

If Iguanas Could Speak

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I saw, in web unbroken,
Its history outwrought
Not as the loud had spoken,
But as the mute had thought.

—Thomas Hardy

Someone once asked me why iguanas are mute. I skipped the whole vocal cords thing and gave him what I thought was a most appropriate answer. "Iguanas," I said, "are mute because, if God had given them a voice, we wouldn't be able to hear ourselves think for their screaming and crying..."

I was born and raised in Athens, Greece and my parents were considerate enough to introduce me to the wonders of animal life from an early age. Growing up in an environment filled with cats, dogs,

reptiles, and birds, I learned how to love life itself. In fact, I am quite certain that I learned how to love humans from my interactions with animals.

When I was 15, one of my Red-eared Sliders (*Trachemys scripta*) broke the right side of her shell in a fall from her terrarium. I was devastated. I took her to my dog vet, who apparently had no idea about reptiles and couldn't do a single thing to help her. I began searching for a reptile vet in Greece — but couldn't find one. After a rigorous search, I came to a sad discovery. I was completely alone. Not a single Greek veterinarian worked on reptiles! The pet shops, although full of reptiles, didn't know the first thing about herp care. The picture wasn't right — but I wasn't going give up on my turtle. I began purchasing foreign literature on pond turtles in order to



Andy Gogakis with his pet iguana, Eric. Photograph by Lucas Liaskos.

cure mine myself. That's when it hit me. Everything I had been doing in regard to turtle husbandry was utterly wrong.

Nobody in Greece was interested in reptiles. When confronted with the question: "What am I to do with my sick pet?" everyone, including many vets and my parents, responded: "Let it die and buy a new one; it's not like you are dealing with a dog." For crying out loud! We are talking about a living, breathing entity here. Come on, show some compassion here, people. I was confronted by the same response from everyone I talked to about the Blue Iguana extinction issue. Phrases like "Who

cares?" or mere grins were enough to make any considerate person angry. Suffice it to say, I cured the poor creature myself. Ten years after her accident she is doing well, although her shell never recovered completely (turtles have a very slow healing rate).

More serious problems arise when it comes to iguanas. Greece has to be the only country in the world that treats lizards as pests and not pets. Until 2000, very few people owned iguanas — but featuring one in a television series changed the whole picture. The owner of the iguana was portrayed as a weirdo, a societal outcast, a freak with strange hair color, who, to be honest, was quite funny. And, suddenly, that was it. Every kid in Greece wanted an iguana. Since the TV-series iguana ate only lettuce and spiders and lived in a 20-gallon tank, it was apparently easy to keep one. The fact that iguanas are very cheap in Greece has only encouraged people to acquire one. As a result, according to one of the largest pet shops in Athens, iguana sales have risen 500% in the past few years. On the opposite side of that coin, however, the mortality rate of these creatures is well over 95% — testament to throw-away attitudes toward reptiles and the lack of accurate information regarding proper husbandry.



Photograph by Andy Gogakis.

When I was confronted with my iguana's health problems, I quickly reached my wits' end. The only source of help was the Internet. I even sent e-mails to the Greek Veterinary Committee asking for assistance in finding a vet who would work on reptiles. The response was that no Greek vets had any interest in reptiles and that reptiles weren't even considered in university training programs. I also did some legal research and found out that animal care legislation in Greece covers only cats and dogs.

I finally decided to strike out on my own. After two years of hard work, intensive research, and many sleepless nights, I managed to cure my pet iguana, Eric, who suffered from mites, skin and spike problems, dehydration, advanced tail rot, and feeding problems. He had carried these problems with him since the day I saved him from a terrible pet shop, where he had shared a five-gallon tank with another iguana. Today he lives in a very large enclosure that resembles a tropical forest.

I am not one to tell you that all people are inconsiderate and cruel. I believe that proper educational efforts regarding reptilian pets will eventually incur dramatic improvements. In the interim, I just hope that the iguanas in Greece remain mute...