

# IGUANAS AS PETS?

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Among the many life forms with which we share the planet is a handful of wild animals that, given proper care, adapt well to living with human beings. The green iguana is one of these animals making an exceptional pet, and for the species this is a very mixed blessing.

In recent years the “pet” iguana has gained substantial popularity. Progress is being made with respect to proper captive care, and more accurate, detailed information about iguanas is currently available. Ideally, if people have successful experiences with iguana keeping, concern for iguanas and their habitat will increase. Unfortunately, what has also increased is the number and interest of opportunistic pet retailers, dealers, and pet product manufacturers who are not especially concerned with the well-being of iguanas or their habitat. The price of iguanas has decreased, dramatically in some instances, along with the increased availability of farm and captive raised hatchlings. Sadly,

to many people, when the price goes down, so does the value of each lizard’s life. These wonderful animals become quite expendable. Overcrowded or ill-kept iguana tanks appearing with greater frequency in pet shops nationwide are only partial evidence of this. It is disturbing to think of iguanas (or any live creature) going the way of little green dime-store turtles, or of the county fair anoles, doled out as token prizes like valueless objects...

For wild iguanas, like other wild animals, survival, reproduction, and the act of living within an environment to which they have beautifully evolved; their home, are central to their existence. To make captive pets of one or more of these lizards is to assume the responsibility of creating an environment where each lizard can thrive. While this is not very difficult, specific provisions must be made. Furthermore, when one keeps *healthy* iguanas, one is taking on pets that should live for at least 10 years and that will grow to be quite large in the first 2-3 years of life. These large, healthy lizards have “normal” iguana activities, particularly when kept in pairs or groups. They do not pass entire days sitting still, as do poorly kept pet shop display specimens, but have busy lives requiring a fair amount of space (and sometimes patience on the part of their keepers).

Having raised many iguanas and “rehabilitated” others, this author has enjoyed the individuality and richness of behavior that emerges the healthier and more acclimated they become. It has been extremely moving to witness lizards, tragically damaged by poor husbandry, survive and eventually thrive.

It is clear to me that each tiny hatchling iguana has the potential to develop into a large, marvelous and unique lizard. The unnecessary iguana deaths, currently on the rise in the pet industry, represent wasted potential, or more coldly, “bio-waste.” It is more humane and less wasteful that iguanas be raised for consumption rather than to die pitifully at the bottom of a shipping box, in a wholesale warehouse, or pet shop display tank.

