

## COMMENTARY

# Amphibians and Reptiles are Wild Animals

In his commentary, “Domestic Reptiles and Amphibians?” (*Reptiles & Amphibians* 16(3):190–194), Al Winstel ended by proclaiming: “... some herps deserve to be admitted to the ranks of the domestic!” Such a pronouncement implies that the title “domestic” is somehow honorific and desirable to reptiles and amphibians. It is not.

A close look at the situations in which most captive reptiles and amphibians find themselves demonstrates that, rather than striving to achieve an extolled status, they are suffering in great numbers, languishing under improper care, and often treated as mere objects or “collections” for the gratification of their human keepers. Colorado Reptile Humane Society (CRHS) does not support the captive breeding of reptiles and amphibians for such purposes and implores all herpetoculturists to think carefully about breeding decisions and the plight of captive reptiles and amphibians. Indeed, the human need to own something that looks “pretty” is insufficient justification to bring so many living creatures into suffering.

While it is true that some reptiles and amphibians are capable of being socialized and becoming tolerant of their human caretakers, this does not mean they are “happy” to do so, as Winstel implies. Indeed, even the best captive situation offers a marked reduction in habitat area, stimulation, seasonal variation, and food availability from a wild habitat. Regardless of their color variation (of which a great, beautiful abundance exists in nature — see box turtles or the *Ensatina* salamanders of California), captive-bred reptiles and amphibians are wild animals and should be treated as such. Engaging in irresponsible breeding and further exacerbating the overabundance of reptiles and amphibians in captivity, simply for the pleasure of ownership, is irresponsible and shows a lack of respect for these lovely animals as living creatures. Is this not the same mentality that brought us the spectacle of the cross-eyed “white tigers?”

Additionally, the continued breeding of reptiles and amphibians for the pet trade and personal ownership is rapidly becoming a major ethical, safety, and economic issue across the country. In the first 10 months of 2009, CRHS accepted over 300 reptiles and amphibians from owner surrenders and found stray animals. We are one organization that serves a portion of a single state; given the paucity of such organizations across the country and the inundation with unwanted animals of those that do exist, this amounts to nothing short of a crisis for captive reptiles and amphibians. Additionally, accidentally or intentionally released captive animals are causing massive damage to ecosystems across the country, from Snapping Turtles in California to Green Iguanas and Burmese Pythons in Florida. While a single creamsicle-colored Corn Snake escaping from an owner’s cage isn’t going to destroy an ecosystem, thousands of breeders engaging in reckless and thoughtless experiments can lead to disastrous cumulative effects.

We at CRHS do not wish to condemn herpetocultural enthusiasts who have found a love for these oft-maligned creatures. We do, however, beseech all would-be reptile or amphibian breeders to consider the implications of their actions. Until every animal has a home, it is unconscionable to

continue adding animals to captivity when plenty are simply waiting to find permanent caretakers or euthanized for want of space in already-crowded shelters. Additionally, relishing the possibilities of “creating” new color patterns on a whim both objectifies the individual animal and diminishes the wondrous variety of still-wild creatures. Before breeding, please consider the greater context of your actions.

**CRHS Board of Directors:** Margie Allison, Vicky DeFrancesco, Eric Gangloff, Jane Hlavaty, Ann-Elizabeth Nash, Dan Ranger, Jonathan Scupin



Captive breeding has “created” many new color patterns in species such as the Bearded Dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*). The individual on the left is “Hypo Orange”; the one on the right is a “Hypo Orange Leatherback.” The authors suggest that relishing the “creation” of such “morphs” objectifies the animal and diminishes the wondrous variety of individuals in nature.



An adolescent Common Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*), unhappy to be removed from his ditch.