

REPTILE OWNERSHIP & VET AWARENESS



As we all know animals are truly a life commitment and look to us to be cared for. We assure our cats and dogs have a proper veterinarian so why not our reptiles? I am in hopes this article will raise awareness and begin to “Modernize” this limited way of thinking. I, not unlike other reptiles enthusiasts, have been housing reptiles most of my life. I remember I was about ten when I was able to have my very first reptile. Boa constrictors (*B. constrictor*) were a favorite of mine and continue to be one of my favorite snakes today. The purchase of my first reptile was by no means an impulse buy. The Boa was a pet I had wanted for some time and remember spending hours each week researching and learning everything I possibly could about the boa constrictor. Understanding that the boa (a member of the family Boidae) needed special requirements in order to survive I hit the books, yes books, as the internet was still decades away. As I researched I found that these requirements were specifically known in the scientific world as husbandry. It was at that point I began reading everything I could about the subject. Doing so opened up a world of new terms, expressions and anecdotes about the hobby. I remember thinking “Really? do I have to understand all of this?”. In short, I found out the hard way that the answer to that question was yes. At the time I figured I knew all I could and was confident that my new pet would adapt to the home I provided and would thrive. Everything I needed was in place, everything except one crucial piece...a local veterinarian. Not just any veterinarian a herpetologist and not just any herpetologist, one that was an expert in the



knowledge, care and biology of the boa constrictor and snakes in general.

Tragically It was only a few months later that my pet boa was dead. My boa had an infection identified as ‘Mouth Rot’ or properly put “Infectious Ulcerative Stomatitis” a bacterial infection that invades the mouth area. The infection prevents the mouth from closing properly and causes difficulty in breathing. I recall first noticing the symptoms (salivation, bleeding, pus pockets, distortion of the mouth and inflammation) but at the time not wise enough to understand them. I remember thinking, “how could this be? I did everything right”. To this end I was very upset and felt helpless. It was the early 80’s and I lived in a state where veterinarian herpetologists were not conveniently “around the corner”, even today veterinarian herpetologists - qualified veterinarian herpetologist are a challenge to find. By qualified I mean a herpetologist that specializes in a particular species i.e. snakes, lizards or turtles. I could not find a veterinarian herpetologist anywhere in or even near my area. At this point I did the only thing I could think of, I took a trip to my local pet shop and purchased a medication to apply to the affected area. I do not recall the name of the product but looking back I believe it was some type of iodine solution. Regardless of what it was I was nowhere near experienced enough to administer it properly and it proved to be fatal.



Today I spend most of my time and efforts on all aspects of reptile education as well as reptile breeding programs - specifically Ball Pythons (*Python Regius*). I breed Ball Pythons for both a hobby and for profit. I am passionate about what I do, care tremendously for the animals I keep and the continuation of welfare for those I let go .

Whenever I am approached about a purchase I make a conscientious effort to ask if they have researched an appropriate veterinarian in their area. I continue to explain that it is very important they find one that is an expert in the species they are going to house. Some of the comments I have heard surprised me. The comments surprised me so much it motivated me to write this article on "Reptile Ownership And Veterinarian Awareness". A few of those comments follow. "Oh, I do not have a qualified Herpetologist in my area", "My vet is too far away and or too expensive", " Could I treat it on my own successfully without seeing a vet? It's only a snake right?", "Can I get medication without a vet appointment?". All of these arguments albeit mute begs the question. If this is the response then why adopt or purchase an animal period.

I personally have a qualified veterinary herpetologist about 35 minutes from my area. I am in contact with him throughout the year and we work closely together. In addition I have another veterinary herpetologist about an hour from me if ever needed. Many times this step in acquisition process is highly overlooked when we adopt or purchase a reptile. In short we tend to give into all of the emotional aspects without pausing to think about the logical aspects

i.e. the proper care, time, expense and "Life" commitment it will take.

In reference to this topic, below are few questions to ask before purchasing a reptile:

- Is there a veterinary herpetologist in my area? If so what does he/she specialize in?
- What are the days and hours the herpetologist is on duty or on call? I have found that some veterinary herpetologists float from one office to another at different times.
- What is their reputation? What degrees and special certification do they hold?
- Do I understand the different potential health issues and what are the possible costs incurred if my reptile does fall ill?
- Would I drive an hour for a qualified veterinarian rather than 10 minutes for one that is not?

The above are all valid and revealing questions to ask. If the answer to a particular question is "No" then there may be a bit of rethinking in order. Again I am in hopes this article finds people well and supplies necessary information for anyone purchasing a reptile of any species. We as reptile owners have a responsibility to understand all aspects of a particular species care and husbandry. By doing so we may become experts in our own right however we will always be in need of a qualified veterinary herpetologist. Veterinarian awareness is just one more piece in successfully caring for our animals and ensuring their care is secure.

For a complete list of veterinary herpetologists (reptile veterinarians) by state visit: <http://www.reptileveterinarians.com/> or <http://www.infinityreptiles.com/knowledgebase.html>

