

Turtles in Chinatown

By Russ Case

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Always remember that the cute, little, baby red-eared slider can grow fairly large. I was in Chinatown in Los Angeles recently, and an early stop during my visit was at a tiny pet store in which I had seen baby red-eared sliders for sale in the past. I was curious as to how they got away with selling these illegal, under-size turtles. This store also was selling wild birds as pets, another no-no. Upon this visit, however, it looked like the authorities had paid a visit, as there were no wild birds on hand, and no baby turtles. They had a few adult red ears and some fire-bellied toads, and that was about it in regard to herps.

I also wondered if I would see any butchered turtles in any of the markets. Although I had in the past, I didn't see any this trip in any of the markets I poked my head into. I was glad of that.

I did, however, see baby sliders for sale in a few of the other shops. Oddly, these shops sold mostly knick-knacks. Some sold touristy junk; others sold everything from furniture to shrine cabinets, incense and statues. Some also had small, plastic, rectangular aquariums with a little bit of water, a marble, and two hatchling red-eared sliders inside. One shopkeeper offered me the whole shebang for a mere \$5. I actually considered getting the turtles, but decided not to give in to an impulse purchase – those babies would get fairly large, after all – and I wasn't sure I wanted to encourage the selling of the turtles in this fashion.

That's a point I wrestle with sometimes. Current legal ramifications aside, I remember the special fascination I had with baby red-eared sliders when I was a kid. Maybe I'm being naïve in hoping that any of those baby Chinatown turtles that are purchased will be given the proper care and not treated as disposable pets. Unfortunately, a cheap price tag does foster the opposite likelihood, and chances are because they didn't cost much the turtles may not experience the best life has to offer.

When I was buying – and inadvertently killing – baby sliders the reptilekeeping resources and knowledge available today were nonexistent. But with all of the information available today one would think that maybe those baby turtles have a better chance of growing up. Maybe they'll be taken home and treasured. Or maybe they'll be purchased on a whim because they're cute and cheap, and they'll be taken home and neglected to the point that they die.

I guess I'll just hope for the best that it's not the latter.

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