

## Negligent or Not?

By Russ Case

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Since 1975 it has been illegal to sell turtles smaller than 4 inches in length. Today I read an article on the website of the Fresno Bee, a local newspaper for Fresno County, Calif., that irritated me. The headline for the article states, "Turtles sold in Clovis can be surrendered safely." The article was about a vendor at a festival held in the town of Clovis, Calif., who got in trouble for selling some red-eared sliders, and the fear people who purchased the turtles experienced when they learned after the fact that the turtles could carry – you guessed it – Salmonella.

For those of you who may not know, Salmonella is the genus name for bacteria that cause the disease salmonellosis. Salmonellosis can cause diarrhea, fever and abdominal cramping. Typically, the symptoms will last for about a week before recovery. Sometimes, however, especially in infants, elderly people and others with weak immune systems, salmonellosis can be more serious than a week-long bout of the symptoms. If in such patients the disease passes into the bloodstream from the intestines, where it gets its start, it can involve a hospital stay to prevent it from spreading to other areas of the body. If antibiotic treatment is not administered, the disease can spread, and it can result in death in a worst-case scenario. There are thousands of strains of Salmonella, and the genus name comes from the scientist, Dr. Daniel Salmon, who isolated the first Salmonella bacteria in 1884-1885 (though some believe Salmon's research partner, Dr. Theobald Smith, actually did this, and Salmon took the credit).

Salmonella live in the gut of both humans and animals and can be transmitted via a number of vectors. The most common is by eating foods of animal origin (though vegetables can also be contaminated) that are contaminated with animal feces, an excellent argument for why you should practice hygienic food preparation. Washing and cooking food items thoroughly goes a long way toward avoiding salmonellosis.

Unfortunately for the pet reptile industry, it was discovered that reptiles, among other animals such as birds, can carry Salmonella, and in the early 1970s, baby turtles especially were red-flagged as carriers. This led to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration declaring in 1975 that it was illegal to sell turtles that were smaller than 4 inches in length, the now-famous (in reptile circles, anyway) "4-Inch-Law." Perhaps you wonder how 4 inches came to be the magic number. Remember, salmonellosis is most commonly the result of putting something into one's mouth that is contaminated, and the powers that be at the USDA determined that turtles 4 inches and larger were difficult for infants to put in their mouths.

So for years it's been illegal to sell baby turtles, which may be both good and bad. Baby turtles were very common impulse buys back in the old days, and I'm sure many thousands, and maybe millions, of baby sliders and other species met early deaths because of this. I know I killed some inadvertently because I didn't know about full-spectrum lighting and proper turtle diets. So maybe baby turtles have been spared death because of this law. However, armed with good care information that is now readily available, I am sure the number of deaths due to keeper ignorance would be lessened to a huge degree.

What irritated me about the article is that no mention of the 4-inch rule is made. The article makes it sound like a terrible misdeed resulted in contaminated turtles being let loose upon an unsuspecting populace, and that the vendor at the festival was a crook for selling red-eared sliders, period. According to the article, a mother who purchased one for her child found out afterward that the turtle could carry Salmonella. She became alarmed and notified the police, who notified the health department, which then sounded the alarm until other people who bought turtles at the festival got scared and turned the turtles in to the Central California Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

If the turtles were smaller than 4 inches, then the vendor did break the law and some concern may be warranted. And frankly, I assume they were. But the article does not make this clear. All it does is relate the panic that resulted from the selling of some turtles, and make it seem as if their sale alone, despite their size, was against the law. I hope people who read it don't think that red-eared sliders are outright illegal to sell. Read the article here and see what you think.

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