

A Tragic Reminder to Be Responsible With Reptiles

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Albino Burmese Python By now many of you must have heard of the tragic death of a 2-year-old girl in Oxford, Fla., that took place on July 1 as the apparent result of asphyxiation by an albino Burmese python.

The snake reportedly escaped from an aquarium and entered the child's room during the night and constricted her. The snake's owner found the snake over the girl's body the next morning. He stabbed it and it crawled off, to be recovered later by authorities. The last I read it was not known whether or not the snake would be euthanized. I personally would hope that it is not, and that it would be turned over to someone who can care for it and secure it properly. The snake's owner was being investigated, and reports state he has had some prior legal issues due to drug involvement. Also mentioned was the fact that the python was stowed in a bag prior to being placed in the aquarium, but it was not clear if the bag was tied securely at the top. A tied bag is often used to contain constrictors.

Here is the worst kind of reminder of just how important it is to properly secure reptile pets, especially large constrictors. The death itself, of course, is horrible to the extreme. And in regard to the reptilekeeping hobby, this is just the sort of tragedy the organizations that are against the keeping of pet reptiles use to fuel their argument that exotic pets should be severely restricted, if not outlawed outright. The complete circumstances of this accident are still being investigated, but it has already dealt a blow to the reptilekeeping hobby. Any time an accident involving a reptile takes place, especially an accident this horrendous, the media is all over it due to the sensationalistic nature of the event. I've mentioned this before: the old-time journalistic cliché "if it bleeds, it leads" still holds very true. And the death of a child is one of the worst things that can happen.

At a time when our hobby is being assaulted by bills such as HR 669 and any number of other proposals that seem to be cropping up with increasing frequency, please make every effort to be a responsible reptilekeeper. Pets may be docile and "friendly" nearly all the time, but remember that any animal – from dog to cat to bird to python – can act unpredictably. Even people can act unpredictably, so why should it be a surprise that an animal can? Simply put, if you own an animal that can hurt somebody, treat it with care and respect. Large snakes are strong. Don't expect a simple screen lid with two plastic clamps to secure a big snake. Big animals need special housing that can be locked securely.

I do not mean to give the impression that this poor child's death is secondary to the attacks on reptilekeeping that will likely follow in the wake of this tragic occurrence. That would never be my intention. But reptile hobbyists must learn from this and take heed. Though snake attacks like this are extremely rare – much more rare than death by dog attack, I'm willing to bet -- animal activist groups will use this accident to further their goal putting an end to the keeping of exotic pets. Fault may be found with the snake's owner, but the argument will be – already is – that if the snake was illegal to keep in the first place this would not have happened. This argument can be applied to virtually anything that causes someone's death, whether we're talking dogs, cars, guns or bathtubs, but it's a favorite chestnut we can expect to see any time one of these rare accidents takes place.

Please do your part to protect our hobby by being responsible reptile owners. And that goes double for anyone who keeps large constrictors.

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