

Do Reptiles Really Like Us?

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A common sight at reptile expos is a shoulder-riding iguana or, perhaps more likely these days, a bearded dragon. I think that turtles and lizards are less intimidating due in part to the fact that we can look at them and they look back at us. Having been in the pet magazine business for more than 16 years – not to mention being an animal enthusiast for pretty much my entire life -- I've observed (and sometimes been targeted by) a broad range of opinion among pet owners on a variety of topics. One that I think is always interesting to discuss, in regard to reptiles, is whether or not our reptile pets truly do "like" us.

If you've been hanging out in the reptile world, or maybe even walking along a beach boardwalk somewhere (in the case of my immediate habitat, I'm thinking of Venice Beach), you may have seen a green iguana owner proudly wearing said iguana on a shoulder while walking or rollerskating along. Of course sights such as this are common at reptile expos, where the shoulder-rider could be an iguana or, perhaps more likely these days, a bearded dragon. It comes across that people who "wear" their reptiles in public probably are in the camp that believes their pets enjoy their company and that they like their owners for who they are.

Or are these people's pets simply clinging to them for dear life? Or maybe they're sucking out their body warmth.

If you keep reptiles you know some more than others can seem interested in what is going on outside of their enclosures. Lizards and turtles, especially, watch us. Are they simply on full red alert to any sign of danger, which is the behavior they would be exhibiting in the wild? Do they watch us from their rocks and logs with the same wariness that they may watch a potential predator, such as a circling bird or approaching carnivore? Or do they gaze upon us with fondness, as if thinking, "There's my caretaker, and I love him"?

I think, generally speaking, that turtles and lizards "connect" with people better than snakes, and I think this is due in large part to the structure of their eyes. I mentioned my "eye theory" in my book, Snakes, as a reason why some people may be more wary of snakes than they are of turtles and lizards. The eyes of turtles and lizards have an easily identifiable pupil that enables us to tell with some degree of accuracy where they are looking. Snakes on the other hand, with their darker eyes and hard-to-discern pupils, seem more mysterious. Like the saying goes, "eyes are the windows into the soul." Because you can't easily tell if a snake is looking at you it's harder to connect. And this isn't even taking into account the fact that snakes have no eyelids, making them even more alien or mystifying to non-reptile people. Meanwhile, I think that turtles and lizards are less intimidating due in part to the fact that we can look at them and they look back at us.

Anyway, that's my eye theory and I'm sticking to it.

When you approach a pet reptile's enclosure and it runs to the front, do you think it's happy to see you beyond the fact that you may be bringing it food? Or is this a conditioned feeding response only? I know my slider, Helmut, has me trained. If I'm sitting at my desk and he drops from his floating platform into the water and begins swimming back and forth at the front of his enclosure, I know he's hungry. I will often get up and give him some food at these times. I watch him eat, walk back to my desk and after he's done eating he climbs back onto his platform to bask. This is our routine. Because I like to think I'm calling the shots I may not feed him every time he exhibits this behavior. He'd end up being overfed if I did so, but my ego also won't allow me to be a puppet completely at his beck and call.

What about when we're holding reptiles? Do you think they like it? Do they appreciate the human/reptile connection that's taking place? Or are they frozen in fear? Maybe there's an element of truth in both scenarios. Or maybe they're content to be held simply because they enjoy your body heat. Some may struggle and it's obvious that they don't enjoy handling. You should avoid handling reptiles that don't enjoy it because doing so can stress them out, and stress can lead to illness. They might stop eating, for one thing, and that's never good.

Some animals are better display animals than others. Amphibians, for instance. Tiger salamanders, which I wrote about in a previous blog, are fairly bulky and sturdy. But amphibian skin and limbs are more delicate than that of reptiles, and

amphibians are better left alone.

Some reptiles are better served by minimal handling, too -- chameleons, for instance. Chameleons are fascinating reptiles and due to advances in herpetoculture over the past decades sturdier captive-bred specimens are more widely available. This is a huge improvement over the past sickly wild-caught chameleons that were often imported. But even though they're healthier overall chameleons can still stress out, and handling them excessively is not a great idea.

Do you think pet reptiles generally appreciate their human caretakers? Or do you think that most would just as soon escape if given the chance? There's much to be said for learned behavior in reptiles and other pets – associating their owners with food, for instance. However, what about outright affection? I think whether or not reptiles are capable of that is the interesting question.

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