

## The Cost of Reptilekeeping

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Reptiles make great pets, but you have to be willing to spend some money to care for them properly. Courtesy Sean Kelley. Generally speaking, when compared to other types of pets that require more maintenance, reptiles are fairly cost effective to keep. While some of the rarer types can cost thousands of dollars – yes, there are “investment quality” reptiles -- many can still be purchased fairly inexpensively. The equipment needed to care for them is not a terribly huge expense, either, though I suppose this may depend on how many reptiles you are keeping.

That said you do have to spend some money to keep reptiles happy and healthy. It does cost something to care for them properly. Depending on the type of reptile or amphibian you want to keep, chances are you'll definitely need to spend money on lighting and/or heating equipment. Then there's food, of course. And having some type of enclosure in which to house them is always a good idea, of course. Cage décor can be important, too, as many types, such as bark slabs, plants, branches and other items can provide hiding places that will add greatly to your reptile's feelings of security and, ultimately, health.

Some of these expenses may be one-time expenses; others will need to be revisited over the course of your pet's life. For instance, although a full-spectrum fluorescent light may still emit light, the beneficial UVB rays cease to be as effective once the bulb is several months old. These bulbs have to be replaced to remain at maximum efficiency. But items such as cage decorations, as well as the cage itself, can of course be cleaned up and used for a long time.

If you're unsure or leery about costs, keep in mind that it is possible to keep some reptiles “on the cheap” when it comes to setting up the enclosure. While a beautiful naturalistic enclosure is always great to strive for, using natural-appearing substrate, plants, etc., many reptile enthusiasts use newspaper for a substrate, and shoeboxes for hiding places. This is especially true with snakes, as snakes will often destroy, or at least rearrange, their cage decorations as they move about their enclosures. Some arboreal snakes that may not get as heavy-bodied as other species may be better choices for naturalistic enclosures, as opposed to heavy boas or pythons that may break stuff they crawl upon.

Aside from the gear used to maintain animals, there's another cost to keep in mind: veterinary care. This tends to be an area that is often neglected by reptile (and other pet) owners. Granted, the costs associated with taking an animal to a vet can be quite high. And I know it's difficult for some people to justify spending a couple hundred dollars in vet care on a lizard that cost about \$50. This decision is very individual and everyone has their own thoughts about it. I personally believe that if you purchase an animal you are taking on the responsibility to care for it to the best of your ability. If you cannot afford a visit to a veterinarian, maybe you should reconsider getting the animal in the first place.

There are some over-the-counter medications and home remedies available for use with reptiles in certain circumstances, but getting a proper diagnosis on a sick pet is very important. A veterinarian can perform tests that you can't, and getting a diagnosis sooner rather than later is also crucial. Complicating matters is that it is a reptile's nature to conceal illness. If a wild reptile shows signs of illness or weakness it will be a likely candidate for death. You've heard of “survival of the fittest,” right? Captive reptiles do the same thing. Therefore, if disease in a captive reptile has progressed to the point that it has become evident, any hope of saving the animal's life may lie with immediate veterinary care.

Should people get pets and just keep their fingers crossed that they never need to take them to a veterinarian? There is veterinary insurance that can help with financial pressures, but the harsh reality is many people cannot afford to spend what might amount to a lot of money on veterinary care. If they can afford it but won't pay it, then they're treating the pet as expendable. I don't believe in that. But what if people cannot afford to take their pets to a vet even if they wanted to? Should people that fit into this category not be permitted to keep pets, period? That's a tough question. A life without pets can be a sad prospect.

What do you think?

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