

Know How Long Your Reptile Lives

By Russ Case

March 13, 2009

Tortoises are famous for being long-lived – some have been reported to exceed 100 years of age.

Illustration by Tom Kimball. In a previous blog I've already described how I once agreed to take on a sick Jackson's chameleon, only to have it die soon after. Another animal I once regretted getting on impulse was a horseshoe crab. I saw it in a tropical fish store, remembered coming across horseshoe crabs in my youth when vacationing in Delaware, and brought one home, primarily because I felt nostalgic, not because I had any longtime interest in the crab. Soon I grew bored with it, and I ended up feeding the horseshoe crab to my pet octopus, Griptog. The octopus got a decent meal, but the fact is I should not have gotten the horseshoe crab in the first place. Whether you buy a new car only to realize later that you can't afford the payments or you buy a hatchling water monitor and discover only afterward that it will get huge, the advice is the same: Avoid impulse buying. Be an informed customer and know what you're getting into.

The first entry in my "Before You Buy a Herp" series of blogs recommended knowing the answer to the question, "How big will it get?" The question for this week's blog is How long will it live?

Compared to hamsters, rats and other "pocket" pets, as well as cats and dogs, some reptiles can live a really long time. Tortoises, of course, are famous for being long-lived – some have been reported to exceed 100 years of age. But other herps can live to ripe old ages, as well. Green iguanas can live 15 years or longer. Big pythons, such as reticulated pythons and Burmese pythons, can live longer than 20 years. Even smaller snakes such as kingsnakes can make it to 20. Turtles may not always live as long as their chelonian cousins the tortoises, but common pet species such as red-eared sliders and painted turtles can live up to 20 years or longer.

In my opinion, if you obtain a pet you are making a commitment to caring for that animal for as long as it lives. You should not bring a new pet reptile home while thinking, "I'll give it a shot and see how it goes. I can always get rid of it later if I don't like it." That's not being a responsible pet owner. Knowing how long a reptile will live is important. Think in the long term, both in regard to you and your new reptile. If you will not be able to care for the reptile for its whole life, then you should devote some thought to what will happen to it if and when you no longer can.

When you're thinking about adding a new reptile to your home, think about your own stage in life. Are you settled? Do you think you'll be living where you are now for a long time, or, for instance, will you eventually be leaving home to attend college? If you obtain a pet reptile you may need to do some planning ahead of time for who will take care of the animal should you move away or otherwise be unable to keep it. We all start out wanting to keep our pets, but let's face it, life can get in the way. Having a backup plan is always a good idea.

Parents are often the chief inheritors of their children's pets, for a variety of reasons. A kid may simply lose interest, or he or she may grow up and go away to school. Whatever the cause, parents may have to step in to take over reptile care. Hopefully parents who find themselves in this position will still enjoy keeping the reptiles and won't make a secret drive to a nearby park to let the animal loose. This should never be done by anybody. If you find yourself with a reptile you cannot care for, look for a local herp club or rescue organization, and see if they can help you place it in a reptile-loving home. That's always better than setting an animal free.

Some people provide for their pets in their wills. This can be important in the case of very-long-lived tortoises, and people that leave instructions for what should be done with the pets they leave behind, especially if money is provided for the animals' ongoing care, are the best kind of pet owners: conscientious ones.

Years ago, my family and I were keeping a couple of California desert tortoises, Goliath and Geraldine, in the backyard of the house we were renting in Southern California. One day the landlord announced he was selling the house and that we'd have to move. It looked like we would be moving to a mobile home, which did not exactly feature a nice big yard for desert tortoises to roam around in, and dig their burrows. Because we would not be able to provide the tortoises with the appropriate habitat, the people who were moving into the house we were vacating were consulted. They were told about the tortoises, and asked if they would like to keep them. Luckily they did want them, and for all I know Geraldine and Goliath are still ambling about in that backyard.

My point here is that sometimes despite your best planning efforts you may have to improvise what to do with a long-lived reptile pet in the event you can no longer keep it. Little did my family know when we acquired the tortoises that we would someday be moving to a place where they would not have a proper environment. Like I said before, life gets in the way sometimes. But with proper consideration beforehand, and a backup plan in mind, your animals should be well taken care of for their entire lives, whether in your care or someone else's whom you have enlisted. Just remember to never set them free into nature under any circumstances.

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