Reptile Myths and Misconceptions

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There are many myths and misconceptions floating around about reptiles. These myths are detrimental to herps, as they promote negative stereotypes as well as contribute to improper care of pet reptiles. In this article, we will debunk some of these myths and clear up the misconceptions you may have about herps and herp care.

MYTH: Reptiles are easy to care for.

FACT: Reptiles are very care-intensive pets, and improper care can significantly shorten their life spans.

This may be one of the most widespread myths. Many people think that getting a reptile is as simple as buying it, sticking it in a glass cage, and feeding it occasionally. This couldn't be further from the truth. Even before bringing a reptile home, you will have to spend a good deal of time setting up a proper habitat and monitoring temperature and humidity to make sure it is safe for the reptile you've chosen. You will have to do significant research to determine which reptile is best for you and what kind of care it needs.

Once you have purchased your reptile, you will have to continue monitoring the habitat, and you should clean it regularly. You may need to adjust heating and lighting to more accurately simulate its natural environment or to deal with seasonal changes. You will have to keep a close eye on it for any signs of illness and schedule a veterinary appointment if you see any problems. Your herp will have a very specific diet that you must follow, including, in most cases, the use of vitamin and mineral supplements. Feeding a reptile is generally much more involved than just setting a bowl of commercially made food in front of it. Many will require live feeder insects or pre-killed prey that you will have to breed or acquire.

It is estimated that approximately 90% of reptiles die in their first year of captivity because their owners have no idea what proper reptile care entails. Some reptiles are easier to care for than others, but all still require a significant level of care that cannot be classified as "easy".

MYTH: Reptiles make great pets for kids.

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FACT: Reptiles require a level of responsibility that most children cannot handle.

As mentioned above, reptiles are very care-intensive pets, and most children are just not able to provide the required level of care. Many reptiles require complicated setups that children will not know how to monitor, and an improper environment can lead to serious health issues. If you want your children to experience having a reptile as a pet, you must purchase the reptile as a family pet with the knowledge that a parent must be the primary caregiver. It should be you that makes sure the reptile is fed, the habitat is properly maintained and cleaned, and the reptile is taken to the veterinarian for annual checkups.

MYTH: Only turtles carry *Salmonella*.

FACT: All reptiles carry *Salmonella*.

Salmonella is present in at least 90% of all exotic reptiles, and they carry it and shed it in their feces. To prevent the spread of *salmonella*, it is important to wash your hands thoroughly after touching your herp or anything in its habitat, regardless of what kind of herp you own.

MYTH: All snakes are venomous.

FACT: Only some snakes are venomous.

Though snakes have a reputation for being deadly, only about 10% of the snakes worldwide are actually venomous. Of the 110 snake species native to the United States, only 20 are venomous. More people die from bee stings than from snake bites each year.

MYTH: Snakes are very fast.

FACT: Most snakes move no faster than 6 mph.

The average speed for a snake is two to six mph. The fastest snake in the world, the Black Mamba, only goes twelve to fourteen mph. Many snakes appear to be going much faster than they actually are because of "lateral undulation," or the way in which they move.

MYTH: Snakes don't have to eat.

FACT: Some snakes don't eat often, but all living animals still need food.

Larger snakes will not eat as often as smaller ones, but that doesn't mean that they don't need food. Some snakes, such as Ball Pythons, are known to be reluctant eaters, but you still must try different things to get them to eat. You should never simply stop feeding a snake because it refuses food. Refusal of food may mean that the snake is not hungry, but if it happens all the time, it means that you haven't found the right feeding method yet.

MYTH: Some snakes are vegetarians.

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FACT: All snakes are carnivores.

A snake's food source is important. Some snakes live primarily on invertebrates, while others eat fish. Some will eat amphibians, other reptiles, or even other snakes of the same species. Many will need a diet that consists mainly of whole prey mammals, such as mice, rats, and chicks. But you cannot try to turn a snake into an herbivore.

MYTH: Snakes attack or chase humans.

FACT: Most snakes will attempt to escape rather than confront you.

Though some snakes will defend themselves if they feel threatened, most will try to get away, especially from a human "predator" that is significantly larger than they are. If they cannot escape, they may strike at a human in an attempt to drive him or her away, but this is not due to aggression.

MYTH: Toads give humans warts.

FACT: Toads have nothing to do with humans' warts.

Though toads have a warty appearance, the texture of their skin is not something that is contagious. Human warts are caused by a virus, not by contact with toads.

MYTH: Toads produce and secrete toxins that can kill humans.

FACT: Only a few toads produce harmful toxins in response to a threat.

All toads have parotid glands that produce a chemical substance, but only a small number of toad species actually produce a highly toxic substance. Some species also have toxin-producing cells in their skin.

MYTH: Turtles and tortoises can live on a diet consisting only of lettuce.

FACT: Turtles and tortoises have widely varied diets that include a number of different foods.

Chelonians, or turtles and tortoises, may be herbivores, omnivores, or carnivores. Omnivorous chelonians require both plant matter and meat in their diets, and carnivores need meat. Even those chelonians that are herbivores require more than just lettuce. A complete diet for an herbivorous chelonian can include vegetables, fruits, leafy greens, grasses, and hays. Feeding only lettuce will result in severe malnutrition and eventually death. It is important that you take the time to learn what constitutes a complete, balanced diet for your chelonian and feed it accordingly.

MYTH: All lizards are insectivores.

FACT: What type of diet a lizard needs varies by species.

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Some lizards are primarily insectivores, but other lizards can be herbivores, omnivores, or carnivores. You will need to research the species of lizard that you are keeping to determine what kind of diet will best fit its needs.

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