

Crazy Animal People

Engage, Trust Education Before Rule-Making and Enforcement



By Greg Mertz, DVM

Last week a friend of the New England Wildlife Center and a long time client of the Odd Pet Vet passed away: Dr. Ann Palmer-Kelly. She was a crazy animal person. She owned 11 box turtles.

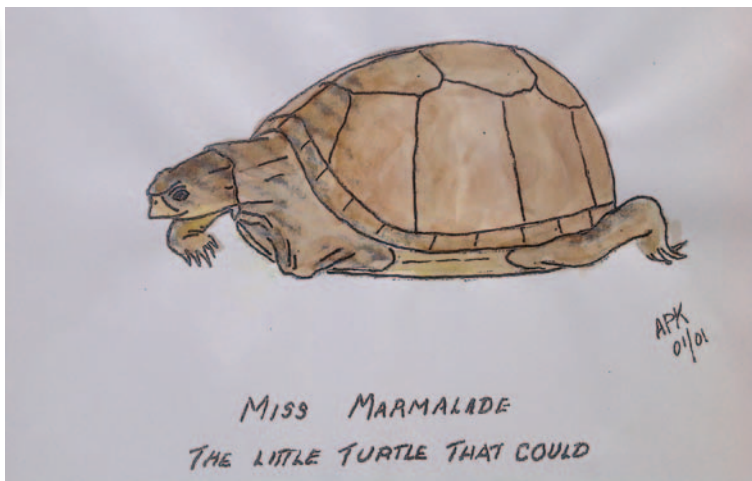
Dr. Palmer-Kelly was a kind, caring pet owner. She would have, could have owned many, many more but knew the limits of her "Turtle Plantation." She lived in a one bedroom, top floor apartment in Cambridge. The 'Plantation' was her living room, dedicated to the 11 turtles.

Crazy animal people come in two types: nice and mean. The nice ones love animals of all kinds or of a particular phylum, class, family or species. Dr. Palmer-Kelly loved her turtles. She talked about them, she educated others about them, published articles about them, and she hand-wrote hundreds of pages of journal notes about the day-to-day interactions of one turtle with another. She drew them and painted them in various poses and interactions. These are valuable insights into the daily lives and habits of box turtles.

I had a friend who loved all kinds of insects and while he was a single (he's married now) young man, living in a pond-side cottage, every night he would open all his windows, turn on all of his lights and sit with a book identifying the hundreds who came to visit. He would do this until three or four o'clock in the morning. What he learned, he shared with others.

The mean ones pick at other people's animal care and often are in the business of making rules or laws for other animal people to follow. They groove on the horrors of abuse. They relate stories of how horribly abused this animal was and how horribly abused that animal was. They rescue animals from people and businesses who don't know what they are doing, and it turns out no one knows what they are doing except them. And from these singular points of view new rules and new laws are made.

My first writing assignment just out of college, as an employee of a nature center, was to make a list of rules about the care, feeding and handling of educational, wild animals that we kept for



Top: A Dr. Palmer-Kelly watercolor of some of her pet turtles. Top right: A Dr. Palmer-Kelly watercolor of one of her pet turtles. Bottom: Dr. Palmer-Kelly's watercolor of her 90-year-old pet turtle Marmalade.

school class, volunteer and general public programs.

I set to work, made my list, and turned it into my boss for review. You cannot imagine my ecstasy on seeing this list typed up and posted. I read it over and over. It sounded so professional, and so, so knowledgeable and important. People would have to do what I said. Wow, I was so important! (What a fall I had from there.)

That's what a lot of rules are, a mechanism to make the rule maker feel knowledgeable and important. Today the animal care world is replete with these kind of rule-makers. And MA seems in throes of such a phenomenon.

What is needed is education, not more laws. By and large the vast majority of wrongs visited on animals is done out of ignorance. Of course there are instances of cruelty that are based in psychological illness but nitpicking laws do not stop these events.

Education is an act of persuasion. If your advocacy lacks the skills to persuade, it doesn't mean a new law has to be made. It means that your advocates need to learn and implement the act of quality education. Persuasive education takes skill, practice, humility, and repetition. You catch a lot more flies with honey.

Very few pet owners do things to hurt their animals deliberately. True, there are things that people do, unknowingly that hurt the animals in their care. This is where education comes in.

Today I see a lot of clients who are unknowingly hurting their pet reptiles because they are keeping them too warm. One client told me proudly yesterday that his lizard cage was large, replete with hidey-holes, and a basking lamp that generates a hot spot in the cage that gets to 135 degrees Fahrenheit! Whoa! What? What

animal in their right mind wants to sit in 135 degrees? He is not alone. I hear clients everyday talk about 110 degree hot spots; I diagnose sunburn everyday, too.

It is what they read; it is what they extrapolate from what they were told to do. Shall I call the police and tell them that they are abusing their pets? Shall I go to the Legislature and put forward a bill to make it against the law to keep any reptile above 90 degrees? Or, better yet, make it illegal for reptiles to be kept as pets?

I think not. But, there is a contingent that will argue that this is what is needed. The bond between Dr. Palmer-Kelly and her turtles was a precious one. Dr. Palmer-Kelly suffered from severe rheumatoid arthritis. Nevertheless on warm, sunny, spring, summer and fall afternoons she would bicycle or drive the turtles to Walden Pond so that they might explore grassy and woodland areas, looking for worms, bugs and mushrooms.

Every car visit to the veterinarian or excursion to natural areas, Dr. Palmer-Kelly seat-belted in her charges to prevent injury in case of a car crash. Only three or four would go on any one trip, in case a catastrophe happened, not all would be lost. Marmalade, one of her three-toed box turtles is three legged and would have long ago left this planet if it had not been for her dedicated and intricate care. Today, Marmalade, 90-years-old, continues to thrive within the 'Plantation,' that has been moved to the New England Wildlife Center.

There is a sweetness to Dr. Palmer-Kelly's engagement with the natural world through the eyes of her eleven turtles. She will be missed by turtle and human alike. Engage and trust education long before rule-making and enforcement.



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