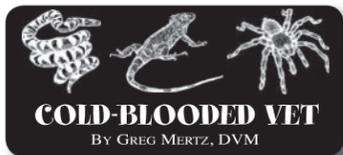


The Hundredth Turtle: Why Turtles Hate Me



By Greg Mertz, DVM

Turtles hate me. It is a learned thing. And perhaps a tribal thing. I do awful things to turtles, in their view. I cut their toenails, their beaks, and feed them medicines. I don't entice them, I don't cajole them, I just simply pick them up, pry their mouths open and stuff medicine down their throats.

I have learned over the years that cajoling a turtle is like trying to convince a rock to get up and dance. You can play the music as loudly as you want but the rock doesn't unfold one wit. Same with turtles.

I have one client who will disagree with me. She was a music teacher in Dover, MA where she instilled a love of turtles and music in generations of students. She had three turtles that she adored. She learned that they loved to have their backs rubbed and scratched. (Turtle shell is a layer of reptile skin fitted on top of a skull-like platform of bone). Each day she would scratch their backs with her fingers while humming the tune "They Don't Wear Pants on the Other Side of France." The turtles quickly learned to wiggle under her caress in time with the music. Today, fifty years later, she can hum the tune and they will stand up and dance to the music.

But that being said, in my view, turtles are just plain

dumb. Let me give you an example. Two decades ago, I had a good-sized leopard tortoise patient, as big as a basketball, named Freddie, who refused to look at me. I say that knowing full well, that back there in his turtle cave of top-shell-bottom-shell, Freddie was peering out over his legs spying on me. He refused to unfold his legs, no matter how hard I tried to pry one out.

Their design is impenetrable, both in physics and time. I don't know who thought this up, but they were even better functional designers than Steve Jobs. Turtles have been on earth for 210 million years with essentially the same compact architecture. It is hard to believe, but evolution had the forethought to create a design to foil guys like me. Dinosaurs-ruled-the-Earth be damned. This shell design has outlasted them, and if we are to believe evolutionists, dinosaur offspring now look like chickens.

Back to my patient. This leopard tortoise had a bad case of protozoan parasites that needed two doses of a drug called metronidazole. These doses were to be given seven days apart.

Back in the day, vet visits were relatively easy. The client walks the turtle into the exam room in a big soup pan, or box, or pet taxi. Before the turtle had a chance to figure out where he was, I would grab him by the front leg, pull it out, and pin it down with my left hand. I would take my right hand, in which I held a syringe filled with metronidazole, and push it

into his mouth.

I have to divert here and explain something about metronidazole. It is one of the earliest antibiotics invented. It had a pretty specific purpose for treating STD's in the form of syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia. It turns out it works pretty well on turtle and other reptile protozoan parasites, too. The people who designed this drug probably have awards hanging on their walls for creating the worst tasting medicine on earth. I believe there is some Puritanical retribution in how this drug was formulated. (You can see the antibiotic tasting committee sitting around a table all agreeing that if you did these immoral STD deeds there had better be a bitter pill at the other end. "That'll teach you.")

So when turtles meet metronidazole, evolution does a double take. Back to Freddie. I got him the first time. They walked through the door, I wrestled Freddie to the ground and got the metronidazole down his esophagus. On the second visit, Freddie covered his face with his legs and peered out at me. I had done this turtle treatment a few times and had learned how to out-fox them on most occasions. Not Freddie. I turned him upside down, I walked away, we took him to another room, soaked him in water. Nothing worked. Freddie the Stubborn.

I sent the client home. They came back a few days later. Stubborn as ever, Freddie was a repeat performance. I sent them away, they came back a week later and the result was

the same. As soon as Freddie was put in the car to go to the vet he would close up and not open again until he was on his way home in the car.

Say what? This is what the client said to me. "As soon as we take Freddie to the car to come here, he closes up and refuses to open up until we are finished with the appointment. When he is put back in the car and we start going home, he starts crawling all around the back seat."

Here is where I think turtles are dumb. I got his medicine ready in the syringe. I pretended to do an exam by picking him up, poking, prodding, and shining lights on him. Then I snuck out to the client's car and hid in the back seat. The clients brought Freddie out to the car. They get in, start home and are doing all the cooing and chortling about what a good turtle he is. He opens up, starts to crawl around the back seat and I jump on him, pry his leg open, get the syringe in his mouth and give him his bitter pill. You have to figure that if turtles were really that smart, he would have seen that one coming.

I am sorry to say, but there is a back story here. Freddie was about the hundredth turtle I treated. In the 1970's Lawrence Blair and Lyall Watson reported on a phenomenon that came to be known as the The Hundredth Monkey. The premise is that when a hundred members of any species, or taxonomic group of animals, whether they are located in close proximity to one another or spread around the world, learn a new



behavior, all the members of that group will have the same thought or will perform the same behavior. I call the 252 species of turtles of the world one tribe. Because of this event, where I reigned supreme, I no longer have any purchase with turtles on their veterinary visits with me. Now, all the turtles of the world clam up, pull their feet in front of their faces and refuse to open their mouths for medicines, beak trims and just simple human-to-turtle hellos. Turtles hate me. And my life is miserable. I hope they are happy.

TODAY Show Runs Shelter Ads

Last month, The Shelter Pet Project, a campaign from The Humane Society of the United States, Maddie's Fund and the Ad Council to promote shelter pet adoptions, revealed a new ad featuring TODAY anchor Natalie Morales. The ad is part of "TODAY Takes Action," a

weeklong series of public service ads featuring TODAY's anchors.

The Shelter Pet Project is the first national PSA campaign that brings together the largest animal welfare organizations and shelters across the country to promote the adoption of shelter pets nationwide.

The campaign is designed to inspire adoption and drive down euthanasia rates of dogs and cats in shelters. Since the campaign launched in 2009, there has been an estimated 10 percent decline in euthanasia across the United States.

Natalie Morales adopted her dog, Zara, after doing a pet

adoption segment for TODAY in April 2011 and is very passionate about the issue. Actress Jenna Elfman provides the voiceover for Zara in the new TV spot. This and other Shelter Pet Project ads were created pro bono by Drafftcb in Chicago.

"Natalie Morales is like so many other millions of Americans – she loves her dog, and wants to see more people experience the joys of adoption," said Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of The HSUS. "We hope that Natalie's PSA for The Shelter Pet Project will get picked up not only by The Today Show, but throughout the country and shine a light on adoption and lead to a further reduction in euthanasia rates."

"The animal lovers of America are indebted to Natalie Morales and NBC's TODAY Show for helping to create a no kill nation by promoting shelter pet adoptions and The Shelter Pet Project during TODAY Takes Action Week," said Rich Avanzino, president of Maddie's Fund.

"This new PSA shows the true connection that exists

between shelter pets and the families that adopt them," said Peggy Conlon, president and CEO of the Ad Council. "As you can see from the spot, Zara knows Natalie better than almost anyone, and I think this will encourage many more families throughout the country to consider pet adoption."

TODAY's anchors personally selected the social issues they are supporting from among the Ad Council's 50 national campaigns, and participated in brainstorming sessions with the ad agencies to help inform the creative.

The new PSAs were distributed to NBC stations nationwide in February. The production costs for the PSAs have been provided by the Ad Council's non-profit and federal government partners. The Humane Society of the United States is the nation's largest animal protection organization, rated the most effective by its peers. HSUS rescues and cares for tens of thousands of animals each year. Its primary mission is to prevent cruelty before it occurs (humanesociety.org.)

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