

The Reptile Keeper

I have been a reptile veterinarian for more than twenty years and I have noticed that people who keep reptiles as pets are a little different than the typical dog and cat owner. When dogs and cats come to the vet, you can tell their owners are there for one reason: to see the vet, get the help they need, and get back home.

When reptile owners go the vet it's a little like a party. They are no less committed to their pets but they are a whole lot more interested in the other clients and the other animals than dog and cat people are. My clients will wait an hour for an appointment, and then go back out to reception and hang out for another hour talking to the other reptile owners.

There is a lot of "Hey, what's in the bag?" and "Where did you get that?" and "What is that?" and even "You should see mine, it's way bigger than yours." Reptile keepers span the demographic spectrum from doctors and lawyers, to children, bikers, housewives, musicians, bureaucrats, carpenters, magicians, and exotic dancers. From the homeless to the well heeled.

The reptile keeper is fascinated by biology. The reptile keeper is fascinated by exotic places and times. Their care of their reptile is a thread that connects them to secret places in jungles, deserts, woodlands, ponds and rivers. It also connects them to the Carboniferous, the Triassic and the Paleocene. When you own a dog you get a friend; when you own a Boa you get a companion that can warp-speed you to another time and place. Dog and cat owners value the homestead; reptile owners value Mother Earth.

I sit in a cold, clinical exam room and watch the parade of reptile owners come with pets and problems. I see more turtles than lizards, more lizards than snakes, more snakes than frogs, more frogs than toads, and more toads than salamanders. So far, I have seen about 75,000 reptiles in my career. And the most interesting thing I have seen so far, are the people.

I have a seventy-something client that has had her pet turtle since she was nine years old. Another client owns at least a thousand reptiles in her home. Some clients are rescuers. They "rescue" pet reptiles from pet stores like the store is a warring country. The more the rescuer rescues the more the store orders in.

I have one lady client who owns and loves three iguanas. Each Christmas season she dresses the iguanas in angel costumes and takes their pictures for her annual Christmas card.

I have a client with thirty frogs. They are mostly White's Tree Frogs. She loves her frogs, each and every one. They all have names, mostly from TV characters. Her sister has thirty turtles. Most are box turtles. She loves her turtles, each and every one. They all have names, mostly from TV characters.

Another client tells me he hopes his snake will bite me because he would like to watch me bleed. Another male client travels with his snake in his underpants. It's a temperature thing, he says.

Reptile keepers hunger for information about their pets. They like to know what makes them tick, where they are from, how big they will get and how long they will live. Reptile keepers are the only

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pet owners who, when their animal needs a surgery, routinely ask if they can attend, observe or even help do the job. They just love biology.

Reptile keepers are often educators. They will take their pets into schools, to the beach, and even onto street corners. There they talk eagerly to people about their pet and its biology. They will discuss and advocate for saving habitats for these animals in the wild.

Some reptile keepers are about making statements, others use reptiles to appear 'normal'. One male client arrived with one side of his head shaved, wearing what looked like an 8-penny nail through his nose, a belt made out of handcuffs, and a tow chain tied in a noose around his neck. His Boa was the most 'normal' thing about him.

One turtle owner of eight or so boxes spends countless hours watching her turtles parade her house. She keeps a daily log of who goes where, who visits whom, who mates with whom, who gets jealous and challenges whom, and who eats what and when. When she brings them to my office they come in seat belts in case of an accident. And not all at one time, just in case of disaster, so not all is lost.

Two clients, that I know, have set up trust funds for each of their turtles. Another client divorced over her turtles.

I have a client who kept three, now two aquatic turtles. She has had them for 46 years. For many years she sang to them daily "They don't wear pants on the other side of France." She scratched their backs while she hummed and sang. Now the turtles will dance like their backs are being scratched when she sings the song to them. They wiggle side to side and bob in time to the music.

One of my clients drives her tortoise around on the dashboard of her car, winter or summer to give him a warm, sunny place to bask and a lot of things to see. One client slept every night in bed with her iguana. (That's nothing-we are talking about just reptiles here, but I have a client who slept every night in bed with her pet tarantula.)

One client uses her two box turtles in her spiritual "healing arts" business. When she first visited me she took an aura reading of me and my exam room to see if I was an acceptable veterinary spirit.

What she doesn't know is that turtles hate me. All of them, whether they are my patients or not. All 252 species have wave-lengthed with one another and decided that I am evil. "Don't cooperate with him, and if you can, pee on him, poop on him and bite him."

Snakes like me, by and large. Lizards are metza-metza about me. Frogs find me alarming, toads do too. Salamanders are always in deep prayer. I think my clients like me. They keep coming back, but then, they may be coming back to see each other and what's in the other guy's bag.

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