

THOUGHTS ON ANIMALS IN CAPTIVITY AND OTHER RELATED MATTERS

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Joining the B.H.S. as a teenager brings memories of reading with interest articles in the Journal by people such as Dr. Edward Elkan, Alfred Leutscher, and many others. These were the pioneers of Herpetological interest, on a scientific and a layman's level. Those were fascinating times, and those earlier contributors to the Journal the last of the amateur/professional keepers of Reptiles and Amphibians in the old style. As a society I believe we need to retrace our roots and look at the way legislation and animal rights organisations are trying to deny our rights to maintain and study reptiles and amphibians in captivity. Any publicity tends to be bad publicity, further eroding our credibility.

As modern husbandry practices have improved more and more species are being bred each year. There are now some excellent books on the subject as well as back up from specialist equipment and Societies such as our own. Why do people keep reptiles and amphibians? Possibly through an admiration of the natural world or just the sheer involvement of looking after interesting and often beautiful creatures; to be treated to the intimacies of their habits and reproductive cycles, ultimately (nowadays) to produce young over several generations.

If this interest was curtailed through legislation where would the stimulus be for youngsters to get involved in the conservation of all natural things in the future? Many of today's eminent herpetologists gained their early interest in such ways. Gerald Durrell is a classic example of a man who through sheer drive and interest has done so much for many species of endangered animals. How familiar is his early childhood to many of us, pond dipping for newts and frogs or maintaining small reptiles and amphibians in aquaria.

Zoos come in for much criticism these days but many are doing an excellent public relations service for the promotion of interest and awareness of what is happening in the world. Much of the work on species such as the Mountain Gorilla was funded by zoos. The research undertaken by Diane Fossey was started by the New York Zoological Society bringing attention to the vulnerability of this species. Dolphinariums have probably played a part in getting people interested in the plight of Dolphins and Whales. Despite the excellent wildlife films now shown on television, nothing can replace seeing the real thing in life: the texture of skin, body size and even smell.

We cannot afford to fragment ourselves from one another if we have the same basic goal in life, to save these animals and plants from destruction. Herpetologists, whether they be ecologists, conservationists, taxonomists or, to use an American term, Herpetoculturists, all want to see a safe future for reptiles and amphibians. Due to their vulnerability they are excellent indicators of changes in the environment, giving early warnings of problems to come.

CITES was basically a good piece of legislation, but it is not flexible enough, sometimes working against the good of the species. The Costa Rican Golden Toad, *Bufo periglenes*, was given total legal protection, both by CITES and national law. Collection or export of live specimens for any purpose was prohibited. The species lived in pristine Cloud Forest, and was never subject to loss of habitat or collection, yet it now appears to be extinct, for unknown reasons. If small numbers had been allowed to be collected by interested breeders, the toad would probably not now be extinct. The Harlequin Frogs, *Atelopus*, are facing a similar future despite living in remote or well protected reserves. Recently, a bush fire in the Sipaliwini reserve, Surinam, all but destroyed the populations of the Blue Poison Dart Frog, *Dendrobates azureus*. Fortunately this frog is quite widely bred in captivity in North America and Europe, so if the species is extinct in the wild a reintroduction programme can be planned when the vegetation regenerates. In the case of the first two amphibians no one knows why they declined; pollution

and climatic change are theories put forward. Some *Atelopus* species could be bred much as *Dendrobates* are.

The destruction going on in the Amazon Basin is probably the worst ecological disaster yet to happen to the world, yet Brazil does not allow export of species about to be drowned by badly planned hydro-electric dams, poisoned by mineral mining operations, burned for growing unsuitable crops or for cattle ranching. Many species have been helped by private and public herpetological collections. The Puerto Rican Crested Toad, Jamaican Boas, Round Island Geckoes and Skinks, etc. Others in the private sector now being produced regularly are the beautiful Golden Mantella and Tomato Frog, Madagascan Toads, etc. etc. Closer to home our own Society has greatly assisted the Sand Lizard and Natterjack Toad through land management and captive breeding.

Many wild areas could benefit from sustainable commercial collection of such creatures as Butterflies, Reptiles and Amphibians, integrated with more natural forest farming techniques, producing valuable revenue, food, and maintaining a near-to-nature environment. Such schemes could directly help indigenous people who are normally the losers in so many badly managed schemes. Farming Iguanas in South and Central America, Chameleons in Madagascar or some of the Australian Pythons or Monitors, are examples which come to mind.

There is no doubt that the pet trade has often been wasteful and immoral, in its choice of species and the sheer numbers imported. If a better choice of species were made, and in more limited numbers, these could supply specialist breeders, and the more hardy groups the pet trade. The more vulnerable species which need specialist care could eventually end up in the trade when sufficient numbers of unrelated stock were available. Instead of unsuitable animals going to impulse buyers and dying in a short space of time, healthy animals adapted to a captive environment could be offered to individuals with experience in maintaining the easier kinds. The North American Corn Snake, the Leopard Gecko, and Clawed Frogs are good examples of well adapted species for the beginner. Care sheets should be given with these animals as a compulsory service at the point of sale. With more success by keepers of reptiles and amphibians, interest would increase, promoting wider concern for all species, and sound husbandry practices. A good example of a species which is a "prime target" for captive breeding is the Cape Verde Skink, *Macroscoincus cocteauui*, a large Skink 50 cm in length of the sub family *Tiliquinae*, thought to be on the verge of extinction (if not already extinct!) This lizard was imported many years ago and described as a good vivarium animal. Now certain institutes or individuals with modern facilities could potentially save this species by captive propagation. The Herpetological community needs to close ranks, set high standards and show the public the positive side of studying these varied and exotic creatures. At the same time we should distance ourselves from the idiots who through ignorance and anti-social behaviour give us a negative public image.

The Bulletin has become an excellent mouthpiece for the Society on all types of issues and can only increase the interest of scientist and layman alike. Please send in any articles on successful breeding projects of all groups of Reptiles and Amphibians. Also notes on useful new equipment, conservation projects worldwide, threatened habitats and hopefully, the odd successful reintroduction report. Herpetology has emerged from its infancy: let us promote and, above all, enjoy it.