



Common green iguana (photo by TomWebber)

# THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES™

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## The Trade in Live Reptiles: Imports to the United States

### INTRODUCTION

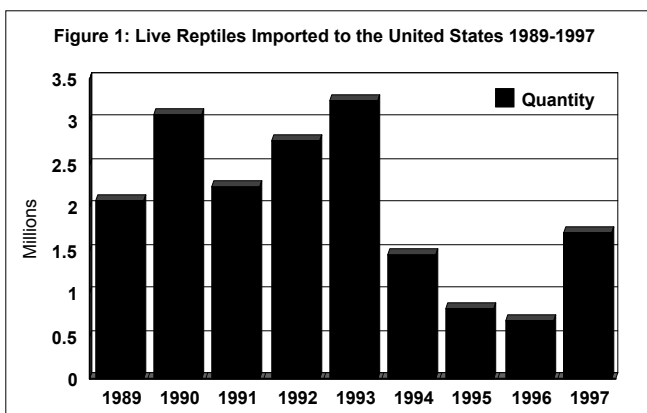
Reptiles are growing in popularity as pets. According to the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association (APPMA), more than 3.9 million households in the United States contained one or more pet reptiles or amphibians in 2000. This is a 44 percent increase since 1998. These households kept about nine million reptiles and amphibians.

But few people stop to consider the origin of reptiles offered for sale at pet stores, the suffering the reptiles have endured, or whether reptiles make appropriate pets in the first place. Many people are lured into buying a pet reptile by misinformation proclaiming that reptiles are low cost, low maintenance pets. This is far from the truth. Reptile experts know that proper care requires a substantial and long-term commitment of time and money, as well as research into the specialized needs of these animals. Improper care can lead to illness, injury, and death of not only the reptiles but also their human caregivers.

### REPTILE IMPORTS

More than 18.3 million live reptiles, representing 645 taxa, were imported to the United States between 1989 and 1997. In 1997 alone, more than 1.7 million reptiles were imported (1997 is the most recent year for which data are available). Despite the fact that reptile ownership has increased in recent years, the number of reptiles imported has not. In fact, there has been no particular pattern in reptile imports to the United States since 1989 (Figure 1). This can be explained by the fact that many reptiles kept by Americans as pets are captured from the wild in the United States. Many also originate from so-called farms or are captive bred in the United States.

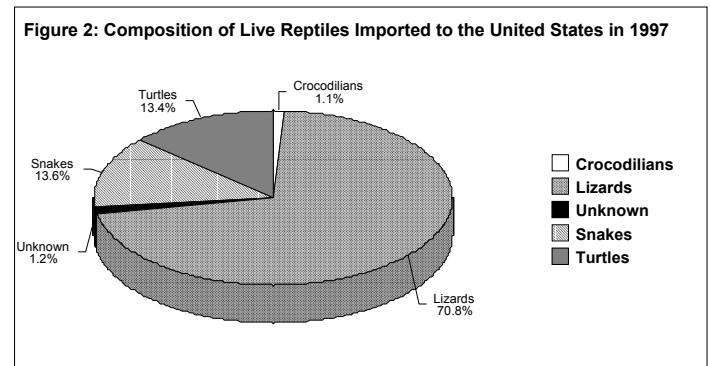
In 1970, turtles were also the type of reptile most commonly imported to the United States, comprising 79.6 percent of all reptile imports. Today, about 250,000 turtles are imported each year for the pet trade, about 13.4 percent of the total. The most common reptile species imported to the United States are the common green iguana (*Iguana iguana*) from Colombia and El Salvador; the leaf-toed gecko (*Hemidactylus spp.*), mostly from Thailand and Vietnam; the ball python (*Python regius*), mostly from Benin and Togo; the oriental water dragon (*Physignathus concincinus*), mostly from Vietnam; and the king ratsnake (*Elaphe carinata*), mostly from China (Table 1).



Lizards are the most commonly imported type of reptile, followed by turtles, snakes, and crocodilians (Figure 2<sup>\*</sup>). However, the most popular type of pet reptile is the turtle. According to the 2000 APPMA survey, 46 percent of reptile owners kept one or more turtles in their homes.








Red-eared slider (photo by TomWebber)



Import information is based on an HSUS analysis of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service data on live reptile imports to the United States.

**Table 1: Top Five Species of Live Reptiles Imported to the United States in 1997**

	<p><b>Common Green Iguana (<i>Iguana iguana</i>)</b></p> <p>Common green iguanas are one of the largest species of iguana, growing to more than six feet in length. Found in Central and South America, they inhabit rain forests, woodlands, and savannahs and as adults eat only vegetation. Threats include over-collection for the pet trade and for use as food and habitat destruction and degradation by pesticides. In 1997, 566,307 common green iguanas were imported to the United States, constituting 33 percent of all reptile imports for that year. The main countries of origin were Colombia (303,479) and El Salvador (227,964). (photo by George W. Robinson)</p>
	<p><b>Leaf-Toed Gecko (<i>Hemidactylus spp.</i>)</b></p> <p>Leaf-toed geckos are found on every continent in the world. They inhabit rocky hillsides, canyons and mixed chaparral, feeding on insects such as beetles, spiders, moths, flies, termites and insect larvae. They are excellent climbers, with toe pads that allow rapid movement on steep surfaces. In 1997, 143,746 leaf-toed geckos were imported to the United States, constituting 8.4 percent of all reptile imports for that year. The main countries of origin were Thailand (72,060) and Vietnam (56,287). (photo by John H. Tashjian)</p>
	<p><b>Ball Python (<i>Python regius</i>)</b></p> <p>Ball pythons are found in central and western Africa. They live on the ground and in trees, eating amphibians, lizards, other snakes, and small mammals. They are called "ball" pythons because of their habit of curling up into a ball when stressed. Ball pythons are collected from the wild for food, skin, and the pet trades. In 1997, 94,072 ball pythons were imported to the United States, constituting 5.5 percent of all reptile imports for that year. The main countries of origin were Benin (48,740) and Togo (28,844). (photo by John H. Tashjian)</p>
	<p><b>Oriental Water Dragon (<i>Physignathus concincinus</i>)</b></p> <p>Oriental water dragons are found in tropical rain forests of southeast Asia. They live mainly in trees and around water and are primarily carnivorous, occasionally eating fruit and flowers. Males may grow up to three feet in length, while females are a little smaller. Their shade of green changes depending on the level of stress they are experiencing. Water dragons are quite nervous and desperately try to escape confinement. In 1997, 38,456 oriental water dragons were imported to the United States, constituting 2.2 percent of all reptile imports for that year. Vietnam was the top country of origin (37,828). (photo by Diane Weber)</p>
	<p><b>King Ratsnake (<i>Elaphe carinata</i>)</b></p> <p>King ratsnakes are found in open forests, fields, meadows and bamboo thickets in southeast China and northern Vietnam. They are large, heavy snakes that can grow to more than six feet in length, eating a large variety of small mammals, birds, and bird eggs. This species is sometimes referred to as the "stinking goddess" because of glands that release a strong offensive odor when the snake is picked up or otherwise threatened. In 1997, 37,425 king ratsnakes were imported to the United States, constituting 2.2 percent of all reptile imports for that year. China was the main country of origin, exporting 37,412 king ratsnakes to the United States in 1997. (Imported king ratsnakes were recorded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as live but may have been skins.)</p>

The most common countries of origin of reptiles imported to the United States are Colombia and El Salvador (which export mostly common green iguanas), Vietnam and Thailand (which export mostly leaf-toed geckos), and Benin (which exports mostly ball pythons) (Table 2).

**Table 2: Top Five Countries of Origin of Live Reptiles Imported to the United States in 1997**

Country	Quantity	Main Species
Colombia	330,561	Common Green Iguana
El Salvador	227,964	Common Green Iguana
Vietnam	162,521	Leaf-Toed Gecko
Thailand	89,920	Leaf-Toed Gecko
Benin	82,705	Ball Python

## CONSERVATION CONCERNS

Collection of reptiles for trade has seriously harmed many wild populations. For example, many of Madagascar's tortoises and chameleons have been over-collected for the pet trade and are threatened with extinction. Many reptile species have very slow reproductive rates or exist in very low natural densities, and their populations cannot recover from continued, unregulated collection from the wild. Wild populations of most imported reptile species are not managed, collection from the wild is not controlled, and international trade is not regulated. Indeed, half of the reptiles imported to the United States are not protected

by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (Table 3). CITES is a treaty that protects listed animal and plant species from over-exploitation due to international trade. Even for those few species protected by CITES, many countries that export reptiles do not have adequate resources to properly enforce the existing laws and regulations. They also do not have resources to study wild populations in order to know the impact of trade and to properly manage the populations. Consequently, many countries have taken the responsible position of stopping the export of live animals. Unfortunately, many other countries continue to export animals despite these failings.

Not all imported reptiles originate in the wild. The increasing popularity of pet reptiles has led to the development of many reptile breeding facilities in foreign countries. These facilities vary from *bona fide* breeding centers to reptile farms, or ranches, which are stocked with wild-caught animals. Although reptiles originating from such facilities are often labeled as "captive-bred," such operations may have a detrimental impact on wild populations of reptiles. Some foreign reptile farms have been found to be simply a front to launder wild-caught reptiles. Others capture wild-caught reptiles to replace breeding animals that have died or to increase breeding stock. It is difficult, and often impossible, to monitor these foreign facilities.

Reptile Type	Animals Imported	Protected by CITES (percent of total for each type)	Taxa Imported	Taxa Protected by CITES (percent of total for each type)
Crocodylians	17,153	17,086 (99.6)	8	7 (99.1)
Lizards	1,201,936	679,340 (56.5)	213	89 (41.7)
Snakes	219,485	141,571 (64.5)	122	32 (26.2)
Turtles	258,106	28,252 (10.9)	105	52 (49.5)
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>1,696,682</b>	<b>866,339 (51.0)</b>	<b>448</b>	<b>189 (42.1)</b>
Unidentified Species	19,644	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,716,324</b>	<b>866,339 (51.0) (minimum)</b>	<b>448 (minimum)</b>	<b>189 (42.1) (minimum)</b>

Exotic reptiles have become introduced or invasive species in the United States. Once established, invasive species can cause serious problems for humans, the environment, and animals. Introduced species compete with indigenous wildlife for food and territory. Reptiles escape from reptile shipments at ports and become established in the wild; they are released into the wild by owners who no longer want them as pets; and they are purposely released into the wild in order to establish wild populations that can be collected later. Due to its popular port of Miami, heavy trade in reptiles, and mild climate, Florida has the highest number of nonindigenous reptiles in the United States, including the spectacled caiman, tokay gecko, brown anole, and common green iguana.

Imported reptiles carry viruses, bacteria, and parasites that are highly contagious and could be detrimental to the health of wildlife, as well as that of humans and domesticated animals. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently banned the import of three tortoises from Africa, including the African spurred tortoise, because they were discovered to carry ticks that are vectors of heartwater disease. Heartwater is a highly contagious wasting disease of ruminants including cattle and sheep and wildlife such as deer and antelope. An outbreak of this disease could devastate the cattle industry in the United States and would also harm wildlife. It is of concern that there is no quarantine period required for imported reptiles.



African spurred tortoise (photo from CalPhotos)

## REPTILE SMUGGLING

As demand for rare and exotic reptile species has increased, so has the illegal trade in reptiles. The United States is the world's largest consumer of illegally traded plants and animals. This illegal trade is valued at approximately \$3 billion annually and reptiles constitute a significant part of it. Unfortunately, the more endangered and rare a reptile species is, the higher the price people will pay for it. This creates great monetary incentive for people to illegally collect and trade in these species. Each year, thousands of reptiles are seized by customs officials at airports from people who attempt to smuggle the reptiles into the United States. Reptiles are found stashed in suitcase compartments or in fraudulently labeled packages. Smugglers also attempt to carry reptiles into the United States hidden inside their clothing.

Some of the largest reptile-importing companies in the United States have been involved in smuggling operations. For example, in 1998, Michael J. Van Nostrand, owner of Strictly Reptiles Inc., was convicted of wildlife smuggling. Between 1990 and 1992, Van Nostrand smuggled 1,500 rare reptiles into the United States. He was sentenced to an eight-month jail sentence and eight months' home detention, was fined \$250,000, and lost his license to import or export wildlife. In May 2001, Anson Wong, a Malaysian who ran an international rare animal smuggling ring, was convicted on 40 counts of smuggling, conspiracy, money laundering, and violations of U.S. wildlife protection laws. Among the reptiles Wong imported to the United States were the endangered Komodo dragon and the rarest tortoise species on earth, the ploughshare tortoise. He used Federal Express® as well as human couriers to smuggle the animals. Unfortunately, the penalties for illegal trade in reptiles are often very weak and offer little deterrent to dealers who make thousands, and possibly millions, of dollars smuggling reptiles.

## HUMANE CONCERNS

From the time of capture from the wild, reptiles are exposed to forms of harm and neglect that result in the loss of many animals before they reach the United States. Reptile dealers are not concerned with mortality rates during collection, holding, and transport because wild-caught reptiles cost them virtually

nothing. In fact, huge numbers of reptiles are collected because the death of some is an expected part of the business.

The capture techniques used to collect reptiles from the wild are often harmful to the animals as well as the environment. Hooked sticks are often used to pull reptiles from their hiding places and burrows. Many animals are injured by this practice and eventually die as a result. Burrows are dug up to locate snakes and tortoises. This destroys possible habitats for a number of animals. Harmful chemicals such as gasoline also are used to chase reptiles from their burrows. This poisons the soil, rendering it useless for farming and as wildlife habitat and kills many animals that come in contact with the toxins.



Boxes of live turtles await international shipment.

Following collection, reptiles are kept in holding facilities, often for weeks at a time, awaiting shipment to the United States. Care of reptiles during this time is virtually nonexistent. Holding facilities are often places of filth, disease, and neglect where many animals become sick, injured or die. During this time, reptiles are often purposely denied water and food to reduce their weight for shipment and to decrease the possibility of excrement that could alert inspectors to illegal shipments and inhumane shipping conditions. It is estimated that ten percent of captured reptiles die between capture and export.

The reptiles that survive capture and pre-export holding are packaged and shipped to the United States by air. Their journey may take several days during which time the animals receive no care. To prepare them for transport, lizards and snakes are crammed into linen bags and piled on top of one another in flimsy cardboard boxes. During shipment, reptiles are exposed to temperature extremes and other conditions that kill or injure them. Turtles, stacked in boxes, are often crushed to death by the weight of other turtles in the box. Shipments of reptiles can be held up in customs or abandoned by importers for one reason or another. In many cases, entire shipments sit in holding docks while the animals inside perish. It is estimated that, on average, approximately four percent of reptiles that are exported will die

For additional information see the HSUS report, *Reptiles as Pets: An Examination of the Trade in Live Reptiles in the United States*.

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during shipment. Mortality rates are higher for more fragile species. Regulations for the humane treatment of reptiles during transport are nonexistent except for CITES-listed species. As noted earlier, half of the reptiles imported to the United States are not protected by CITES. Violators of shipping regulations rarely receive any substantial penalty even when improper conditions have caused the death of entire reptile shipments. The treatment that imported reptiles receive during capture and the journey to the United States results in cumulative stress, illness and injury that cause the death of the reptile after it is imported and sold as a pet. Many of the reptiles sold in pet stores are seriously ill at the time of purchase. Even with the best of care, they would still perish. In fact, it is estimated that 90 percent of all reptiles imported to the United States die within their first year of captivity.



These African spurred tortoises died due to trauma and neglect suffered during their capture and transport.

## CONCLUSION

The Humane Society of the United States is strongly opposed to the trade in wild-caught animals for pets because of the tremendous suffering to the animals and the damage to wild populations that it causes. Hundreds of thousands of reptiles die every year due to the capture and transport methods used to supply Americans with reptile pets. Many people purchase reptiles without giving any consideration to where the animal originated or if they will be able to provide proper care. Even experts may not be able to meet the needs of many of the hundreds of reptile species in trade. The Humane Society of the United States believes it is critical to inform the public of the tremendous suffering inflicted by the reptile trade. Although The Humane Society of the United States understands the widespread interest in reptiles, we conclude that reptiles should not be kept as pets by the general public. The best way to avoid contributing to this destructive trade is to choose traditional companion animals for pets and allow reptiles to remain in the wild where they belong.

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