

Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue, Inc.

Green Iguanas in Captivity by Bill Howe

While CDWR deals primarily with the rescue and rehabilitation of native wildlife, we also received numerous calls on the proper care of wildlife as pets - both native and exotic animals. While the C.D.W.R. does not recommend keeping any wild animal in captivity, the organization does feel that, if wild animals MUST be kept as pets, they should be kept properly.

(This article originally appeared in *The Eagle*, the official publication of the Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue in 1999.)

About 35 years ago the first green iguanas reached pet markets in the United States. In a short time they were being imported in vast numbers to meet the demand and native populations in Central and South America were being devastated. Today the iguana remains popular as a pet but, thankfully, nearly all are now being bred and raised at iguana farms in Florida and tropical America.

Before I begin giving some basic information on iguana care, let me try to discourage you from purchasing an iguana in the first place.

Every year the CDWR receives numerous calls from people who want to find a home for an unmanageable pet iguana. Free roaming, escaped pet iguanas are frequent subjects of calls received by CDWR and El Paso Animal Control. The purpose of this issue's article is to educate and, hopefully, to minimize future iguana problems. Once an iguana breaks loose to freedom, capture is difficult at best. Standing under a 50 foot tall tree and chanting, "Leezard, leezard. Come here leezard leezard." will NOT bring your escaped pet back into your arms.

So, you are wandering through a petshop and spy a large terrarium full of baby iguanas. The price isn't bad so you impulsively purchase one. Few people realize that a baby iguana, 8 or so inches in length, can quickly grow to a dragon over 6 feet long. Baby and juvenile iguanas may quickly come to recognize you as a source of food and warmth and will tend to tolerate, if not enjoy, frequent handling. However, as iguanas approach the human equivalent of adolescence, they often go through a period of "teenage

rebellion." The once friendly pet has turned into a mini-monster that wants nothing to do with you. They bite, scratch and slap you with their tails. It is at this stage of development that CDWR receives most of its "come get this animal" calls. After a year or so of this behavior the animal MAY once again become docile and permit handling. However, this is not always the rule. Believe me, an adult iguana can do great bodily harm to the average human. They have strong jaws and sharp teeth quite capable of removing a finger. The claws can inflict lacerations that will send you to the emergency room for stitches and the tail can inflict nasty bruises.



Although over blown as a threat, iguanas and many other animals can carry the salmonella bacteria. I feel you face a greater threat of contracting food poisoning from that chicken you purchased at the market than from your iguana. Use a little common sense. Wash your hands after handling an iguana or *any* animal. Affection should be shown to your animal by gentle petting - forget that big, juicy French kiss.

So! You think you can deal with the possibility of raising a monster. Let's look at the care an iguana requires before you commit to the purchase. While iguanas are now reasonably inexpensive, the equipment needed to maintain a healthy animal will quickly chew up the average weekly paycheck.

Housing

An aquarium or terrarium is not a suitable home for an iguana. They must have an open-air cage that allows for the passing of direct sunlight and free flow of air. There are cages on the market designed especially for iguanas - eg. *Iguan-Ariums*. The largest available is about 36 inches long, suitable for an animal up to 3 feet in length. Remember. Iguanas can grow to over 6 feet. Cost of such a cage at a mail order, discount pet supply company is over \$300, shipping not included. The cage must be large enough to safely house the animal yet be portable enough to be easily moved outside to sunlight and back inside each day.

Next, you must have a heat source that will allow the animal to raise its body temperature to comfortable levels. Iguanas thrive at temperatures in the 90 degree range. A special infrared, radiant heater designed especially for reptiles will set you back over 100 dollars. A portion of the cage must remain unheated so that the iguana can move in and out of the heat to maintain its comfort range.

Iguanas ***must*** have access to several hours of direct sunlight every day. Light that passes through glass is not suitable as glass absorbs nearly all of the beneficial ultraviolet light that passes through it. Without uv light your animal will quickly develop vitamin and mineral deficiencies that will, in the end, be fatal. Special ultraviolet bulbs and vitamin supplements are a help but will *not* replace natural sunlight in the long run. A good light fixture and special bulb will probably set you back 50 dollars or more.

Iguanas come from a humid environment. There are on the market a variety of appliances that will keep your iguana's environment to his liking. These are expensive and, in our extremely dry climate, not very effective.

Okay! Our \$19.95 iguana is now housed in a castle that has set us back nearly \$500. Now let's look at diet.

Feeding

Baby and juvenile iguanas are, primarily, insect eaters. They do consume a certain amount of vegetation. As they become adults they eat almost nothing but plant material. While it is possible to meet your pet's nutritional requirements at the grocery store, it is highly unlikely. Iguanas tend to be finicky eaters and will have their favorite foods. When given a choice of

fruits and veggies they will pick out those morsels they prefer and leave the rest. This results in poor nutrition.

To avoid this problem it is best to feed your animal one of the specially prepared diets available in petshops. These are *expensive*. A few ounces may set you back 6 to 8 dollars. A few ounces is only a snack to an adult iguana. Think dog food is getting expensive? Try feeding an adult iguana. Many iguanas will, at first, refuse to take the special diet. It may take several days, or weeks, before your animal gives it a try. Some animals never take to it.

Finally

This is only the basic information on iguana care. If you have read this article and have not been dissuaded from making that purchase, please take some time to pick up and read one of the manuals on iguana care.

If you decide you no longer want your iguana, please contact CDWR or other herpetological or wildlife organization. While iguanas are lizards, they are NOT desert lizards. They can not be released in El Paso. Our winter weather will quickly kill an iguana as they are not hibernating animals.