

The Reptile Nation and the Importance of USARK

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The past 60 years has seen the practice of keeping reptiles change from an obscure hobby to a widespread and mainstream interest of the American public. During the first half of this span of time, reptile-keeping was organized and represented by the pet industry. Now, looking back from a modern perspective, we can see that an identifiable community of people with shared strong interests in reptiles began to form some 40 years ago. Today, the interests and activities of this group are largely independent from those of the pet industry. We identify this community, with its own channels of communication, economy, and activities as the Reptile Nation.

The Reptile Nation comprises more than 5 million Americans. All are intensely interested to protect their rights to possess and work with reptiles—many keepers can be predicted to be single issue voters if the issue is perceived as unnecessary, unwarranted, or unfair regulation of their right to own and keep their animals. Consider that in April 2009 50,000 letters from the Reptile Nation were delivered to the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife for a preliminary hearing of H.R. 669, an anti-animal bill proposed by Delegate Madeleine Z. Bordallo (Guam), Chair of the Subcommittee.

Millions of dollars flow into the national economy from the Reptile Nation. It is interlaced and interconnected with all levels of the economy. It supports manufacturing, contributes to agriculture, and includes tens of thousands of American small businesses. But its most important contributions and accomplishments may be to conservation and education.

The Reptile Nation has successfully reproduced in captivity a significant percentage of all reptile species. It has convincingly demonstrated that essentially all reptiles can be maintained in captivity, and that this can be done by private keepers.

The Reptile Nation has documented its unequalled work in the maintenance and captive breeding of an entire class of vertebrate animal; data on the maintenance and reproductive husbandry of hundreds of reptiles are available online and published

in magazines, regional publications and books. Even more impressive, the information generated by this endeavor has been shared—the Reptile Nation itself promotes the dissemination of the data that has been generated.

The Reptile Nation created and now supports viable self-sustaining captive populations of several hundred species of reptiles. This has been accomplished through a decentralized, non-governmental, economically driven model of conservation. It is American private enterprise that has achieved this very impressive modern goal, not a penny of American taxpayer dollars has been spent in this endeavor.

What is today being attempted around the world for amphibians, wild felines, and many other rare vertebrates has already been accomplished for reptiles by the Reptile Nation. Reptiles are today more securely established in captivity than any other vertebrate group. This is truly one of the greatest conservation accomplishments of the past 20 years.

Today the vast majority of reptiles held in captivity within the Reptile Nation are captive-bred animals. These are animals that have not been removed from the wild. The Reptile Nation is a producer of captive-bred animals and a protector of reptile species.

Live animals brought to classrooms are the only contact that many American children get to experience with animals. In schools across the United States, the most common animals used in that endeavor are captive reptiles. Not dogs, cats, rodents, monkeys, or birds—it is snakes and lizards that are brought to educate and entertain children. Reptiles are used to teach lessons not only about animals, but also about the environment, ecology, natural history, and conservation.

There are professional lecturers who tour American schools with reptiles. However, most school-based educational programs are done largely as a courtesy of the Reptile Nation; these programs rely on the time and effort of dedicated volunteers who present lectures and demonstrations to school kids, scouts, camps, and other groups of children and adults.

This is the largest volunteer educational program involving animals and wildlife in the United States, now ongoing for more than 30 years.

In many ways, the Reptile Nation undoubtedly still overlaps with the pet industry, its progenitor, but it now is evolving and changing independently. There have been dramatic changes in every aspect of the economics, communications, accomplishments, and philosophies of the Reptile Nation, but the changes mostly have come gradually and have been largely unrecognized. The time has now arrived for this community to comprehend its own existence, embrace its unique accomplishments, and plan for its future.

USARK

The Reptile Nation is a nationwide, interconnected web of people who share a strong interest in reptiles. Within the Reptile Nation there are many subsets of people with varying intense interests in particular aspects of herpetoculture and herpetology. Demographically, the Reptile Nation includes people of every age, income, political, and educational category, and it is spread throughout every county in every state of the nation.

As it has come to recognize its own existence, the Reptile Nation is now awakening to the crucial importance of organization at the national level. Reptile keepers have inherited a degree of independence and privacy from decades ago, long before reptile keeping became a mainstream American activity. However, the time has come to organize so that the Reptile Nation will continue to evolve and prosper.

The United States Association of Reptiles Keepers, better known as USARK, is the political face of the Reptile Nation. It exists to protect and promote the rights and activities of reptile keepers. It is a non-profit, politically active organization. The mission statement reads: “USARK is a science and education based advocacy for the responsible private ownership of, and trade in reptiles. We endorse caging standards, sound husbandry, escape prevention protocols, and an integrated approach to vital conservation issues. Our goal is to facilitate cooperation between government agencies, the scientific community, and the private sector in order to produce policy proposals that will

effectively address important husbandry and conservation issues. The health of these animals, public safety, and maintaining ecological integrity are our primary concerns.” Under the organization and guidance of USARK, the Reptile Nation is a true political and social force. Information on joining and supporting USARK can be found at www.usark.org.

There is a national movement that endangers the Reptile Nation and all the good that it has done. There are highly organized, well-funded, politically active animal-rights groups and environmental groups that hate the concept of captivity. Even though there are widely different underlying reasons why each group believes that animal captivity is wrong, they are united in their efforts to remove animals from captivity and from the American public. Their increasing attacks on the freedoms and rights of all animal owners, and in particular, the Reptile Nation, can no longer be ignored.

The Future of the Reptile Nation

Americans are losing their animals. It’s not just reptiles, although they often are specifically targeted. Little by little, piece by piece, the rights to keep animals are being nibbled away. Today most Americans live in large cities, away from nature, alienated from animals other than small dogs and occasional cats. The average American simply doesn’t realize that his or her right to maintain animals is being systematically challenged and erased.

Regulations to remove animals from all Americans are often framed as being for public safety, public health, or protection to the environment—this all sounds reasonable and desirable to a populace that has little interest and no experience with animals.

As the general population loses contact with animals, it begins to fear animals. The public is constantly being told that animals can cause injury, disease, and even death. However, with the removal of animals from society comes a loss of support for zoos, parks, conservation and environmental organizations. There results a general loss of curiosity about and knowledge of the natural world. People cannot be expected to love, respect, or support that which they have never experienced.

There are forces at play that seek to criminalize the captivity of all animals. Primarily because of a lack of political organization, reptiles have been among the easiest targets. The past decade clearly shows a general trend of slow and insidious increases of restrictive regulations at every level of government throughout the country. City by city, county by county, state by state, anti-animal laws and ordinances have been methodically enacted across the USA. Agricultural guidelines turn into dangerous animal ordinances that turn into exotic animal ordinances that then become animal bans.

In the summer of 2009, a proposed law in Congress, H.R. 669, sought to ban all animals from possession except dogs, cats, goldfish, and domestic livestock. If unopposed, another proposed law, S. 373, will place all pythons on the Injurious Wildlife List, effectively banning them in captivity. We make the following observations:

- These proposals and this type of law are always defended with some combination of claims to protect the public and/or the environment, even though little science supports either claim.
- These laws grant the government sweeping power to confiscate the property rights of American citizens without compensation.

- These laws negatively affect the quality of life of millions of American citizens.
- These laws are typical of the continuous efforts of local and national animal-rights organizations to force their morality and philosophy on the American public through legislation.
- USARK must receive the united support of the Reptile Nation in order to be able to protect our rights to maintain animals into the future.

The future of the Reptile Nation is ours to shape, but we must organize. The Reptile Nation has the political power to deflect whatever happens to be the latest attempt at ratings by Congress or the media, but we must learn how to effectively wield that power through USARK. All persons with interests in live captive-bred reptiles should join USARK and actively support it.

The day has come when political apathy is no longer an option. Only united behind USARK can the Reptile Nation chart a secure course to a future where the efforts and accomplishments of this devoted community are appreciated and encouraged, and its liberties and rights protected.

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