

Caring for Your Elderly Reptile or Amphibian

by Eric Roscoe

Reptile and amphibian, or herptile and other exotic pet keeping has grown and developed tremendously in recent decades as breeders, hobbyists, enthusiasts, and pet owners alike have learned a great deal about the biology, natural history, and reproductive habitats of these animals both in the wild and in captivity. However, there remains much to be learned and discovered, and even to this day, new findings and discoveries relating to the captive care and husbandry, as well as other aspects of these animals are being made. There is certainly always room to better our knowledge and husbandry techniques of these animals in captivity. One of these areas that has remained relatively unexplored, with few other previous articles or information written or published is that of the care and husbandry of elderly reptiles and amphibians.

This is perhaps because unlike cats and dogs, or many other mammal species, reptiles and amphibians often display few to no outward or evident signs of aging that we can easily recognize. However, just like cats, dogs, and other animals, herp keepers can form just as strong of emotional bonds with their pets throughout their lives. It is also well known, and has been previously mentioned in other articles, that in order to survive in the wild, these animals must often mask their injuries or illnesses, making signs of aging difficult to detect to the untrained eye. However, with a bit of background knowledge and experience in reptile and amphibian health and husbandry, as well as knowledge of the history of the individual animal, several signs can be recognized. As such, your elderly pet reptile or amphibian may require some special or additional care and considerations. In this article, the most common visible signs of aging are covered, as well as what you can do to better care for your elderly animal until the end of its life.

The lifespan and longevity of reptiles and amphibians can vary greatly depending on the species, as well as level of care and husbandry. Some species can be rather short-lived, and may even be only annual, with a longevity of only one or two years. However, most reptiles tend to be longer lived animals in captivity, depending on the species. Many lizards and amphibians can reach 10 to 15 years, or more. Some larger lizards such as iguanas, monitors, and tegus, as well as many snakes can live as much as 20 to 40 years or more. Turtles and tortoises, as well as crocodilians and even some amphibians can also be quite long lived animals, often times reaching at least 40 to 70 years or more for the latter two. Some turtles and tortoises can even reach 100 years or more! Even some arachnid and other invertebrate species can be rather long lived, living for at least 15-20 years or more in some cases.

So What Signs Should I Look for in my Elderly Animal?

-Reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates are reproductively viable throughout their lives, and do not undergo menopause as with humans and arguably a few other mammal species. However, as they age, their reproductive productivity and viability may be decreased and fewer eggs or live

young may be laid or given birth to. Older animals can also become more susceptible to egg and follicle binding and retention, as well as other reproductive health concerns.

- The development of bone and/or muscle mass and tone may often be weakened or diminished in older animals resulting from improper or inadequate diets, nutrition, and other husbandry factors. This may result in your elderly animal appearing slower and more sluggish than it may have previously been, or making them more susceptible to fractures and other physical injuries.

-The immune systems of elderly animals can also often be weakened or compromised, potentially leading to many other different illnesses and infections arising that younger animals with stronger and more robust immune systems can often ward off. Species that are heliothermic, or frequent and regular baskers that require optimal levels of UVB or full spectrum lighting and heating may bask more frequently and/or otherwise preferentially select warmer temperatures in their enclosure to compensate for their lessened immune systems. Be sure that thermal burns and overheating cannot occur with your older animal, however.

- In many animals, the skin, scutes, and/or scales can become or appear discolored or less vibrantly colored and more worn in elderly animals as pigmentation begins to fade. This is not uncommon with many older or elderly animals.

-Beaks, shells, and/or claws may undergo overgrowth in chelonians and some lizards as they become less active and inclined to wear them down naturally on surfaces and furnishings provided in the enclosure. These may need additional care and maintenance in trimming and monitoring.

- Even reptiles and amphibians can develop cancer as they age and become older. Skin cancer, as well as Ovarian, liver, and kidney cancers as well as any other bodily systems can all be types of cancers seen. Identifying and treating cancers in herps can be more difficult however due to their slower healing times and lack of readily accessible veins for injections. In general, be aware of and watch for any unusual lumps or bumps anywhere on your reptile or amphibian, which can be any number of different things, both benign or malignant. Also be sure to periodically feel for any unusual hardened or softened spots anywhere along the body.

-As reptiles and amphibians age, they may become more susceptible to dehydration, inadequate humidity levels, and/or may have more difficulty shedding as a result. Providing additional misting, soaking, or other means of hydration and humidity can benefit older herps in these regards.

- In many cases, simply knowing the expected captive and wild longevities for the species in question, if known, as well as the current age, health, and history of the individual animal(s) being maintained may be sufficient in determining whether your animal is elderly or aging. Many animals tend to show few to no other signs of aging not mentioned above, and for some groups of animals, such as amphibians, signs of aging still currently remain largely unknown and unexplored.

How Should I Care for My Elderly Reptile or Amphibian?

-Some adjustments and accommodations to the setup and enclosure itself in which the animal is kept can be made to more easily accommodate your aging or elderly animal. For arboreal to semi-arboreal or semi-aquatic animals, for example, easier access to climbing and basking opportunities, platforms, or other areas of the enclosure can be made. This may include providing wider, larger, or less steep inclines when basking or climbing in order to prevent accidental falls or injuries. Likewise, easier access to the preferred thermal gradients for snakes, as well as other animals can also be considered.

- Your elderly pet's dietary needs and requirements may also change or require special consideration. An elderly animal's digestive and immune systems can often be lessened, as previously mentioned, leading to potential regurgitation or other health issues particularly if suitable enclosure temperatures and gradients are not met. In some cases, smaller and/or more frequent prey items for snakes may be considered rather than larger prey items offered less frequently. Other reptiles that may be herbivorous or omnivorous are usually still capable of ingesting their food items, although offering any diets to these animals in smaller or more finely chopped up servings can still be beneficial.

-Providing additional calcium and vitamin D3, as well as other nutritional and dietary supplements should perhaps be one of the most important aspects and special considerations in maintaining your elderly animal. Even snakes and other primarily carnivorous animals which normally obtain most to all of their required nutrients from whole prey items can benefit from additional supplementation when they are older. As previously mentioned, an elderly animal's immune system, as well as bone and muscle mass and development often becomes lessened as calcium, phosphorus, and other nutrients are more quickly leached from the animal's bones and other areas of the body. This leads to bones and/or muscle becoming more brittle and susceptible to strain and injury than it would in younger, and healthier animals.

-Monitoring fecal and other bodily waste frequency, composition, and analysis and examination can also often help determine many underlying health issues that may arise or are associated with elderly animals.

-Scheduling regular, or more frequent vet visits with your reptile or exotic animal veterinarian is not just for cats and dogs, and they may be able to detect other internal or inconspicuous problems not otherwise readily detected.

When to Say Goodbye to your Scaly Friend and Conclusion

The decision to say goodbye to your elderly animal can be made largely on a case by case basis depending on the animal's current health and condition, the severity of any underlying health issues, and its continued quality of life. It is never easy saying goodbye to any beloved pet, and most of everyone who keeps or maintains these animals have lost a pet at one time or another. When, or if the time comes to consider euthanasia of an elderly animal, it may help at least help in a small amount, especially for new pet owners to know what to expect in the process going

forward. The method of euthanasia (of which there are several, but will not be covered in depth in this article), and disposition (also which there are several means) thereafter may be some of the things to expect and discuss with your veterinarian. In most cases, the kindest and most peaceful and humane options should be selected in general.

However, on a more positive note and outlook, reptiles and amphibians can also be amazingly resilient animals, often being able to live out the remainder of their lives while still going strong right up to the day they finally pass away with few to no major underlying health implications. In conclusion, it is the hope of this article that additional information and resources be brought to one aspect of reptile and exotic pet keeping in which information has not been previously widely known or available. As the herptile keeping hobby and industry continues to grow and become even more well developed and educated than in decades previously, hopefully more new findings into the lifespans and longevities of these animals will be made when it comes to keeping and observing these amazing animals both in the wild and in captivity.