

How to Tame Your Reptile! What to Do if Your Snake or Other Reptile is “Aggressive”!

Many of us have probably seen or heard of the animated film series, “How to Train Your Dragon”. Well, what about one’s pet reptile in real life? Many snakes, and other reptiles and amphibians, can be, or can become relatively calm and friendly, which oftentimes adds to the joy of being able to keep or maintain them as pets in captivity. We enjoy taking them out, handling them, and even learning much more about their biology, adaptability, and intelligence levels. These attributes to these animals are ever-changing and ever-evolving as we learn and hear of the increasingly amount of scientific studies and other articles, and more about them in general. Commonly conceived notions or beliefs about these animals are constantly changing or being challenged, and even still there is much to still be known about these amazing animals.

But what happens when one has been maintaining a pet snake, or other reptile, in captivity for a length of time where it has been relatively, calm, friendly, or handleable, but suddenly changes, or becomes “aggressive”? What could have happened? Or if your newest animal might not exactly be the most socialized or used to being around people. Why might your pet now be acting this way when it hasn’t before? How can one deal with it, or better be able to calm or “tame” them back again? These are all very common causes for “troubleshooting”, and several of the most common reasons or causes for consideration will be examined in this article!

Keep in mind that each individual animal can have their own temperaments and personalities as well, just like even different people, and also like all animals, even with our more long-standing and traditionally “domesticated” cats and dogs, reptiles and amphibians always will possess natural instincts, and may react to certain situations more defensively, no matter how “tame” or “docile” they may otherwise be. So without further adieu, let’s examine some of the considerations one has to consider and think about when it comes to this issue.

-What species of animal is it? Many species are generally known for their docile, inoffensive, or calm dispositions, while others, may generally be known to be more nervous, defensive, or less handleable. There are of course always exceptions and individual variations though. However, narrowing it down to realizing which species the animal is may help determine if the issue has to do with any more species-specific behaviors or dispositions.

-How old is the animal? Hatchling, or neonate animals can oftentimes be more nervous, defensive, or willing to bite, or otherwise act defensively. This is simply because they are small, and perceive nearly everything larger than they are a potential predator or threat. Give your hatchling or neonate animals an appropriate setup with hides and other furnishings to help make it feel more secure, and also time to acclimate to its surroundings. In many cases, younger animals will, over time, grow out of this behavior as they become older and more accustomed to being handled and their surroundings.

-Is the animal at, or reaching sexual maturity? Many reptiles, once they reach or approach certain ages

and/or sizes, may become what may be perceived to be more “aggressive” as they undergo different hormonal or other physiological or reproductive changes. As a result, these animals oftentimes can become more territorial or otherwise desiring, or wanting to mate and reproduce. This can especially be the case with iguanas, and some other lizards, although this may be a possibility with other reptiles as well. If this is the case for the issue, there is not much which can typically be done other than to continue handling or working with the animal, while taking any necessary precautions. These animals usually will also display other territorial, sexual, or reproductive behaviors one can learn to watch for and recognize.

-Are you separating feeding from defensive behaviors?- Feeding and defensive behaviors are the two main reasons, or causes for an animal in captivity to bite, or otherwise act in ways which may be perceived as being “aggressive”. In order to be able to better pinpoint the issue, learning to recognize and separate what may actually be defensive behaviors and what may actually be feeding related behaviors should be considered in how each of these causes should be addressed. In both cases, there is oftentimes variability, once again, in species-specific behaviors, although there can still be many common factors to look for.

Is the animal recoiling or forming the forward third to half of its body into an “S” shaped, or strike posture? Is the animal hissing, exhaling heavily, gaping, defecating, musking, or urinating, displaying longer, or slower tongue flicking? Is the animal flattening its head, neck, and/or body, or rattling or vibrating its tail? These can all be signs of more nervous or defensive behaviors, which should be addressed differently than feeding behavior, and vice versa. Is the animal moving forward towards you with faster, shorter tongue flicks? These could be signs of more feeding related behavior.

-How often are you handling or interacting with the animal? If one is either only entering or opening up the enclosure for feeding primarily, or are not otherwise taking the time to handle or interact with the animal, there is a higher chance of that animal acting either defensively and/or exhibiting feeding behaviors based off of all that it knows or has experienced. This can be the same issue with improper socialization or interaction as with any other pet. Take the time to more regularly and routinely handle or interact with your animal, or consider “hook-training”, as a means of which convincing the animal not to associate human presence or opening of the enclosure only with food.

-Different trains of thought exist with different animals and different situations. Sometimes, “choice based handling” is mentioned, where the animal is allowed to acclimate to its environment and to being handled on its own accord over time. Others may prefer a quicker and more direct approach to get their new animal over its fear of being handled or interaction. In cases such as these, being able to read and understand each species’, and even specific individual animal’s bodily and head movements, postures, tongue flicks, etc. will be key to better “reading” them, and how they will likely react to different approaches. Using a snakehook to partially “block” the forward third of an animal’s body that is likely to try to bite can be helpful when reaching into the enclosure to pull the animal out. Once an animal begins “running”, it is no longer interested in being in either feeding or defensive mode, and then it the time it should be pulled out.

-Giving an animal just enough time to realize what is going on, while also working to get the animal over its initial fear or anxiety with being handled as quickly as possible is the idea of this more direct approach. The longer you the hesitation, the more the animal may become stressed out and defensive, wondering what will happen to it. Don't be afraid of the prospect of being musked on and/or being bitten; one can wear gloves if they so choose, although gloves and also reduce the dexterity and tactile senses needed when handling an animal.

-What is your setup like, where is it located in the household, and how long have you had the animal?

These are all additional considerations as to why an animal might be reacting defensively. If you have recently acquired the animal over the past couple of weeks or months, leave it alone in a quiet, dark, and/or low traffic area of the household, and allow it time to adjust to its surroundings. Don't constantly open the enclosure or take out and handle the animal every day, as this can lead to stressing them out. Also make sure your enclosure and setup is adequate, and the animal has adequate temperatures, humidity, hiding places, and other opportunities to make it feel more secure and acclimated to its environment.

-Have you examined your animal for any possible health issues? If one has followed all of the above, and everything else seems to be up to par, and there is still not an adequate explanation as to why your animal may be reacting the way that it is, thoroughly examine it again for any possible health issues which may be causing the animal pain and/or discomfort, or for any other health related abnormalities. Consider bringing the animal to your local, reputable reptile or exotic animal veterinarian for a more thorough diagnosis or evaluation as well. And sometimes, we simply might not always know or have the answers to everything when it comes to these animals in captivity, and there is still much to be learned and understood about them.

-Is the animal or species captive-bred, or wild caught? Many individuals, or species of animals available in the pet trade are still wild-caught, and may simply require much more time and patience in order to become calmed down and acclimated to their new surroundings, or to being in captivity. Sometimes it can take many months for some animals to become calm, friendly, and handleable enough to become "good" pets. Captive-bred, or CB animals generally acclimate much better and quicker to captive conditions than a wild-caught animal, at least in many cases. Choosing a healthy, well-acclimated, and captive-bred animal as a pet, or at least being aware of the source or origin of any potential pet can help avoid possible temperament and handleability, or other issues later that are associated with wild-caught animals.

-Green Iguanas: One of the most common pet reptile species involved or implicated in these sorts of handling or "aggression" issues by far, have to be green iguanas. This is most commonly, and likely because by around 1 ½ or 2 to 3 years of age, green iguanas, as well as many other large lizard species, will become much more defensive and territorial as they undergo hormonal changes, and sexual maturity. Unfortunately, there is not much else (aside from the above) which can be done to prevent these behaviors entirely, and other, entire articles have been written on these behavioral issues in iguanas. One can try allowing their iguana to "free roam" in another secured area of the house or facility so that they are less likely to injure themselves within a more confined or smaller enclosure. Techniques such as castration (removal of their reproductive organs) or hormonal therapy are costly and expensive

for reptiles, and rarely are that effective.

One can also try reducing their daily light cycles to simulate a shortened or reduction of their breeding season. Sometimes, adding a surrogate, such as a blanket or a towel to simulate another iguana is also sometimes suggested. One might also try creating additional visual barriers for your iguana, particularly if it is around other reptiles or other pets in the household. Many iguanas might just not like certain colors, shapes/objects, certain noises or too much noise and commotion, or actions or movements which may be in the household.

Unfortunately, there is no being able to tell “when” or for “how long” this behavior is expected to last except to say eventually. It could be weeks, or months. Even if, or when they do, once iguanas reach sexual maturity, these behaviors will happen again every year, also. Ultimately, however, these are the realities of owning a pet iguana, and one should certainly not take owning or acquiring an iguana lightly to begin with. Owning these animals requires a considerable amount of time and patience, and the only way of really dealing with it is through patience and monitoring their behavior.