

## **What to Do About Pet Store Neglect**

The issue of neglectful, or substandard pet stores with live animals has been an old and very long running one that perhaps is familiar to the vast majority of reptile and other pet owners, keepers, breeders, and hobbyists. There are many different cases and examples of neglect which can occur or be observed in retail pet store settings including, but not limited to sick, injured, or dying animals, animals which have already deceased, animals with mites or other parasites, overcrowding, improper or incorrect enclosures, displays, and/or setups for the species being maintained, housing of incompatible species together in the same enclosure, and other causes for concern. This article will cover several of the steps and actions everyone as a customer or prospective customer can take in identifying, reporting, and addressing any issues seen in pet stores, but not necessarily provide additional tips for choosing or selecting a healthy animal (See the article titled “How to Choose a Healthy Animal”). For the purposes of this article, it will be assumed that the reader or customer is knowledgeable to the point of being able to identify any such shortcomings.

The purpose of this article is also not to unjustly generalize any or all stores that do sell live animals or to otherwise label any store as “bad” without at least initially giving them a benefit of the doubt (it should be understood that husbandry issues can and do arise for anyone). Certainly, there are many numerous examples of reputable, locally or regionally owned reptile and amphibian, or exotic pet specialty stores that are exceptionally clean and well run, provide exceptional customer service and healthy animals, and go above and beyond the standards that are required. This article is intended to address only those stores which do not consistently operate responsibly or ethically, therefore harming their overall long term reputation.

With all of this stated, here are several tips in the form of more easily read points on how to address pet store neglect.

- Be sure to document as much as possible about the situation or instance in question. Documenting the date, times, location (if the store is part of a chain or has multiple locations), animal(s) in question, and any employees and/or managers contacted or spoken with will help during any follow up, progress reporting, or investigations which may subsequently take place.
- As stated previously, give them the benefit of the doubt at least initially. Husbandry issues can and do happen to anyone, and in some cases (such as a deceased animal in its enclosure) may have only very recently occurred and has not yet been brought to anyone’s attention. There may also be other valid reasons why an animal may be in a situation it is in as well. For instance, a store may take in a rescue or surrender animal in subpar condition that is not of their own doing, but still should make an effort to indicate whether these instances may be the case if the animal will be within public display or in view of customers. If issues begin to occur regularly or consistently, then further steps may need to be taken.
- Notify or inform employees and/or managers and attempt to educate them on what the problem is, and how they can work to address it. In many instances, store employees may not necessarily be specifically trained in or are knowledgeable about reptiles or amphibians, and may be required to

work in multiple departments, not all of which they may be familiar with. Oftentimes, they may simply need to be educated on the topic of proper reptile care and husbandry. However, if it is found that an employee or management is apathetic or does not care, than other measures need to be taken.

- Contact “corporate” if the store belongs to a larger chain. Oftentimes, local employees and management may simply be following outdated or antiquated corporate policies when it comes to animal care and husbandry and have no say or control over how animals may be cared for themselves. In these cases, if enough customers or other external individuals/organizations familiar with the subject matter complain to corporate, policies can be changed through this means. This may require a larger grassroots effort to accomplish, but is another option and point to consider. Some pet retail store chains may also have locally owned franchises depending on the area and location. If this is the case, they may oftentimes be easier to contact and for management to make changes without going through corporate, or if there is a change in local ownership or management.
- Provide follow up and longer term monitoring. Sometimes situations can change for the better with new management of a store(s). Providing follow up is also useful not only in monitoring any husbandry issues or situations that may have previously occurred, but also in potentially establishing mutually beneficial relationships with the store in question, either as an individual or an organization (such as a local, state, or regional herpetological society or other reptile rescue, education, and outreach organization). These positive relationships can include being able to exchange and acquire animals/supplies with the store (if one is also a breeder or hobbyist), having the store host or sponsor educational outreach or other celebratory pet related events with you or your organization being part of it, raising awareness of you/your organization through sponsorships and word of mouth, and providing rescue and rehoming services for any animals a store may have that they wish to rehome, cannot sell, or otherwise get rid of for any reason.
- In bad cases, do not “rescue” or “buy” any animals from the store which you may see. While doing so may be tempting in many circumstances, it very seldom addresses the problem, and instead, usually only perpetuates it. Unfortunately, there are still cases where reptiles and amphibians are viewed by the stores in question as cheap, inexpensive, disposable, or easily replaceable “products” or “merchandise”. Instead, boycott and refrain from making any purchases from the store if, or until they improve, and strongly encourage others to do so as well.
- Ensuring proper animal care and welfare can be a passionate subject for many. Always remember to remain civil and polite, and act professionally when reporting or addressing any cases of pet store neglect. Acting otherwise only hurts one’s level of credibility and is likely to push away or close the receptiveness of a pet store, its employees, or its management that may have otherwise been open and receptive to change.
- Contact the appropriate enforcement agencies to investigate the problem. Contacting the appropriate enforcement agencies may be an option to explore in some bad cases, or cases that continue to persist and do not improve over time. They may also be able to provide more professional long term monitoring of a store as well if chronic cases of neglect are brought to their attention. While an agency or department’s level of jurisdiction, law enforcement, and other legal powers and abilities will usually vary from case to case or among different areas, many have at least some power to investigate animal cruelty, neglect, or welfare situations, as well as write and issue citations, seize or confiscate animals, and/or other things. The appropriate agency to contact may vary depending on one’s area, but is often one’s city/municipal/county Animal Care & Control, local Police Department, or Department of Public Health (which animal services may sometimes fall under). The enforcement agency for issues in Madison and Dane County

Wisconsin, for example, is Public Health of Madison & Dane County. Even though it may be an enforcement agency's job or responsibility to oversee and inspect a local pet store or animal establishment, oftentimes, these inspectors may not know what to look for or to inspect for when it comes to specific husbandry problems with reptiles, amphibians, or other exotics, and these cases can be good opportunities to better educate them or even form another source of knowledge and expertise as well as working relationships.

- Also check with your state's appropriate regulatory or oversight agency (most often the state Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection or Department of Health). These agencies may provide a complaint process that may be followed. For Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP) provides a complaint form here: <https://mydatcp.wi.gov/Complaints/complaint/create/f0813c2d-1189-e311-add8-0050568c06ae>

Unfortunately, the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) Animal Welfare Act does not oversee animal welfare when it comes to reptiles, amphibians, fish, or invertebrate species on their own. However, if the store or facility maintains other exotic species, and/or species that do fall under the AWA, further information and procedures for filing a complaint can be found below:

[https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalwelfare/SA\\_AWA](https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalwelfare/SA_AWA)  
<https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalwelfare/complaint-form>

- The Wisconsin Herpetological Association, or otherwise your area herpetological society can help to identify and contact the appropriate agency for your area if needed.
- These, as well as other agencies may also be able to identify secondary or additional issues with a store in question leading to a mutually desired action being taken, such as zoning, fire, and building code compliance violations if animal welfare related complaints are insufficient on their own.

To conclude, these are perhaps the most important and effective steps that you, as the reader, pet owner, hobbyist, enthusiast, consumer, or other individual or organization can take in addressing pet store neglect when it comes to reptiles and amphibians in these retail environments. Unfortunately, pet store neglect still can and does occur to this day, and will likely to continue to be an issue needing to be dealt with appropriately well into the future as long as apathy and motives for the wrong reasons continues to exist. However, with articles such as this and many other efforts being made to remedy these problems, it is an issue that we can hopefully see decline in prevalence and shift away from serving as the norm as modern trends and husbandry advancements continue to develop in the reptile and pet industries.