



The Reptile Fan Club:

A survey of the hobby in Australia

Text & graphs: Doc Rock

Introduction

At Southern Cross Reptiles, we have been keeping and breeding snakes and lizards over the last couple of decades. During this period, we have seen remarkable changes to the hobby with advances in husbandry, access to exciting new species and changes in State wildlife laws. Being in the business of breeding and selling reptiles, we talk to a lot of enthusiasts and invariably conversations lead to subjects like - "How fast is the hobby growing?"; "What is the most sought after reptile?"; "How important is the internet?"; "What is the general availability of reptile food?"; and "What sort of people are keeping reptiles these days". This last question is of particular interest to me. If I had a dollar for every time I've been asked who buys our reptiles from incredulous members of the not-yet-

afflicted-and-addicted-public, I reckon I could buy that nice little Ferrari in the display room around the corner.

The idea to survey the herpetological community to provide answers to the questions listed above evolved from a night of social drinking and reptile chatter about one and a half years ago. The problem was how to get people to fill out the survey. It was decided that the solution was to run an internet competition with "Albie", the male albino carpet python, as the prize with the "cost" of entry being the requirement to fill out a questionnaire.

The competition was advertised across a range of media – magazines, newspapers, internet forums and on-line sales sites - to try and reach as broad a group as possible. Over a 5 month period, we received a total of 2,127 valid entries. I must give a special thanks to ReptilesAustralia and Herp Trader for advertising the competition.

The competition was finally drawn by Mike Swan at the Melbourne Zoo under the watchful eyes of Simon Watharow, editor of Reptiles Australia, and a small number of hopefuls. The eventual winner was Stuart Beech who doubled the size of his collection by winning Albie!

Typical Reptile Hobbyist

So what is the answer to the "Ferrari question",

what does the typical reptile keeper look like in Australia? By taking the largest statistical group from each survey question, let me describe this mystery person.

You are male, aged between 21 and 30 years and you have been keeping reptiles for 3-5 years. You live in the metropolitan area with your partner and there is a high probability you have kids too. You enjoy looking after your 2-5 reptiles, which consist mainly of pythons, with your partner and/or family. Your first reptile was a snake and most probably a carpet python. If money was no object, the reptile you would like most is a green tree python. You choose to buy your new additions to the reptile collection from the internet, although you buy most of your supplies from a local shop or dealer. You don't grow your own reptile food and are mostly happy with the supply situation.

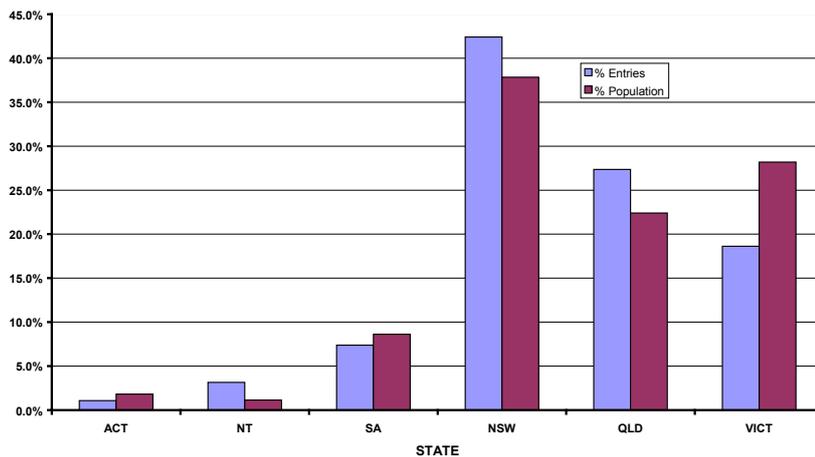
The overwhelming reason you keep reptiles is because you find them "fascinating". You believe the greatest benefit of being allowed to keep reptiles is "community education" and then maybe "a safety net for wild population losses". Basically, you are happy with the State wildlife laws, although if you were allowed, two thirds of you would like to keep imported exotics. You think knowing the provenance of your animals is important.

While you don't belong to a reptile association or an on-line community, you intend to join a club soon and you visit the reptile sites and forums to see what is going on. You do not buy reptile magazines regularly,



Mike Swan draws the winning entry while Doc Rock holds a bag full of two thousand plus competition entries.

ENTRIES v's POPULATION



The relative number of entrants by location is shown above (State laws precluded WA and Tasmania from entering). The blue bars show the percentage of total entrants from each State versus the red bars which represent the population in each State as a percentage of the total number of people living across those States and Territories. As you can see, the greatest population and number of entries were from NSW. Where the blue bar is higher than the red bar for a location (e.g. NT) it indicates that, relative to the average across the total community, there are a higher proportion of reptile keepers and conversely, when the blue bar is lower it suggests a smaller percentage keep reptiles (e.g. Victoria). I puzzled over the result when I first saw it, as I expected the States with the most lenient laws for longest would have the highest percentage of keepers. However, if you examine the graph closely it appears that the further you go north the higher the proportion of reptile lovers.

but if you do, your magazine of choice is Reptiles Australia and you are more likely to buy a second mag as well.

When you have a husbandry problem, you look for a solution first from the internet and then from a friend. Probably a vet is the last place you will go with only about one in ten of you seeking primary advice from this source. Overall, more than 80% of you are happy with the information you have access to.

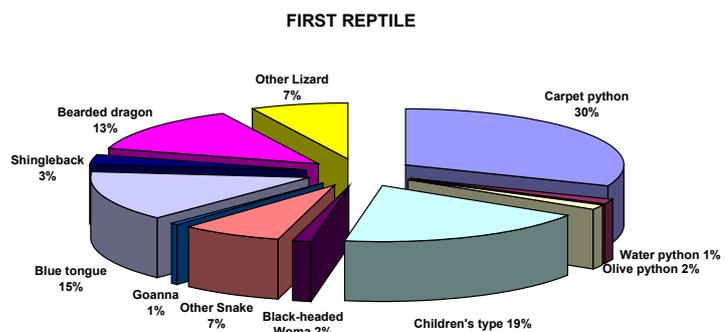
So much for the "typical" keeper, while relevant his profile represents only a part of the overall picture of reptile keeping in Australia. For example when we started keeping snakes and goannas, my wife Diane was one of the only ladies I new that was actively involved in the hobby. While males still dominate today, 22% of the survey respondents with a licence to keep native reptiles were female. I also found it surprising that country folk constituted almost 4 out of every 10 reptile keepers.

Pythons dominated the major part of their collections according to 72% of the survey respondents. This

is an interesting statistic as around 40% of herps start their collection with a lizard. The accompanying graph shows the split by species of the first reptile kept by budding herpetoculturists. As you can see, carpet pythons and Children's type pythons (including Stimsons and spotted) are by far the most common first reptile, accounting for nearly 50% of the total. Among the lizards, bluetongues were the most common entry lizard followed by bearded dragons. Venomous snakes are held by 9.0% of all reptile keepers.

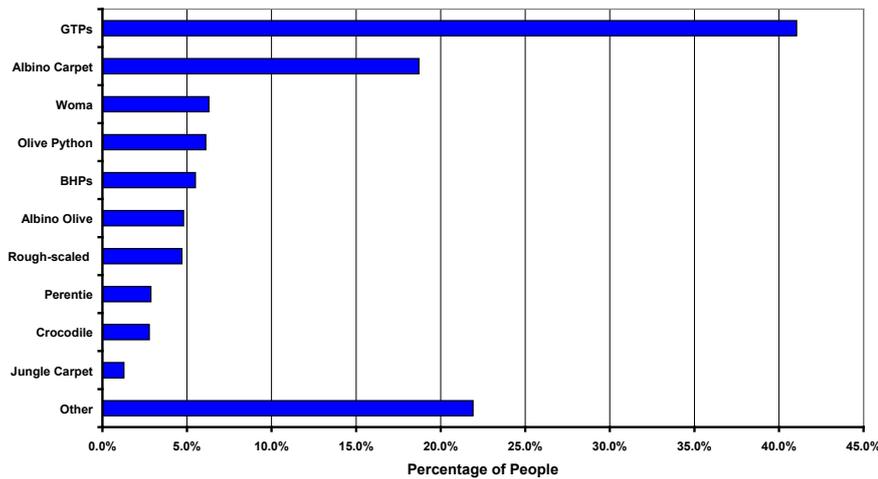
Often, one source of heated discussion and considerable debate among herpers revolves around the question of what is the most desirable Australian reptile to keep. The accompanying graph shows the top ten most desired reptiles from the two thousand one hundred odd respondents that answered the survey. Many have argued strongly that Green Tree Pythons, also known as GTP's or Chondro's, are the most desirable and yes, they would be right. GTP's blitzed the field by a large margin with 41.0% of the vote. The second most desirable snake was the albino carpet python with 18.7%. As the originator of this form, and not wanting to sound too much like a proud father, I think that's pretty good for a reptile that has only been available and seen by the herp community for the last two years. The albino olive also made the top 10 coming in at number six with 4.8% of the respondents lusting after one. Actually, standard olives were popular too at number four nestled in between the two Aspidites species of womas (6.3%) and Black-headed Pythons (5.5%).

The most popular of the non-snake reptiles (if money was no object) were the Perentie (2.9%), followed by the crocodile (2.8%). Geckoes deserve an honourable mention as a group, but no single species shone as the most sought after. The diversity of desirable reptiles is worthy of note too. A total of 21.9%



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MOST DESIRABLE REPTILES



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of herpers picked species other than the top ten. In addition to the geckoes, these included almost every species of goanna, dragon lizard, venomous snake plus a range of other python forms. If you are wondering why the total is greater than 100%, it is because quite a few people were not happy to have just one most desirable reptile, but were greedy and wanted two!

A statistic that has certainly changed dramatically in my experience over the last 20 years is the attitude towards keeping reptiles and the subsequent way the whole family has become involved with the hobby. Many years back, keeping snakes and lizards was perhaps seen as a fringe activity, certainly not something mum and the kids would participate in. However today, this has changed markedly. About one third of respondents were single, one third had a partner and another third had children as well. When asked if anyone helped look after their reptiles, only a quarter of all those surveyed answered that they looked after their scaly charges on their own, while 24.8% got help from their partner, 33.1% from the whole family, 8.7% from just the kids (come on mum, reptiles rock), and 9.1% from a friend.

So reptile keeping has very much become a group activity.

Growth of Reptile Keeping

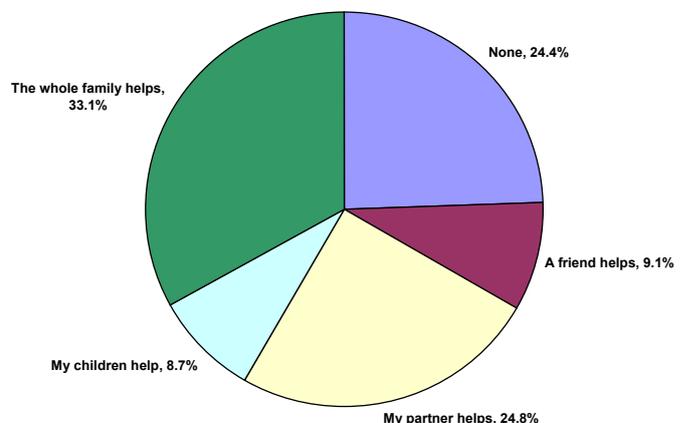
A number of questions were asked in the competition survey which are useful in trying to gauge the future growth of reptile keeping in Australia. As people’s experience in the hobby increases, so does the size of their collection tend to grow (maybe reptiles should come with a warning about their addictive properties?). A graph of years experience versus the number of respondents clearly shows a vibrant hobby with lots of new enthusiasts. In fact, 39.1% of keepers have had 2 years or less experience and 64.7% have had reptiles for 5 or less years. When the size of each collection is expressed as a percentage of

the total, it shows that most have a collection in the range of 2-5 animals. However, what completely staggered me was that one in every eight people had more than 25 reptiles and more than one in twenty had over 50 animals!

When asked the question “are you going to expand your collection more”, nearly one third said they would by 20-50% and one in every two respondents said they intended to grow their collections by 50% or more. The competition questionnaire also asked individuals their opinion about the growth of reptile keeping in Australia and, consistent with the evidence above, 88.7% of people thought the hobby was growing at a moderate or fast pace.

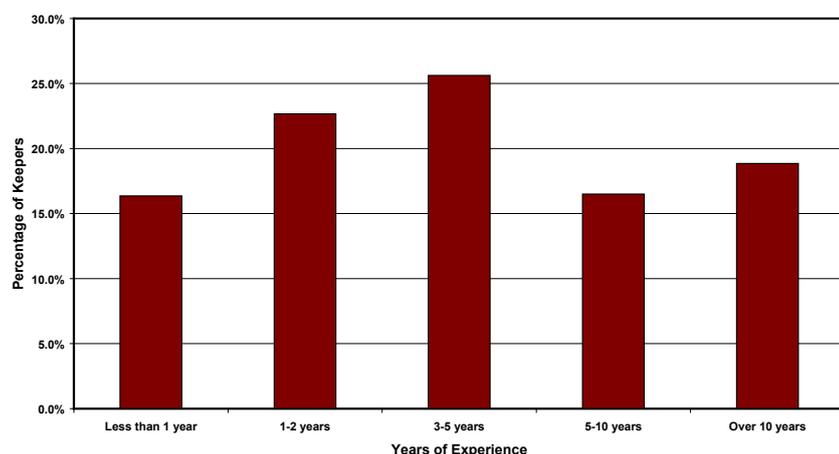
Although only 19.7% of people surveyed thought the current State wildlife laws are “poor” to “hopeless” and the rest thought they were “OK” to “good”, I cannot let this subject pass without making comment on the various State’s legislation. I do not understand the logic applied by many of the State wildlife authorities. Australia has one of the most diverse and dominant reptile faunas in the world and yet many States make it so difficult to keep and buy reptiles com-

INVOLEMENT of OTHERS



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EXPERIENCE AS A REPTILE KEEPER



This graph of years experience versus the number of respondents clearly shows a vibrant hobby with lots of new enthusiasts. In fact, 39.1% of keepers have had 2 years or less experience and 64.7% have had reptiles for 5 or less years.

pared to introduced mammals such as dogs and cats, or native birds some of which can be so much more demanding than reptiles to keep.

In Queensland, you cannot buy any of your own wonderful variety of carpet pythons in a shop, but you can buy Stimson's, Children's and Spotted pythons, many forms of which are harder to keep and breed than most carpet pythons. In NSW, you can't even go into a shop and buy a snake, but you can buy a native bird. Are your authorities "snake-ist" or something? And then we have the situation right up the east coast where womas are seen as a specialist animal and yet they are easier to keep than some carpets, certainly easier than Black-headed Pythons and some of the Children's group and it would be hard to find a more docile, laid back and easy snake to maintain (dinner time excepted). Equal opportunity for womas I say! Imagine the growth the reptile keeping hobby could experience if these laws were half sensible and imagine the impact on public attitudes towards reptiles and our fantastic endemic reptile diversity if they were freely available and observable in pet shops all over Australia?

Future Directions

At this point in the evolution of Australian reptile keeping, about 45%

of us buy our animals from the internet, either through on-line trading sites or vendor websites. If we do not buy our animals this way, then friends are the next most important source for 30% of us followed by shops which contribute a mere 15% of the trade, no doubt because of State legislation in population centres like Queensland and NSW.

The internet has certainly increased the availability of reptiles across Australia. It is probably one reason why there is such a high proportion of country folk in the survey sample. These days it is easy to find the animal you want on-line and most experienced vendors are able to safely air-freight animals almost anywhere in Australia. Although local vendors dominate the provision of herp supplies (e.g. heat mats, hide-boxes and globes) with 58% of the market, on-line purchasing is rapidly growing and the chosen source of supplies for another 36% of keepers. I find it hard to believe that barely five years ago the reptile trade was in its infancy on the World Wide Web in Australia.

Internet forums are a growing phenomenon across many interest areas the world over. Reptile keeping in Australia is no exception. Approximately 42% of all respondents hold a

membership in one or more on-line reptile communities. Of the remaining 58% that are not members, more than 8 in every 10 visit the sites occasionally anyway just to see what's going on.

One area that has always interested me is the availability of food for our captive friends. Many years ago in the United States there was a dramatic halt to the growth of the reptile hobby because the food supply could not keep up with the growth in the number of captive animals. I have seen the supply of food ebb and flow here in Australia over the years too. The survey showed that about one third of enthusiasts here grow their own food. Over 60% of the remaining keepers rated the supply of food as "good" and another 30% as "OK sometimes", leaving less than 10% that thought supply was "mostly inadequate" or "hopeless". Given the growth outlook for the hobby as discussed above, I hope the reptile food producers are planning to increase their output by at least 30-40% a year so that our reptiles are all kept happy and the food price doesn't end up going through the roof.

Less than one in four respondents belong to a reptile association, yet of the remaining three quarters of people over 60% intend to join one. When you consider the survey probably captured 10% of total reptile enthusiasts, this indicates a huge number of potential members for all the existing reptile clubs. My recommendation to all of you on the committees of these associations is to start a membership drive (via the internet?) soon as I cannot see how you will be disappointed.

Finding accurate information about keeping and breeding snakes has always been a problem in the past. However, with the explosion of the internet this seems to have changed now with only 17% of herpers answering "no" to the question "are you happy with the available information to help with the care and

breeding of your reptiles". The internet and friends accounted for nearly 65% of the help people sought and only 11% came from books.

Nearly a third of respondents subscribe to a herpetological magazine with Reptiles Australia being by far the most popular supplying around 85% of these people. The more technical journal, Herpetofauna, was the next most popular with 17% of people subscribing to it, while only about 10% received an overseas publication. You might have noticed that this adds up to more than 100%, but that is because those that chose to subscribe to one publication on average received 1.27 different magazines a year. As mentioned before, the veterinary profession was seen by less than 10% of the survey population as a place to get husbandry information. When I questioned a number of people about this I thought I would be told it was because of the cost, but the general answer was "most don't know much about reptiles". All I can say is that the vet we use is tremendous, but I have watched him go through a learning curve with us over the last 15 years. No doubt as the popularity of reptiles as pets increases and as new vets come on the scene, this will change over the coming years.

Summary

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first significant survey of reptile keepers ever conducted in Australia and is certainly the first one ever published. It was my objective, when embarking on this project, to provide those interested in the hobby a basic description of where we are today and a baseline for the future so that we might have some idea of the path we travel over time.

Clearly the internet has become a major force in the Australian reptile hobby and clearly the hobby is growing rapidly. In his excellent article on "Growing the Hobby" (Reptiles Australia Vol. 2:6), John Weigal estimated the number of keepers nationally at 20,000 and that they were keeping

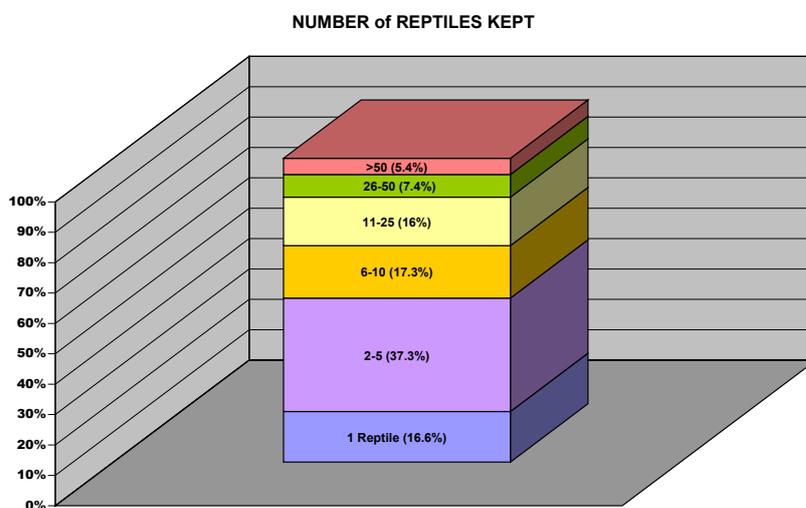
about 100,000 reptiles. If the number of keepers is correct (and my guess is that this is a bit conservative) then the survey reached about 10% of the total population of hobbyists. Working through and averaging the survey results, I have estimated that the 2,127 respondents have collectively 25,517 reptiles between them (i.e. 12 each on average) and that they are planning to buy another 19,076 reptiles (i.e. 7.5 each). This would make John's guess of 100,000 reptiles an underestimate by a factor of 2.5. In fact, the herp community at this point in time is planning to acquire another 200,000 reptiles over the foreseeable future!

As a biologist and an ecologist, I cannot express my pleasure at seeing the change in attitude towards our reptilian fauna. Fifteen years ago if I had shown a snake unannounced in a public place, it would have been met with fear and indignation. The other day I happened to be having a cappuccino outside a coffee shop with a snake in a bag (as you do) and I brought it out to show my guest. Almost immediately people saw the animal and were vitally interested. A good number of them knew it was a python and some even what sort. This evolution has occurred to a large extent because of the growth of reptiles in captivity. It seems everyone

these days knows someone who has a pet reptile. The survey results show that reptile keeping has become very much a shared activity that not only involves friends and partners, but the whole family and I can only see this trend continuing. It would seem that finally a large and forgotten part of Australia's biodiversity is developing a fan club.



Simon Stone (alias Doc Rock) began keeping reptiles when he was 8 years old. His nickname originated from Uni when he got his PhD in Biology. Simon and his wife, Diane, have worked together breeding pythons and goannas for the last couple of decades. Together, they now run Southern Cross Reptiles in Adelaide which specializes in breeding "top end" reptiles like the albino carpet pythons. Doc's two greatest passions these days are developing spectacular new python variants and collecting books on reptiles.



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