

Understanding
the motivations
of beginner
reptile owners



Executive summary

The number of reptiles kept as pets appears to have increased. The rise in calls to, and collections by, the RSPCA relating to reptiles over the past 10 years demonstrates the need to address various issues associated with reptile ownership.

- We commissioned independent research to better understand owners of commonly-kept reptiles: who they are; what species they are buying; what journey they take to acquire their reptiles; and what their motivations are for owning them, in order to improve the welfare of reptiles kept as pets and discover where and how there may be opportunities to influence best practice for their care.
- The research involved talking to professionals (the stakeholder group) from the veterinary industry, reptile pet trade and NGOs.
- Based on the learnings from these stakeholder interviews, the term 'beginner owners' was used to describe the group of particular relevance. Three distinct categories of owner were identified within this group, based on age: children under 16; those in their 20s–30s; and the over 60s.

Through mystery shopping and in-depth interviews with beginner reptile owners, both in person and online, the acquisition of reptiles was explored.

- The research showed that, with beginner owners, it is common for one reptile to have multiple owners in their lifetime and, as a reptile moves from owner to owner, the care information provided at transfer of ownership is further diluted.
- Key findings showed that online care information for reptiles is often contradictory, variable in quality and inconsistent in message, making it very hard for someone with little or no prior knowledge of reptiles to work out where to start. This leads to large numbers of people doing what they believe is right for their reptile, but without knowing whether or not the information they have accessed is factually correct.
- Beginner reptile owners trust sellers and breeders above all other influencers and are heavily swayed by what they are told at the point of purchase, therefore it is important that these sources pass on the correct information.

- The research also highlighted the messages that resonated most (and least) with the beginner owners interviewed.

The issues highlighted in this report cannot be tackled by any one organisation. There is a need to work collaboratively across relevant stakeholders (including the trade, veterinary groups and animal welfare organisations), to ensure the most effective and important messages are shared.

- The aim is to improve care for those species already commonly kept, to ensure reptiles kept as pets are cared for in a responsible way.
- Sellers need to understand the consequences for the welfare of the reptile that result from poor care information being passed on.
- Care information must focus on the beginner owner and be provided in a format they can consume easily, in a language they understand, which is available at the point where they are considering acquiring a reptile.

More research is needed to assess the most appropriate formats and media through which to disseminate care information effectively to the target market.

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uscreates
design for health and wellbeing

This research was funded by the RSPCA

This research was carried out independently by Uscreates.

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Introduction

Reptiles appear to have increased in popularity as pets in the UK. Whilst good data is generally lacking, it is estimated that approximately 700,000 snakes, lizards, turtles and tortoises are being kept in UK households in 2017, compared with approximately 400,000 in 2008¹. This number could potentially be larger as, in 2008, another report, using a different methodology, stated that in excess of seven million reptiles were being kept as pets in the UK².

The needs of reptiles (as defined under the Animal Welfare Act 2006) kept as pets are essentially no different to reptiles living in the wild. They can be challenging to meet because they are fundamentally linked to certain behaviours, diets or environmental conditions that can be difficult to replicate in a household setting.

As reptiles have appeared to increase in popularity as pets, similarly the number of related incidents dealt with by the RSPCA arising from calls to the Society's cruelty line (see Figure 1) has risen in recent years. The number of calls about reptiles increased by 71% in five years (2011–2016) and 75% in 10 years (2006–2016), with 6,888 advice, collection and complaint calls received in 2016³.

In 2016, officers of the RSPCA's Inspectorate collected 1,689 reptiles, which is a 23% increase over five years (2011 to 2016). Over 10 years, there was a 17% increase, from 1,446 in 2006.³ It is important to note that there will be a logistical limit to the number of reptiles collected by the RSPCA due to finite resources. These figures also do not include those reptiles handed in directly to, or abandoned at, RSPCA animal centres as this data is not centrally collated, therefore the number of reptiles the RSPCA took in altogether will be greater than those collected.

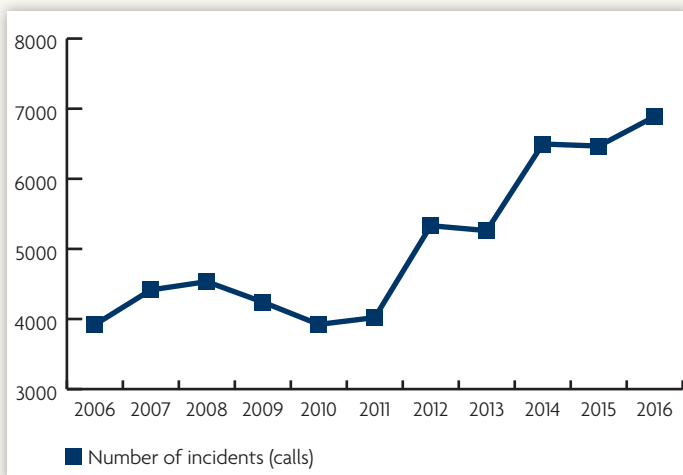


Figure 1:
Calls to the RSPCA's cruelty line about reptiles 2006–2016³

The RSPCA believes that animals should only be kept in captivity if good welfare can be achieved. We are opposed to the trade in wild-caught animals and opposed to the trade in captive-bred non-domesticated animals where there are grounds for believing that suffering may be caused as a result of breeding, holding, transportation or use of the animal⁴. Veterinary associations have raised concerns about non-traditional companion animals, stating that: "There are some species whose five welfare needs are so specialised they could rarely or never be met in a domestic

environment. Other species should only be kept under licence or for defined and authorised conservation purposes."⁵

Top reptile species collected in 2016

The majority (70%) of trade for the pet market is reportedly dominated by six popular pet species: bearded dragon (*Pogona vitticeps*); crested gecko (*Correlophus ciliatus*); leopard gecko (*Eublepharis macularius*); corn snake (*Pantherophis guttatus*); royal python (*Python regius*); and Hermann's tortoise (*Testudo hermanni*)⁶.

It is therefore unsurprising that the species most frequently collected by the RSPCA in 2016 (where the species was recorded) were:

- Corn snake
- Terrapin, particularly yellow-bellied, red-eared or pond slider (*Trachemys scripta spp.*)
- Bearded dragon
- Royal python
- Tortoises, particularly Hermann's tortoise
- Geckos, particularly leopard gecko and crested gecko.

Snakes are by far the most commonly collected reptiles, followed by tortoises, turtles and lizards (see Table 1). Greater London was the area of greatest demand for reptile collections, with 216 reptiles collected by the RSPCA.

Table 1: Reptiles collected by the RSPCA's in 2016³

	Number of reptiles
Snakes	823
Turtles and tortoises	535
Lizards	303
Not specified	28
Total	1,689

Reasons for reptile calls

Table 2: The most common reasons for calls to the RSPCA cruelty line between 2011 and 2016³

Reason for call	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
Abandonment	422	536	549	597	686	714	3,504
Give up/rehome	**	239	290	288	347	359	1,523
Neglect (general)	1,052	1,103	1,232	1,147	1,238	1,232	7,004
Neglect (environment)	**	289	296	386	373	467	1,811

**Data not recorded for this year

Welfare needs of reptiles kept as pets

In carrying out their day-to-day work the RSPCA's Inspectorate encounters some highly knowledgeable keepers who provide the right environment and care for exotic animals. In contrast, there are many people buying exotic animals as pets who have no idea how to care for the animal properly.

Many species require very specialised environments which can be difficult to provide in household settings⁷. Keepers require knowledge of a species' natural behaviour and important features

of their natural environment, in order to care for that animal properly in captivity and there are significant problems seen in reptile health and welfare because owners do not know how to care for their pets⁸.

The RSPCA believes that this lack of knowledge about care results not only from failure of the keeper to carry out their own research into the needs of the particular species, but also as a result of a lack of reliable care information provided at point of sale⁹.

There is excellent advice on the husbandry of reptiles in some shops, however others offer less advice and therefore there is room for improvement⁸.

There are wider issues impacting on the welfare of reptiles kept as pets, particularly the ease with which they can be bought, but we believe that lack of knowledge about what these animals actually need in captivity underpins many of the welfare problems we see.

This lack of knowledge is the focus of our research, as we need to find a way to reach novice reptile owners with information that will help them make an informed decision about owning a reptile and how to care for their reptile properly, in a form they will understand. This will both improve the welfare of the reptiles they keep and hopefully reduce the chances of relinquishment.

In August 2016 the RSPCA commissioned research by Uscreates to better understand the owners of reptiles as pets – who they are, what journey they take to acquire their reptiles and what their motivations are for owning them – in order to improve the welfare of reptiles kept as pets.

The research focuses on four of the more commonly kept species (bearded dragon, corn snake, leopard gecko and royal python).

The sections that follow outline how this research was conducted, the key findings, and recommendations.



Understanding reptile owners

Target audience

The first task was to characterise, or segment, these owners. As a starting point, segmentation was used from research commissioned by the RSPCA in 2011 on puppy buying behaviour. This had split dog owners into three groups:

- 1 Fanatics – experts in the species they keep
- 2 Enthusiasts – a group who are doing what is expected in the husbandry of their pet
- 3 Casuals – spontaneous purchasers who will relinquish quickly when issues arise, with a low emotional attachment to their pet.

If this segmentation is applicable to reptile owners, keepers in the first two groups are expected to be doing the right things for their reptiles. It is the third group – the ‘casuals’ – who were expected to give cause for concern and on whom this research is focused.

The task for Uscreates was to find out more about these potential casual owners. The questions that needed answers were:

- **Who owns reptiles as pets?** Who are they and how old are they? Where do they live? Are they ‘social media savvy’?
- **Where they plan to obtain their reptiles.** From a pet shop (reptile specialist/generalist), online, rescue centre or friend?
- **What reptiles they have as pets.** Which species and how many?
- **What their motivation is for having a reptile as a pet.** What influenced that initial decision, was it ‘spur of the moment’? Is there a genuine passion for reptiles?
- **What journey they take in deciding to obtain their pet.** How long was it between starting to think about obtaining their pet to actually owning it?
- **At what stage in the process of acquiring their pet they are seeking information.** Is it before purchase, at the time of purchase, or post purchase?
- **Where they look for information about their pet.** Are they doing research beforehand? Are they reliant on any information given to them at the point of purchase, or on information on the internet/social media? Are they speaking to their local exotics vet, or are they asking a friend who also has a reptile?
- **How much knowledge they have about looking after their pet.** How much knowledge did they have before purchasing? Do they know what to feed their pet, or their pet’s average lifespan? To what size could their pet grow? What equipment (vivarium, lighting, heating, etc.) is required and why is it needed?
- **How they like to consume their information.** Written word? Moving image? Pictorial/infographic? Do they understand the language/terminology used (for example vivarium, substrate, etc.) and which form of information is most effective?

Desired outcomes

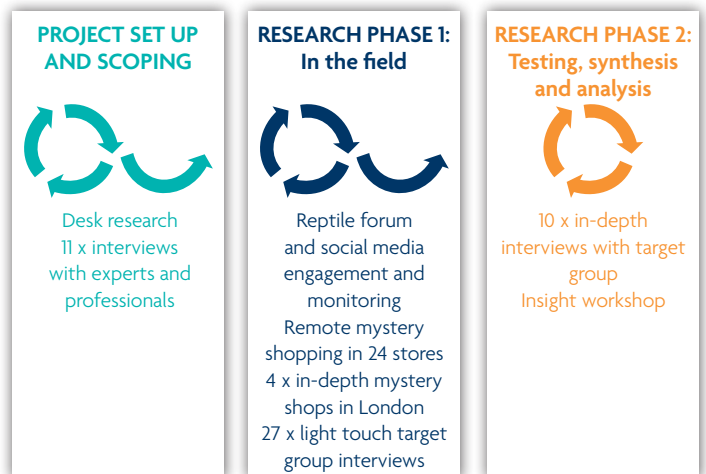
The purpose of the research was to highlight any key welfare concerns that can be addressed, and to build detailed profiles

of pet reptile owners’ attitudes and motivations for acquiring a reptile. Answers were also needed to the following questions:

- What is the model of behaviour for buying a reptile? Where (and how) are there opportunities to interrupt the journey, particularly in reference to the ‘casual’ segment of the market?
- From where are they purchasing their pet?
- Which species are they buying?
- How can ‘good behaviour’ or best practice for reptile care be influenced in those looking to own/currently have a pet reptile?
- Do pet reptile owners understand the language and terminology used in current care information?

Methodology

The research had three distinct phases:



The research was qualitative and did not focus on obtaining a representative sample (which is beyond the scope of this research) – but instead a purposive one, allowing the researchers the ability to use their judgement on who would provide the best and most relevant information to develop meaningful insights that can be taken forward. For example, whilst only 10 in-depth interviews were carried out in the final stage of research, the participants of these were recruited using strict criteria based on the findings from earlier stages of research to ensure they fitted into the target group. In this report, where we discuss the most common/frequent occurrences we are referring to those responses given during the course of this research.

When looking for a group of people who are only connected by the fact that they own (or have owned) a reptile, traditional market research methods were not appropriate, as there is not a defined group (for example 20- to 29-year-old men who like football) to target from the outset. So, we needed an approach that enabled us to test and refine both the target group and any hypotheses, to ensure the right group was targeted. We also needed to be able to test/refine at any time during the research.

Research process

Phase 1 involved talking to professionals from the veterinary industry, reptile pet trade and NGOs – the stakeholder group – to create draft propositions of the customer buying journey and customer personas. These propositions, along with key insights, were tested and refined throughout Phase 2.

How the insights were tested:



Findings

Testing the segmentation

Whilst the term 'casual owner' may be appropriate to owners of other species of pet (such as cats and dogs) it was found not to be applicable to reptile owners. Although there are some reptile owners who may own their pet in a casual way, the research suggests this is not a useful train of thought for the purposes of this research. 'Casual' suggests there is a lack of emotional connection with the pet – this isn't necessarily the case with reptiles. Many people feel very strongly about their pets but lack the basic knowledge to be able to give them everything they need. Understanding what a reptile needs is unlikely to be 'common knowledge' – whilst we may understand, for example, that a snake needs feeding, we may not understand what to feed them and how frequently.

Based on what was learned from these stakeholder interviews, the segmentation was changed from being 'casual owners' to 'beginners' as it became apparent it was a more appropriate term. This enabled the research team to approach the remainder of the work with a different mindset. What follows purely refers to findings about beginner reptile owners uncovered by this research.

Who owns reptiles?

The research revealed that it is unhelpful to look at reptile owners as being significantly different from owners of many other companion animals. Reptile owners are in fact as varied as the reptiles themselves, however it was possible to identify three distinct categories of beginner owners based on age:

1. CHILDREN
2. 20–30s
3. 60+

Whilst there are owners that fall into other age brackets, the groups above were uncovered as peak points in a person's life when they are more likely to own a reptile.

GROUPINGS	Gender	Most common motivation	Commonly owns
CHILDREN	An equal split between male and female owners	Generally a media-born interest	Leopard gecko or bearded dragon
20–30s	More often male	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wants a reptile as a status symbol 2. Have wanted one since childhood 	Royal python/corn snake (male owners) or bearded dragon (female owner)

The third category, 60+, was identified and verified throughout the research to be the following:

60s +	An equal split between male and female owners	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wants a pet 2. Are interested in biology/natural history 	Bearded dragon or royal python
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Whilst an identified group, the 60+ group did not come forward to engage with the later stages of the project. Given that their interest in the reptile is based around biology and natural history, it may be that they make the transition from being a 'beginner' to an 'enthusiast' more quickly. With this in mind, the remainder of the project focused on the other two identified segments:

Children and 20–30s.

Why do people become reptile owners?

The common reasons found for beginner owners acquiring a reptile differed between the two key segments. For children it was often down to a media-born interest in the reptile; this could be television, film, books or online media.

For the 20–30s age group, the initial reason for obtaining a reptile appears to relate to a change in their lifestyle. This could be that they now have their own home (rented or owned), or now have disposable income they want to spend on a reptile. Acquiring a reptile has been something they've always wanted to do – but only now can they do it.

It may also be that some people find reptiles to be a more appropriate pet to keep as they are living in a flat, have limited space available or are allergic to fur or feathers.

Across all groups a common reason for acquiring a reptile was that it was given to them by a friend or relative, often by someone who no longer wanted the animal themselves.

Why do people give up their reptiles?

A substantial proportion of beginner owners in this research gave up their reptiles. There appear to be multiple reasons. This research showed the most common reasons across all segments to be:

- Relationship break-up
- Death of owner
- Cost of keeping.

Other reasons highlighted through the research included:

- Going to university
- Moving house
- Reptile had grown to an unexpected size
- Poor health of the reptile
- Reptile lifespan too long

- Reptile became aggressive
- Boredom with the reptile.

Looking at these reasons for relinquishment of the reptile, there are some, relating to the reptiles themselves, that can and should be addressed (these are covered in the 'Recommendations' section on page 13 of this report).

Buyer journey

To understand how to help address the issues faced by beginner reptile owners, it was important to look at the journey they take into reptile ownership.

From the research carried out, the journey map below was developed to show the common journey taken to reptile ownership. This was drawn up as a result of mystery shopping in four main types of retail environments: garden centres; large pet shops; local independent pet shops; and specialist reptile shops.

Insights from these visits are outlined below.

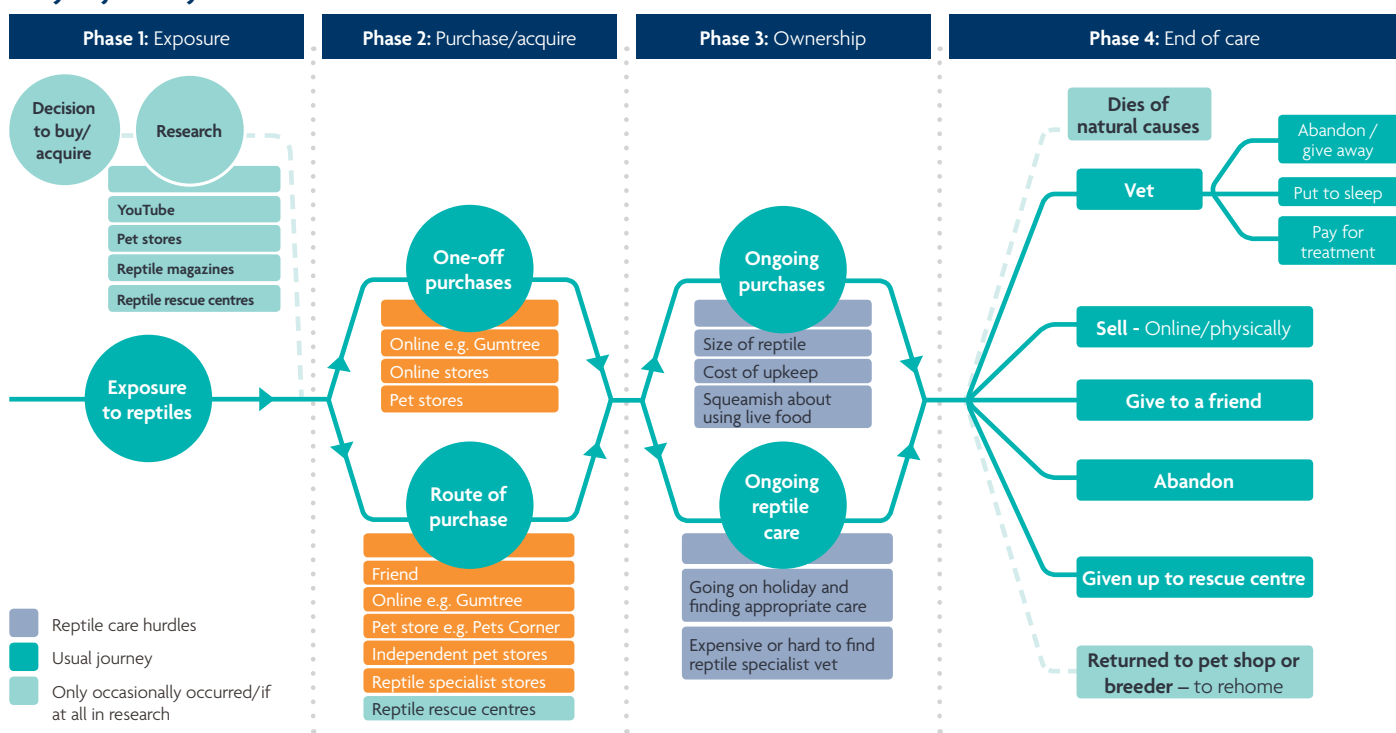
Phase 1: Exposure

During this phase the future owner of a reptile has passive exposure to them. This could be via their friends, family or the media. For some there is also an element of active exposure; researching the reptile of their choice either online (this research suggests that YouTube is frequently used) or by visiting pet shops.

Phase 2: Purchase/acquire

This could happen in one of two ways. The first is the conscious decision to acquire the reptile – this could be from online advertisements or a pet shop. This route often includes a financial transaction. The second route is that the reptile ends up in their care without a conscious decision necessarily being made; it may have been a gift, or passed on as the result of the death of a relative or friend.

Buyer journey



Alongside the acquisition of the reptile itself there are additional one-off purchases of the equipment needed. In some instances the vivarium is advertised for sale, with associated equipment, then the reptile is provided for free. In other cases people buy the equipment secondhand online and buy the reptile from a pet shop.

Phase 3: Ownership

Throughout the day-to-day ownership of the reptile there are responsibilities that lie with the owner. There are the ongoing purchases (for example, live food or getting the correct lamps for the set-up) and reptile care (for example, finding a specialist reptile vet in the area or having to buy new equipment as the reptile has outgrown the vivarium). For some people these become too much and can lead to Phase 4, where ownership is relinquished or neglect occurs as they do not take the necessary action. Other issues, such as finding appropriate care for the reptile whilst on holiday, can be problems that may not have been considered prior to Phase 2.

Phase 4: End of care

There are many cases where a beginner owner has successfully cared for their reptile for many years, resulting in the reptile dying of natural causes. In other instances the reptile and owner part company prematurely. This research has highlighted that this could be due to one of the following reasons:

- Euthanased or abandoned at the vets'
- Sold, either in person or advertised online
- Given to a friend or relative
- Abandoned or deliberately released to the wild. The RSPCA has been called to many cases of reptiles left to fend for themselves having been abandoned in parks, stairwells and alleyways, or living in waterways
- Signed over to a rescue centre
- Taken to a pet shop to be rehomed. Whilst this was not frequently mentioned by beginner owners in the course of this research, the stakeholders told us that many pet shops will help rehome where they can.

Reptile journey

From the mystery shopping and subsequent in-depth interviews with beginner reptile owners, the following reptile journey became apparent. The research showed that, in the beginner owner segment, it is not uncommon for one reptile to have multiple owners in their lifetime.

This hypothetical example, based on insights from the research, begins with a 26-year-old couple who have purchased a leopard gecko from a local pet shop. A couple of years later the couple split up and give their pet to their neighbour's 12-year-old boy. After a few months the boy gets bored of the gecko, leaving his mother to care for the reptile. This isn't something she is able to do, so she decides to sell it on Gumtree. The gecko is bought by a 22-year-old woman, and after a year the animal falls ill. She takes it to a specialist vet but can't afford to pay for the care, so the gecko is euthanased.

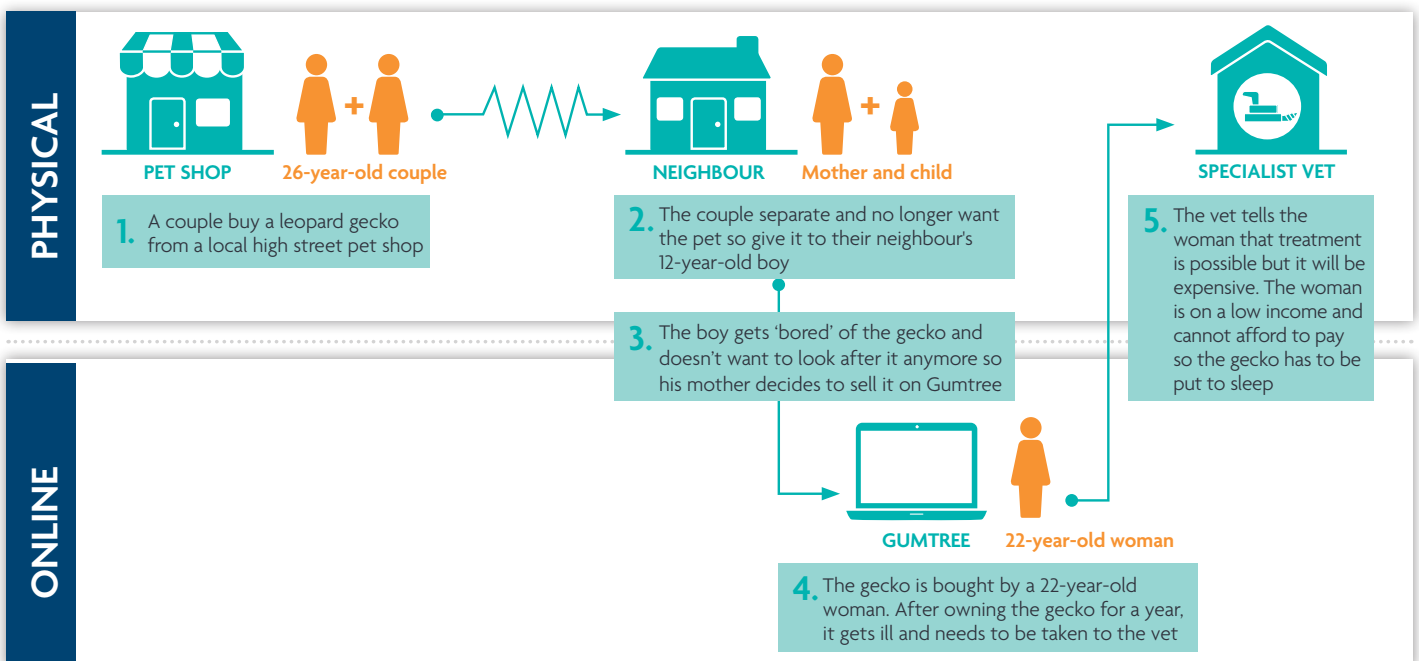
So, in this example there is one leopard gecko and three owners, each of whom acquired (and subsequently relinquished) their pet in different ways.

A common problem discovered through the research was that, as a reptile moves from owner to owner, the care information becomes diluted each time.

In the context of the leopard gecko scenario, the 26-year-old couple were given good care information by the shop staff when they bought their gecko. When they passed their pet on they gave their neighbour's son a very quick 'crash course' in care that covered the basics but no more. By the time the mother came to sell the gecko on Gumtree, she was more concerned with a quick sale than ensuring the next owner knew what they were doing. This is something that was seen time and time again in the course of this research: the individual seller usually (although not always) concentrates on demonstrating the health of the reptile they are selling (it 'eats, sheds and poos') rather than testing the new buyer to ensure they will competently look after their new pet.

As will be shown in the recommendations, it is essential to ensure

The reptile journey



that the appropriate care advice is available for all owners of a reptile, regardless of the means by which they acquire their pet.

In store versus online

Through mystery shopping and in-depth interviews with beginner reptile owners, both in-person and online purchasing/acquisition of reptiles was explored. Whilst both routes result in reptile ownership the focus of the journey is very different.

On multiple occasions when going into a pet shop and enquiring about purchasing a bearded dragon, the mystery shoppers felt they were being tested on whether or not they were a suitable future owner. Making a sale didn't come across as a priority. The care of the reptile and the required equipment was discussed. This appears to show that the emphasis is on the welfare of the reptile.

Move the conversation online to classified ad websites and social media groups and making that sale became the most important thing. The sellers were usually (but again, not always) more concerned about 'proving' the health of the reptile rather than checking whether the prospective buyer knew how to care for the animal correctly. The reptile "eats, sheds and poos" was a common phrase seen in online adverts.

Survey of online ads

The *One Click Away* report¹⁰ from Blue Cross and The Born Free Foundation looked at a sample of 1,796 online classified ads from a three-month period across several general selling websites. It found that at least 53 different types (species, hybrids, etc.) of reptile were advertised for sale to the general public. This included animals that the RSPCA considers unsuitable to be kept as pets, such as large, more specialist species or potentially dangerous animals. There was a lack of even the most basic care and welfare advice relating to the keeping of the animals advertised.

No checks are made on these websites to find out whether the prospective owner has any knowledge about the particular animal, or the appropriate equipment and housing to care for that animal properly. Some species were identified incorrectly, or not at all.

Even more disturbing was that some of the animals advertised were posted with information stating they were "in poor health", and the focus was often less on the animal and more on wanting rid of the animal, as adverts offered animals as "swaps" or "quick sales".

Problems during ownership

There are a number of key issues flagged up by the research that occur during the ownership stage.

Owners do not know what an ill or undernourished reptile looks like.

Only two of the 10 interviewed in the final stages of research felt they knew the signs to look out for when their reptile was ill. Most people said they wouldn't think to look at this unless there was an obvious problem with their pet, such as an injured tail: "*I wish [the pet shop] had told me the signs of when it was unwell.*"

Reptiles have a reputation as hardy and resilient animals.

Many of the owners and sellers interviewed in this process had the view that their reptile was tough and hardy: "*We've never had anything wrong with our reptiles ... bearded dragons and leopard*

geckos are very very hardy." Reptiles are no more or less hardy than many small animals. Belief that they are more so may be blinding them to subtler signs of illness.

Mismatch in equipment understanding.

Some of the RSPCA officers interviewed said they were rarely called out for reptile cases, instead they usually 'stumble' on them when visiting for other reasons. One officer said: "*Many of the issues I see with reptiles are to do with incorrect heating or lighting.*" This differs greatly from the views expressed by the reptile owners we spoke with, who all viewed setting up and managing reptile equipment as "easy" or "very easy". It is believed that the errors occur when the beginner is not shown how to properly set up the enclosure, e.g. where and how to fit lamps and other equipment correctly, and have been left to work it out for themselves.

Owners lack deep knowledge of why reptiles must be cared for in a certain way.

Whilst most owners interviewed had the basic understanding on what their pet needed, they didn't necessarily understand *why*. For example, if a reptile is naturally arboreal (a tree dweller) they would be more suited to a taller, vertical vivarium rather than a longer, horizontal one. Improving this knowledge of why with the owners can help lead them towards making more informed decisions on how they keep and care for their pets.

Learnings

This is what can be learned from these journeys and the mystery shopping that was carried out to compile them.

- Whilst the methods of acquiring a reptile may vary, all beginner owners go through a similar process. The 20–30s segment is more likely to take the journey online as they are more tech savvy.
- People buy, and some subsequently relinquish, reptiles for a variety of different reasons. These reasons are difficult to predict, but by seeking to promote good buyer behaviour some can be addressed.
- Many beginner owners we spoke to did not research how to care for their reptile prior to purchase; they are reliant on what they are told at the point of purchase.
- When purchasing from an individual online the onus was on the buyer to know what they were doing. The sellers were often more focused on making the sale and proving the animal was 'in good health' rather than ensuring the future welfare of the reptile.
- Reptiles can be owned more than once in their lifetimes. The secondary pet market is something that needs to be examined, especially in terms of how care information can be passed on to the second or third owner.
- There is a widespread view that reptile equipment is easy to set up. However, the majority of challenges around care and neglect come as a result of inadequate set-up of the enclosure.

Personas

To highlight some of the common issues beginner reptile owners are faced with Uscreates have developed three personas which bring it all to life. They are not representative of all beginner reptile owners, but instead allow us to focus our attention on those who need extra support and guidance. Each is based on a combination of real-life situations that were revealed in the research.

LAURA AND JIMMY KANE

AGES: 42 and 10

FINANCES: mid

REPTILE: leopard gecko

REPTILE AGE: 2 years

OWNERSHIP PERIOD: 2 years

BOUGHT REPTILE FROM: small local pet shop

LIVE IN: Cornwall

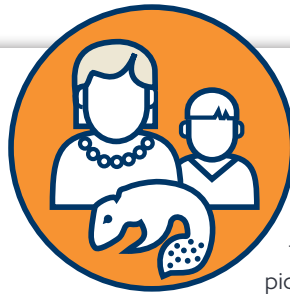
BACKGROUND

Jimmy had been pestering his mother, Laura, for a gecko for four months before she finally gave in. He has a short attention span so she was hoping owning his own pet would help him become more responsible.

Though he originally wanted a puppy, Laura told him they didn't have the space for one. As a single mother who often works late she was also worried about who would walk a dog. But Jimmy quickly changed his mind about which pet he wanted and started asking for a gecko after he found out one of his friends had one.

CARING FOR THE REPTILE

When they first went into the pet shop they had considered buying a crested gecko but the shopkeeper told them a leopard gecko would be better because "they're very easy to look after,



the perfect beginner pet". They hadn't done any research before they went into the shop but felt that the shop staff they spoke to knew what they were talking about and that they'd been given all the information they needed and been helped to pick out the right equipment. And if they had any other questions they were welcome to go back and ask.

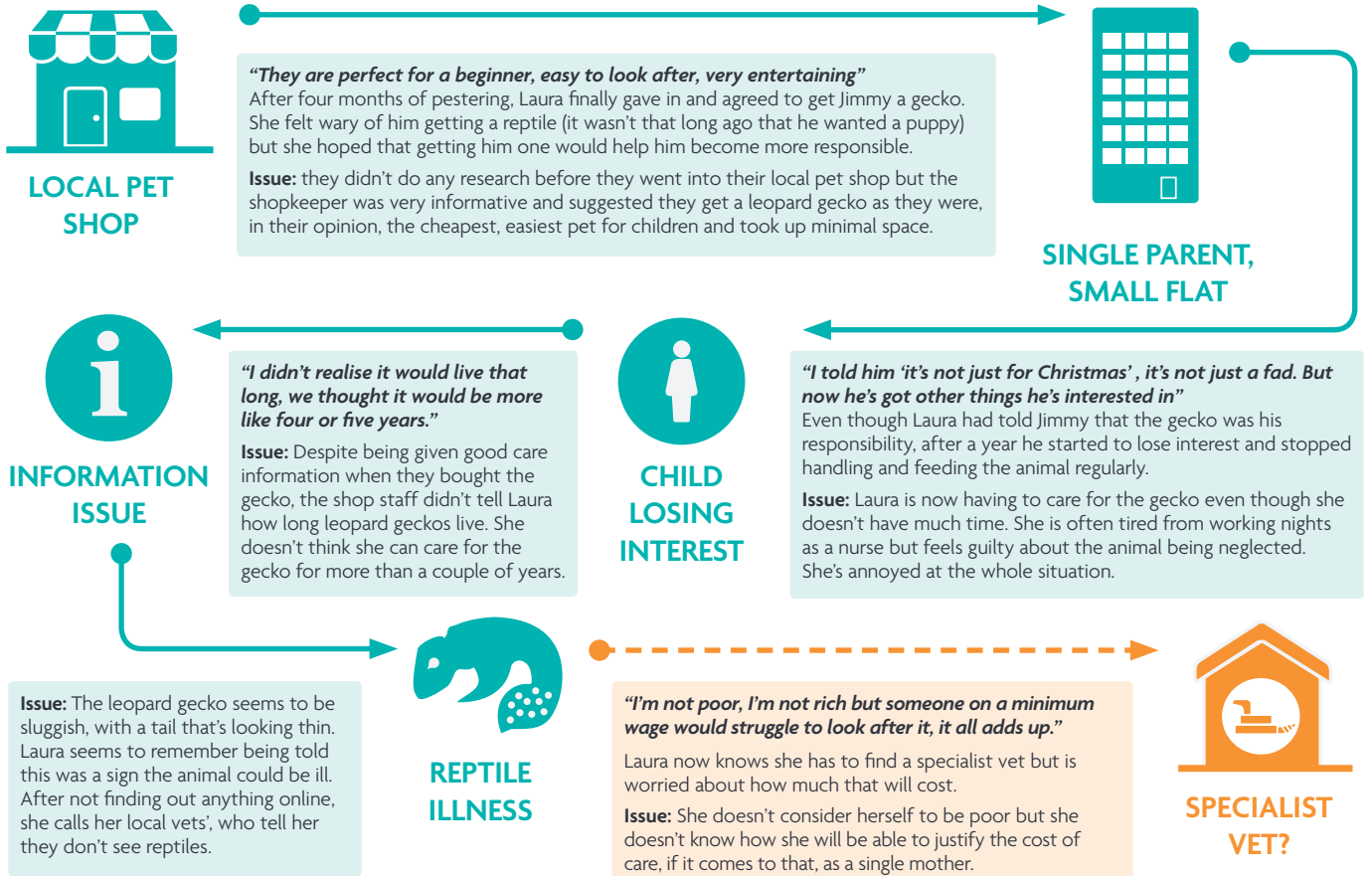
Unfortunately, after the first year Jimmy started to get bored of his reptile. It wasn't really very interactive and now Laura is the one who is having to care for it – feeding, cleaning and handling the gecko. She works long shifts as a nurse and this is neither something she wanted to do nor has the time to do after a long day at work.

What's more, whilst most of the information she was told by the shopkeeper seems to be correct, Laura hadn't realised how long a leopard gecko's lifespan was: "I didn't realise it would live that long, we thought it would be more like four to five years."

Laura is annoyed that she allowed herself to be persuaded by Jimmy to get a pet that he is now not looking after, especially as the animal now seems a bit sluggish. The tail is looking thin which, if Laura remembers correctly what the shopkeeper advised her, was a sign of illness, but she's not sure what to do about it. A quick online search hasn't yielded any obvious results so she called her local vets', but they don't deal with reptiles so she's now not sure what to do.

PURCHASING JOURNEY 1: PARENT AND CHILD

Retaking the steps of the journey taken by Laura and Jimmy, a number of issues can be identified.



TONY WILLIAMS

AGE: 19

FINANCES: low

REPTILE: corn snake

REPTILE AGE: 3 years

OWNERSHIP PERIOD: 2 years

BOUGHT REPTILE FROM: Facebook group

LIVES IN: outer Birmingham

BACKGROUND

Tony always thought snakes were interesting and cool but it wasn't until two years ago, when he saw a corn snake for sale online via a local Facebook group, that he considered owning one. None of his friends has a reptile and they are impressed by it, often asking if they can come over to his house and play computer games.

He is currently still living at home with his parents. His bedroom is fairly small but he managed to fit all the equipment in for the corn snake.

CARING FOR HIS REPTILE

Tony has now had his reptile for two years. He bought it



from someone on a local Facebook group when the snake was a year old. Although he'd been interested in snakes for a while it had been a pretty impulsive purchase because the seller was offering him an 'ASAP pick up only' deal because they were moving house and couldn't take the snake with them.

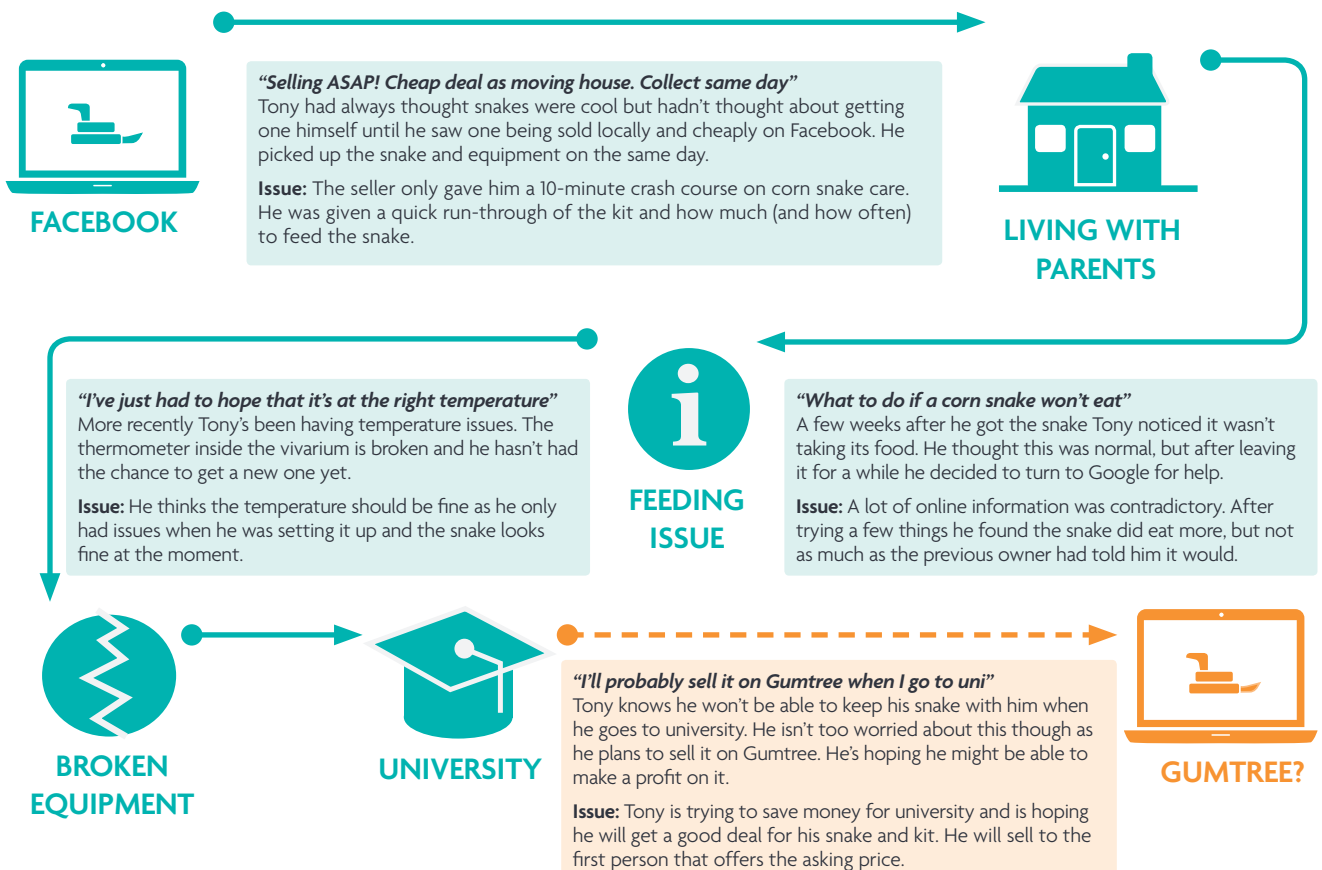
The sale was quick and simple with the seller only questioning if Tony could pick up the corn snake and equipment on the same day. When he collected the snake the seller quickly showed him how the equipment was set up and told him about feeding patterns.

Unfortunately, in the weeks following the relocation to Tony's house, the snake started to go off its food. Tony left it for a bit as he thought this was usual snake behaviour. After a while he Googled 'what to do if a corn snake won't eat' and read up on how to properly thaw the mice, which seemed to help. It's still not eating as much as the previous owner said it should but he doesn't know what else to do.

Tony is now starting to think about going to university. He doesn't think he'll be able to take the snake with him but that's okay by him as "I don't think I'm really into snakes anymore".

PURCHASING JOURNEY 2: 20–30s MALE

Again, retaking the steps that Tony took will identify the issues he encountered.



MAYA LOCKE

AGE: 29

FINANCES: low

REPTILE: bearded dragon

REPTILE AGE: 5 years

OWNERSHIP PERIOD: 5 years

BOUGHT REPTILE FROM: large pet shop

LIVES: just outside Glasgow

BACKGROUND

Maya lives by herself in a one-bedroom flat just outside Glasgow. She was excited to move into her own place at first but soon found she often got lonely. She has quite an erratic work schedule but decided she would like a pet as company. After doing a bit of research online she decided a reptile would be the cheapest and easiest pet for her. She found a blog recommending bearded dragons as the best beginner reptile as they were “*simple and interactive pets*”. She hadn't really considered getting one before so thought she'd go to the local pet shop to find out more and ended up buying a baby one. “*My beardie is very cuddly and friendly!*”



CARING FOR HER REPTILE

Maya has now owned her bearded dragon for five years so doesn't feel there's much more information she needs to find about caring for her pet. Through trial and error she believes she has found out the best way to care for her reptile.

Any time she has a question about its care she goes on her favourite Facebook group or forum. Both of them are filled with bearded dragon owners like herself and she trusts the advice they give her – unlike pet stores. “*When I first got my baby bearded dragon they didn't tell me much, they didn't even tell me I needed a UV light.*” Since then Maya has been distrustful of any pet shop advice and is careful about where she gets her information on caring for her pet online.

During its lifetime, Maya has only had to take her reptile to the vet once. After owning it for three years it started to become lethargic and had a film over both eyes. She took her pet to a reptile specialist vet for treatment. Whilst there the vet pointed out a few other minor complications, which Maya hadn't realised were an issue, and helped her sort them out. Since then she has been very careful to look out for changes in her pet's behaviour in case they are signs of illness.

PURCHASING JOURNEY 3: 20–30s FEMALE

Again, following the steps taken by Maya will highlight the issues that occurred in her purchasing journey.

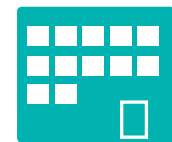


LARGE PET SHOP

“*Great for a beginner, dead friendly and love to be handled*”

Maya lives alone in a small one-bedroom flat. Whilst excited to have her own place, she was lonely and wanted a pet for company. After doing some online research about pets that were easy to look after she settled on getting a bearded dragon.

Issue: Maya was told what and how often to feed her pet. The staff in-store also helped her pick out the equipment that would be right for her reptile. Though Maya had done some research beforehand she didn't know the specifics around bearded dragon feeding and equipment.



LIVING ALONE

Issue: After three years Maya noticed her beardie was becoming lethargic and had a film over both eyes. Unsure of what to do she took her pet to a reptile specialist vet for treatment.

Maya had thought she was careful, responsible and clued-up on caring for her reptile. However, the vet pointed out a couple of other minor health complications that Maya had not realised were an issue.



CARE INFORMATION

“*When I first got my baby bearded dragon they didn't tell me much. They didn't even tell me I needed a UV light.*”

Whilst they did help with some things, the pet shop didn't tell her that she needed a UV light and as a result Maya now doesn't trust reptile seller or pet shop advice after receiving poor information previously.

Issue: If she hadn't been more interested in finding out more about the habits of bearded dragons she wouldn't have looked online and discovered she'd been given incorrect information and was missing an important piece of equipment.



REPTILE ILLNESS

“*My research was all internet-based which requires all reptile owners to use intuition and common sense, rather than taking everything told to them as gospel; especially as the internet is full of contradictory information.*”

Maya now watches her beardie closely for any changes in its behaviour in case they are a sign of illness. She has found a forum and Facebook group where she trusts the advice they give.



FORUM / FACEBOOK

Care information available

Before coming to the recommendations it is important to consider what care information is currently available.

As illustrated in the personas for both Tony and Maya, online care information for reptiles is often contradictory and requires people to use their common sense and intuition to navigate through it. This may be easier said than done. Maya had done her homework; she researched her bearded dragon and had a thirst for knowledge to find out more. She was able to piece together all the information and worked out, through trial and error, what worked and what didn't.

But sadly, not everyone will do as Maya did. Some beginner owners may struggle to find the correct care information, or know how to make comparisons and use trial and error. In these cases it is a genuine lack of understanding as opposed to being purposely neglectful. There are many forums and Facebook pages where advice can be sought from expert reptile keepers, but for a beginner owner these may be difficult to find or daunting to enter.

A simple Google search will offer a plethora of information on how to care for your bearded dragon or corn snake, but the information differs from source to source. How do you know which is correct? It's understandable that issues arise around the care of a reptile with this beginner segment. Look at just one aspect of bearded dragon care – what the correct temperature should be for the hot and cool ends of the vivarium – and opinions differ.

The figures below are taken from five random websites on the first page of a Google search:

	Hot end	Cool end
1 ¹¹	At least 35°C	20–25°C
2 ¹²	Max 110°F (43.3°C)	No lower than 85°F (29°C)
3 ¹³	38–42°C	22–26°C
4 ¹⁴	100°F (37.8°C)	80°F (26.6°C)
5 ¹⁵	40°C	29°C

Put yourself in the shoes of a beginner owner. Which temperature range would you go with when there is no base-level knowledge to work from? The above figures suggest that it is acceptable for the hot end to be just over 43°C (possibly higher, given that website 1 offers no maximum temperature) with the cool end at 20°C. How would you, as a beginner owner, know if these conditions are right for a bearded dragon?

When the online world of information is so difficult to navigate, people will turn to someone they consider to be an expert. In the case of reptiles, this appears to be the seller or breeder from whom the reptile came. Indeed, this research showed that pet shops were considered the 'go to' places for advice for the beginner. However, as was shown in Maya's persona, when these sources give incorrect information distrust can quickly grow.

Overarching summary

This piece of research began by looking at the concept of reptile owners being seen as a specific group of people who could be targeted through a specific channel. This concept was challenged for the reasons below.

- Reptile owners are not a specific group to target. They are like owners of any other animal; as varied as the animals they own.
- There is widespread misunderstanding about reptile characteristics. The belief that reptiles are hardy and resilient animals can get in the way of an owner adequately caring for their pet. A breeder telling a new owner "I've never had any problems with any of my reptiles" may stop that new owner from looking out for subtler signs of illness.
- Information about care is variable in quality and inconsistent in message. The minefield of online care information for reptiles leads to large numbers of people doing what they believe is right, but without knowing whether the information they have accessed is factually correct, even if they would not consider themselves to be beginner owners.
- Beginner reptile owners find it very difficult to identify when they are giving inadequate care or if their pet is ill; they don't identify themselves as giving 'bad' care that needs to change.
- Beginner reptile owners are heavily influenced by what they are told at the point of purchase and it is difficult to affect change once these patterns have been established.
- Care information can be diluted when a reptile passes from one owner to another.
- Beginner reptile owners trust sellers and breeders above all other influencers: it is therefore important that these are passing on the agreed correct information.
- It is important to ensure beginner owners know how to set up the equipment their reptile needs. Many of the problems encountered by RSPCA officers have been due to inadequate set-up of the enclosure.

Recommendations

A number of key recommendations have come out of the research. These are split into three areas for consideration:

- 1 Myth busting
- 2 Point of purchase
- 3 Care information

There is overlap between these sections, but these recommendations offer a starting point from which to work towards responsible reptile ownership with beginner owners.

The intention here is not to make recommendations either way on the suitability of owning a reptile, but instead to lay bare the facts to ensure the potential owner is making an informed decision on whether or not that reptile is the right pet for them and, if it is, how they should care for the animal.

1. Myth busting

The apparent increase in reptile ownership has not been accompanied by widespread education and awareness-raising about: how to care appropriately for these animals; the technical equipment needed; or how to access reliable care information. The research carried out highlighted that there are a number of myths around reptile ownership that should be addressed.

The issues that need addressing lie around the inherent nature of reptiles (particularly that they are susceptible to illness, and understanding it is difficult to tell the signs that they are ill) and demonstrating that they are not indestructible. These need to be

combined with messages around ownership; offering a balanced, honest view of what ownership is like and the challenges that go with it.

Given that sellers and breeders are the most trusted sources of information on reptile care, should it be considered that these messages should also come from them? The research implied that a beginner owner may be more receptive to someone who has first hand experience of the challenges the new, potential owner may encounter.

The messages need to reach the mainstream mass media, aiming for a wide, national reach. Confining the messages to specialist reptile media will prevent the information reaching this new audience of potential and existing beginner reptile owners.

Across the relevant stakeholders (including the trade, veterinary groups and animal welfare organisations), there is a need to work together to ensure the most effective and important messages are shared, focusing on better care for those that are already commonly kept.

2. Point of purchase

Beginner owners rely largely on information given at the point of purchase. This information will inform their view on how a reptile should be kept. It seems to be the most important interaction in the development of behaviours around reptile care.

There can be several ownership changes throughout the lifespan of a reptile and as such it is important to focus not only on the initial purchase in a reptile's life but also on each subsequent one. How can the second or even third owners be influenced? How can sellers be encouraged to test the competency of the buyers to ensure the future welfare of the animal they are selling?

This needs to be a collaborative process, ensuring a consistent message is given out. Sellers need to understand the consequences for the welfare of the reptile as a result of poor care information being passed on.

3. Care information

Care information available for the commonly kept species of reptiles is confusing and contradictory. For someone with little or no prior knowledge of the animals in question it is incredibly difficult to work out where to start.

- **The information should be created with the beginner owner in mind**

Care sheets written by 'experts' aren't necessarily the answer. The care information provided needs to be in a format beginner owners can consume easily, in a language they understand, which is available at the appropriate time and place when they are considering acquiring a reptile.

This is an area where more research is needed to ensure the most appropriate formats and media are used to disseminate care information to the target market.

- **The right information at the right time**

As the beginner owner embarks on their ownership journey, the research indicates that they will naturally seek out specific information along the way. The task of 'experts' in reptile care is not only to provide them with the information we know they should have but also to answer the questions they do have, in an accessible manner.

For example, (as shown on the following page) in Phases 1 and 2 of the purchasing journey, new owners are interested in information around life expectancy and the equipment needed. It is not until Phase 3 (ownership) is reached that they start to consider what the physical symptoms of illness are and understand that a reptile isn't indestructible. This is something they should be aware of at the start of the journey.

Reptile ownership messages

Whilst more in-depth research is required to flesh out the messages and channels of communication, the following outlines some concept messages that were tested with beginner reptile owners. The messages shown below include direct quotes that were taken from the research. The intention was to test themes rather than specific details of each message and would therefore need refining before being used in advice or care information.

Messages that resonated most

The three messages below resonated most with those interviewed.

1. Physical symptoms. *"Do you know what an unwell leopard gecko looks like?"* When compared to mammals more commonly kept as pets, it can be harder to tell when a reptile is ill or suffering.

2. Information. *"There are a lot of different views online about how best to care for reptiles. Use your common sense when researching."*

3. Reptiles are not indestructible. *"I might look hard on the outside but I'm soft on the inside."* It's often hard to tell the health of a reptile; because they look fine doesn't mean they actually are.

Lukewarm responses

These three messages received lukewarm responses from interviewees. They agreed with the points, however many felt the information was not particularly new to them and they weren't sure they would click through for more detail.

4. Why do you want a pet? *"I don't want to play; that's not what we do."* Many reptiles aren't sociable and do not particularly enjoy being handled or petted. Make sure you understand that your reptile may not want to be handled before you buy.

5. Life expectancy. *"Think a leopard gecko lives for only five years? Leopard geckos can live for 10–20 years. Reptiles live for longer than you might think."*

6. Test the buyer. *"It's difficult getting a reptile for the first time, especially online. Make sure the person you're selling to knows the basic information and what they're letting themselves in for."*

Messages that resonated least

The following four messages resonated least with the interviewees. They felt that the hidden costs were only true for bearded dragons, not other reptiles and none of them thought the equipment was difficult to manage.

7. Hidden costs. *"A bearded dragon may seem cheap at first but it will cost an estimated £XX over its lifetime. Make sure you know the facts before you buy."*

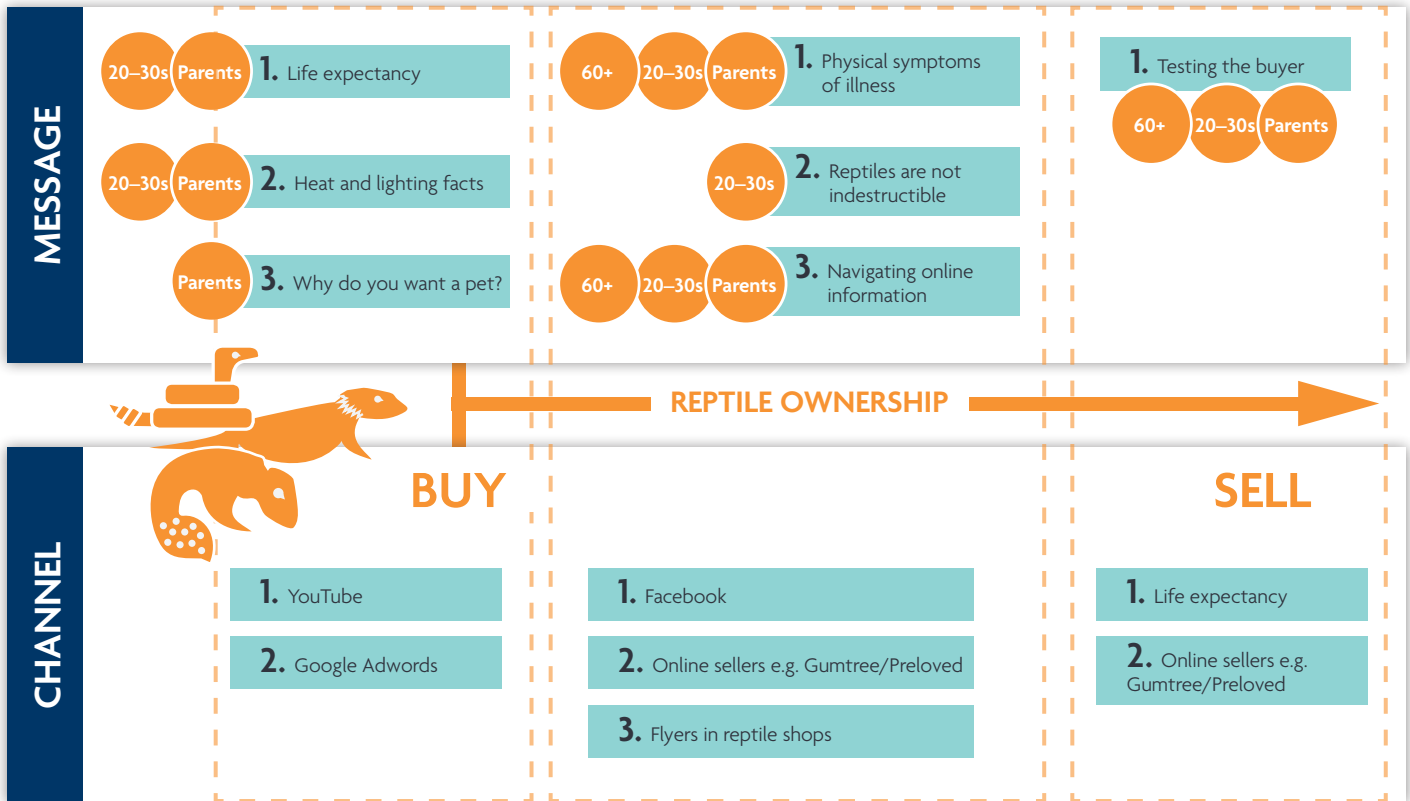
8. Technology. “I’m actually quite high maintenance.” There is a lot of technology available these days to look after reptiles, however just because you can use a smartphone doesn’t mean reptile equipment is as easy to manage.

9. They’re still exotic. “British weather is cold enough as it is.

Especially when you’re from the deserts of north-west India like me.” Reptiles are wild animals with the same needs in captivity as they have in the wild; make sure you know what environment your reptile needs.

10. Equipment. “The majority of reptile issues are with incorrect heating and lighting. Make sure you know the facts to allow your reptile to thrive, not just survive.”

Messages that resonate with beginner owners



The way forward

To our knowledge there has been no research like this previously carried out into reptile ownership. Whilst this research has uncovered some useful insights into beginner keepers of commonly kept reptiles, there is still more to be discovered to ensure the right people – in the right way, at the right time – are reached with the right message.

The issues in this report are not ones that the RSPCA can tackle alone. There is a need to work collaboratively across stakeholders (including government, trade groups, vets and animal welfare organisations) to ensure all reptiles being kept as pets are cared for in a responsible way.

The RSPCA would like to see the development of a central information resource where members of the public can have access to accurate care information on commonly kept species

written in a form they can understand. The RSPCA welcomes Defra’s commitment to make the inclusion of written care information a mandatory licence condition on those selling pets in England¹⁷, a move that the Society and keepers⁶ have long called for. As demonstrated in this report, whilst it is essential that the information is provided in a way the owner can easily consume, it must be in an appropriate tone of voice and format for the intended audience. If it is not, there is the risk of the information given falling on deaf ears, with the unintended consequence being the welfare of the reptile being compromised. The RSPCA is aware of positive movements in the trade and hobbyist sector towards self regulation and standards, which in turn help improve reptile welfare.

Care information is just one aspect affecting the welfare of reptiles kept as pets. The RSPCA will continue working across all areas in order to stop the keeping of exotic animals as pets in unsuitable conditions. To find out more about the RSPCA’s work on reptiles and other exotics, visit: www.rspca.org.uk/exotics

The following case studies are examples of poor welfare of reptiles as seen by the RSPCA



Corn snake found dead in alleyway.

Corn snake found dead, 2016

The RSPCA appealed for information after a member of the public found a dead adult corn snake dumped in a fish tank in an alleyway in Wokingham. The snake was about a metre long, very thin and had been left on dirty bedding with a small bowl of water. It is not known if the reptile died in the tank before being dumped, or had died after being abandoned.



Triton, the chameleon found by the Thames.

Abandoned chameleon, 2016

A Yemen chameleon was found on a pathway, next to the Thames in Greenwich, by a member of the public, who then took him home and called the RSPCA. The chameleon was collected by an officer and taken to a specialist centre to be looked after. He was malnourished, not eating or drinking and was changing colour from green to grey, which can be a sign of stress. The chameleon, who was named Triton, recovered in the care of the RSPCA and was made available for rehoming.



Emaciated common boa kept in poor conditions.

Boas, bearded dragon and iguana, 2016

RSPCA Inspector Sophie Daniels was called to a property where she found a bearded dragon and two juvenile common boa constrictors without appropriate heat, light or water. The snakes were kept in dirty housings, one of which also contained a rotting rat carcass.

A dead iguana was also found, in an advanced stage of decomposition that made cause of death impossible to determine.



Bearded dragon, extremely thin and dehydrated.

The two snakes and bearded dragon were signed over to the RSPCA. The bearded dragon was very underweight and dehydrated and suffering from an incomplete shed, which can be a sign of poor health and inappropriate conditions, and one of the boas was emaciated. However, with correct husbandry, food and water all three reptiles made significant weight gains and improvements.

The defendant pleaded guilty to causing unnecessary suffering to the animals and was disqualified from keeping reptiles for two years.

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Born Free Foundation participated in the research and supports the general objective and findings of the report in the hope that the welfare of those reptiles currently kept as pets can be improved. Born Free remains opposed to the keeping and trade of reptiles as pets.



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