



Virginia Herpetological Society

House Bill 1242

Delegate _____
General Assembly Building
Room _____
Capitol Square
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Dear Delegate;

I am writing to you as president of the Virginia Herpetological Society, a professional organization dedicated to the management, study, and conservation of Virginia's reptile and amphibian wildlife species through research, education, and administration. As an organization that represents hundreds of people who are either natural resource professionals, scientists, or citizens concerned with reptile and amphibian wildlife in Virginia we look to support efforts that protect, manage, and afford the opportunity to enjoy wild reptiles and amphibians.

The Society believes that through education and research, we can effectively combat the stigma associated with reptiles and amphibians. As such, part of our mission is to engage the public in educational activities as well as award grants in research and educational projects. We believe that good solutions require good information and best solutions will only come from a fully informed legislative body.

We are concerned that House Bill 1242, which would ban, among other animals, the ownership, trade and breeding of certain reptiles in Virginia, would not accomplish its intended purpose. It would appear that this bill was written hastily and without any consultation with scientists or experts in the subject matter. We believe that as written, this law will only continue to perpetuate the negative stigma associated with reptiles and amphibians by labeling them as "dangerous" animals.

Part of the justification to this bill, it would seem, stems from the Ohio incident that occurred earlier this year. Although we recognize the need to avoid an incident such as this to occur in Virginia, I would like to remind the legislature that no humans were harmed in that incident, and that the incident also was related to a wildlife sanctuary, that had become unsustainable by the mentally ill owner. I would like to remind the legislature that Wildlife Sanctuaries are exempt from this ban. Additionally, no reptiles or amphibians were released as part of that incident.

The Society feels that any legislation must be based on science and facts, not fear or knee jerk reactions. There simply is no empirical data that shows that exotic snakes should be considered any more dangerous than dogs, horses, cats or cars. The next page bullets some statistics that will hopefully clarify why this bill is not based on facts.

Following are statistics regarding the dangers of other domestic animals and car accidents that contrast against exotic snake ownership:

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- The 2007 Virginia Department of Health Division of Injury and Violence Prevention report that stated an estimated 4,356 people were seen in an emergency department/urgent care center for a dog bite injury¹.
- According to the CDC, about 4.5 million people are bitten by dogs each year, almost one in five of those who are bitten require medical attention and in 2006, more than 31,000 people underwent reconstructive surgery as a result of being bitten by dogs². Additionally, according to a study from the division of public health in Raleigh, NC, an average of 19 deaths per year were recorded annually between 1979 and 2005, resulting in 494 deaths attributed to dogs³.
- Furthermore, the CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report states that between 2001 and 2009 there have been 3,638 traumatic brain injuries related to horseback riding⁴.
- Additionally, the Va Dept. of Health and the Brain Injury Association of Virginia sent me these statistics: Number of people who have been hospitalized in Virginia from horseback riding injuries between 2006 and 2010 alone: **903**
- In 2011, Virginia had 740 deaths related to car crashes⁵.
- According to a CDC study, 1.4 million human Salmonella infections and an estimated 600 associated deaths occur each year in the United States. However, less than 1% of human Salmonella infections are caused by the “reptile-associated” serotypes⁶.
- **By contrast**, between 1990 and 2009, there have been a total of only 16 captive venomous snake related fatalities in the USA. One of these occurred in Virginia in 2004 and was related to a snake handler belonging to a church⁷.

The other aspect of this legislation deals with the potential environmental impact of exotic reptiles to our native fauna. Following are some facts regarding the environmental impact of other species of domesticated animals and the facts about the survivorship of exotics in Virginia if they are to escape:

- Most exotic species of snakes will not be able to survive the cold winters that occur in Virginia. Primarily a study was conducted showing that Burmese pythons cannot even survive South Carolina’s winter weather⁸, much less survive and propagate in Virginia.
- Furthermore, cats kill more birds than any exotic reptile. In March of 2011, a study was released showing domestic, outdoor cats commit 46% of all predation of birds. This can contribute to millions of native and neotropical migratory bird deaths. These cats are “in fact having population-level effects.”^{9,10} By contrast, there have been no recorded events of exotic reptiles causing any damage to the environment in Virginia.

Finally, the Society feels, that as written, the language may directly impact our activities, as well as the activity of many other groups in Virginia in regards to scientific research and educating the public; in that at some point, members of the Society and other organizations may in fact possess venomous reptiles for educational purposes. This bill would impact these groups or individuals in that it would essentially make it illegal to "possess" any of our native venomous snakes. This could potentially translate to a violation by anyone holding any such species of snake, even if it is simply the result of a survey of reptile and amphibian species on any particular property such as a park or wildlife management area. As written, this legislation would take away from the learning experience that we could provide to the public about the natural behaviors of reptiles, including large boids and venomous reptiles. We believe that

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education, not restrictive regulations will help the public understand both the dangers and wonders of reptiles in general.

In conclusion, the Society feels that this legislation is not based on sound facts and science but is driven by an ideological agenda that is exploiting people's fears and ignorance of exotic animals and reptiles in particular. This only furthers the unwarranted fear and ignorance associated with reptiles in Virginia and is something that the Virginia Herpetological Society is trying very aggressively to change. We strongly urge you to reject this bill as written.

The Virginia Herpetological Society appreciates your time and consideration of this issue and we look forward to hearing from you. If you would like to discuss this issue further, please call or e-mail me at the following: phone (804) 307-9066 at home or e-mail at president@vaherpsociety.com.

Sincerely,

Larry Mendoza, President
Virginia Herpetological Society
www.vaherpsociety.com

References:

1. <http://www.vahealth.org/Injury/data/factsheets/Dog%20Bite%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>
2. <http://www.cdc.gov/HomeandRecreationalSafety/Dog-Bites/biteprevention.html>
3. http://www.rexano.org/Statistics/Dog_Attack_1979_2005_Langley.pdf
4. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/wk/mm6039.pdf>
5. <http://www2.newsadvance.com/news/2011/dec/26/traffic-deaths-2010-virginia-ar-1569663/>
6. <http://www.rexano.org//SafetyFrame.htm>
7. http://www.rexano.org/Statistics/venomous_captive_snake_fatality.pdf
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10. http://nationalzoo.si.edu/scbi/migratorybirds/science_article/pdfs/55.pdf

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