

Responsible Reptile Keeping

Author(s): **Tony Wigley**, Co-Founder of Responsible Reptile Keeping, UK.



**HOW MANY
PET
REPTILES
SURVIVE
ONE YEAR?**



**BALL
PYTHON
BANNED**



**WHITELISTS &
POSITIVE
LISTS**

THE TRUTH



- How would you feel if couldn't keep reptiles anymore?
- What if your government decided to ban them, or only allowed a few species to be kept legally?
- Or what would you do if your favourite pet species was made illegal?

Well, believe it or not, these things are actually happening all around the world. Wherever you live, you can rest assured that campaign groups are pressuring your government to impose restrictive laws. These are worrying times.

Tony Wigley, Co-Founder of Responsible Reptile Keeping tells how to battle against activity of animal rights campaigners

What's going on?

Animal rights campaigners (ARCs) around the world have been working to ban reptile keeping since at least the 1970s. Thankfully, pet-keeping advocates have also been hard at work, countering the sensationalised misinformation the ARCs peddle. And despite working with budgets a fraction of the size, the pro-keeping advocates win more battles than they lose. Common sense and scientific evidence usually prevail, but not always.

I think we can all agree that reptile keeping has come a long way since the 1970s. Even the last 10 years have seen several herpetocultural revolutions, alongside many impressive husbandry and welfare advancements—so much so that I would go so far as to say that reptiles enjoy better welfare than almost every other pet taxa.

Of course, I'm biased. But there is no question that reptile husbandry and welfare are better than ever, so you might expect our critics to applaud these advancements. Instead, they have doubled down on their efforts. Today, there is more campaigning and pressure on reptile keepers and businesses than ever before in history.

Is social media to blame?

First, it's important to understand that good welfare and herpetological advancements will never appease radical animal rights campaigners. They won't be happy until reptile keeping is banned completely, and there's plenty of evidence and examples from around the world to support this aspersion.

But the main reason ARCs are causing more trouble than ever is social media.

We all know that the internet has revolutionised how we live and think—and this is particularly true since the rise of social media. Today, social media influences almost every part of our lives. It's where we go for news; where we do our research, where we join tribes, pick up ideas and opinions, and it's where we cultivate our ideologies. And our opponents have been extremely adept at taking advantage of this technology to generate support for their cause.



Tony Wigley, RRK Co-Founder.

Despite being very few in number, and lacking a credible, evidence-based position, our enemies have mastered the use of rhetoric on social media to broadcast misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and outright lies to generate support for their extreme ideologies. Meanwhile, reptile keepers and businesses have been focused on their passion for reptiles—and quite right too. But ignoring ARC propaganda has enabled a tiny minority of extremists to take control of the narrative.

Today, these extremists can say what they like about us. They spend huge sums of money spreading their disinformation and rhetoric, and it spreads like a virus on social media, unchallenged and uncorrected.

A bad example

If you were to believe ARC propaganda, then apparently 75% of pet reptiles die in their first year. As reptile keepers, we instinctively know this isn't true. And indeed, when we scrutinise the research behind this statistic, it's clearly bogus. The methodology used is severely flawed, and whether that was done inadvertently or on purpose, we can only speculate.

We even have two separate additional studies that provide far more reliable data. These two studies were completed independently, used different methodologies, and generated different results. Instead of 75% mortality in the first year, both of these studies came to a surprisingly similar conclusion—that reptile mortality in the first year was less than 4%. That's quite a difference.

But even though the 75% study is flawed, and despite there being far more reliable science available, that 75% statistic is still banded around on social media, reported in mainstream media, and is often cited by animal keepers and reptile-related businesses around the world. It was even presented as a fact in a European Parliament meeting, I attended. To say it is frustrating would be an understatement because this type of propaganda seems to spread like wildfire and is highly damaging to our community.

And this is just one item of propaganda and disinformation that is broadcast by ARCs and is being believed by naive, well-meaning members of the public. The average Joes and Joannas out there who don't know much about reptiles are regularly fed lies and misinformation, and this makes them more susceptible to propaganda and more likely to believe ARC lies. It's a big problem because some of those misinformed people who have been pre-programmed with lies will find themselves in positions of power, either in the media, schools, or worst of all, government. It means the lobbying organisations who work on our behalf are constantly on the back foot, trying to correct the misinformation that's being peddled.

It's a massive task, and thankfully those lobbyists on the front line are doing a great job. But inevitably, they cannot win every battle, so little by little, animal rights ideologies are gaining ground.

What can we do?

I've worked with reptiles since 1997. In addition to working in reptile stores, wholesalers, breeding facilities, venomous collections, zoos and livefood breeders, I've also for the last 20 years, worked as a journalist

writing for reptile magazines and pet-trade publications around the world. It's been my job to keep an eye on what animal rights campaigners are up to, and what I have seen makes me increasingly worried.

In 2014 my wife, Vickie, and I launched a media agency, and because the animal rights situation concerned us so much, we volunteered our media expertise to help the pro-keeping advocacy organisations that were working with the UK Government. Sadly, the amount of time we could offer wasn't enough to make a dent in the ARC's propaganda machine.

That's when I had an idea.

What if we repurposed our media expertise to focus exclusively on fighting ARC propaganda? What if, every time ARC propaganda appeared online, we could respond with the truth? What if responsible reptile keepers around the world had content they could share and use to shut down the ARC's misinformation and lies?

- Could it be done?
- Could it work?
- Would we go broke trying?



Tony interviews Andrew Nicolaou aka Riddler Reptiles.

Tony with Slash
the Komodo dragon.



After a long conversation, Vickie and I decided we would give it a shot. "You've been talking about doing something like this for a long time. So, either we do something, or we quit complaining!" Vickie said.

A few months later Responsible Reptile Keeping was launched.

What is Responsible Reptile Keeping?

Lobbying and interacting with governments is still the most important and effective way to fight legislative fires. But this on its own is not enough, and the organisations doing this vital work have neither the time nor the resources to think about media campaigning. And that's where RRK comes in.

I think the best way to describe RRK is to think of us as a dedicated media department for responsible reptile keepers around the world. We produce a range of media on a wide variety of important topics—from videos, podcasts and interviews, to magazines, blogs and documentary films, all highlighting the truth about responsible reptile keeping.

The content aims to not only refute the propaganda broadcast by ARCs, but also to help educate the tiny minority of keepers who could do better or create issues that are weaponised by anti-keeping campaigners. And we're also producing content which celebrates the pioneering work being done by knowledgeable and experienced private keepers. Our community has a lot to be proud of, so let's shout about it! tiny minority of keepers who could do better or create issues that are weaponised by anti-keeping campaigners.

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Does it work?

We launched Responsible Reptile Keeping in the autumn of 2022, and the feedback we've received has been phenomenal. More importantly, our mission to take back control of the narrative seems to be working. Predictably, our first video corrected the myth that claimed 75% of pet reptiles die in their first year, and it's been pretty successful.

We've seen keepers shutting down this ridiculous claim when they see it broadcast online, and we've even heard of our video being referenced when this topic is discussed in government working groups. We've also corrected stories published in magazines, persuading the editor to publish a correction.

And that's not all. As RRK's online profile has grown, the organisation has essentially become a storefront for the international reptile community. Let me give you an example.

- Ball pythons were banned in Spain in 2019, following the publication of a flawed risk assessment that concluded the species could become invasive there. Spanish herpetologists took the ruling to court, hopeful it could be overturned. However, despite robust evidence, the judge decided to keep the ban "as a precaution".



- Ball pythons are still banned in Spain today, along with savannah monitors and peninsula cooters.

In Europe, part of the EU Commission's workload is to investigate ways to reduce illegal wildlife trade. This is a major battleground that's exploited by ARCs who claim this trade is worth many billions of dollars, and use this sensational figure to justify closing down the pet trade.

In reality, the illegal wildlife trade mostly comprises timber, plants, bush meat and traditional medicines. Illegal trade in live pet animals in Europe and America is infinitesimally tiny and most of that comprises administrative and paperwork issues rather than attempts



RRK presenting at the Zoo Expo conference in Oslo.

to smuggle endangered species. But again, ARC's sensationalised propaganda overinflates a small issue in the hope they can use it to end responsible keeping.

During their search for stakeholders, the organisation conducting the EU's consultation found RRK's content online and invited us to contribute to the discussion. Of course, we were eager to do so, but during the interview, it became clear that the organisation had not contacted many pro-keeping lobbying organisations that are active in Europe. Thankfully, we were able to introduce our European colleagues to the consultation, when there was a likelihood they could have been excluded if RRK hadn't been so visible online. Having a prolific and reputable online profile certainly opens doors.

Similarly, we were contacted by a journalist writing an article about positive lists which are being proposed in Europe as a means to ban most pet reptile species. This meant we were able to put across our side of the story, and thank goodness we did because the publication in question is owned by an organisation that is notoriously in favour of such a ban.



Talking turtles with Suzie Simpson from Turtle Tally.

- Californian king snakes (in fact, all *Lampropeltis getula* subspecies)—are banned across the whole of Europe since they became invasive in Gran Canaria. Gran Canaria is geographically closer to Africa than to mainland Europe and this species could not survive in most European countries. This is another example of overreaching and unnecessary legislation with no conservation or welfare benefits.



We were pleased to note when the article came out that our input came across as considered, sensible and evidence-based, whereas those arguing in favour of positive lists sounded heavy-handed, overly emotional and steeped in rhetoric. Another win for common sense!

The RRK mission

Having our voice heard in government when new legislation is being discussed is vital.

But it's also important to make sure our voices are heard in discussions outside government.

After all, that's where every animal rights campaign begins. It's where the ARCs use propaganda and rhetoric to get the ball rolling and recruit public support. They have been able to infect the public with misinformation and lies, recruiting support and funding along the way.

Misinforming the public has become a big business for these organisations, and has enabled a few extremists to become disproportionately influential and powerful. If all the public ever hears is that reptile keeping

is cruel, dangerous and damaging to ecology, then no wonder they are happy to get behind campaigns urging a ban.

Our mission is to provide opportunities for people to hear the truth about responsible reptile keeping. We all know how much humans benefit from keeping companion animals. And we know that private keepers have been at the forefront of pretty much every pioneering husbandry and welfare advancement. We also know that on the whole, pet reptile welfare is impressively high. And that responsible, sustainable keeping and breeding is not only good for business, but it's good for the planet too.

It shouldn't need much debate to conclude that the people who know best are us – the passionate specialists and enthusiasts who keep and study reptiles and who obviously want the best for them. And that's why we think it's vital we let as many people know the truth as possible.

We hope that by arming people with facts, the ARC's sensationalised and unjust claims can be closed down before they become an issue—before they even

YOUR VOICE IS NEEDED NOW MORE THAN EVER



THE EU CONSIDERS A 'POSITIVE LIST OF PETS'

Join the fight against ARC propaganda

- If you agree animal rights campaigners are dangerous and you believe the problem is getting worse.
- If you are frustrated by propaganda and misinformation you see online and think someone should do something about it.



Then join us.

<https://responsiblereptilekeeping.org/memberships>



RRK presenting at the PRAS Juniors award evening.

get to the editorial meetings in newspaper offices, or on the curriculum at schools and universities, and before they appear on the agenda in government department meetings. We hope that people will share our videos, interviews and podcasts, so more people realise that animal rights campaigners are extremists whose ultimate goal is to end all human interactions with animals.

Right now, the animal rights campaigners are winning, but we intend to put a stop to that. If we don't take action, it is quite possible, probable even, that our children will be banned from keeping animals and prevented from contributing to the wealth of herpetological knowledge and welfare advancements. And that would be a great disaster, from every perspective.

The ARC's online campaigns have had it their own way, until now. Responsible Reptile Keeping is already turning the tide, and we're only just getting started. We have truth on our side, and with your help, we can put an end to the dangerous campaigns that threaten our community and the good work we do.

It's time for our voices to be heard.

We hope you'll join us.

Because together, we can make a difference.

Want one of these?

Fiji iguanas are pretty cool, but you can only get your hands on exclusive RRK merch by becoming a member!



Responsible
Reptile
Keeping

**Protecting and supporting
responsible reptile keepers worldwide**



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