

What You Need to Know About Reptile Enrichment

[RSS](#)



What You Need to Know About Reptile Enrichment

Written by Mariah Healey, ReptiFiles.com

You may have started seeing a new word lately in your reptile-related Facebook groups and YouTube channels: “enrichment”. If you don’t know what this means, then you probably feel a little lost in these discussions. So let’s start from the beginning:

What is enrichment?

Enrichment is the strategic use of items and activities to stimulate a captive animal to engage in natural behaviors.

Enrichment is common practice in high-quality zoos and similar institutions — although guests often see enrichment items as “toys” for the animals, they actually have a higher function: increasing the animals’ quality of life in captivity. How does that work? Simple: Animals have instincts which pre-program them to pursue certain behaviors. When they are free to express these behaviors, they have an outlet for excess energy and get to be, well, an animal. When they are unable to express these behaviors, they become frustrated and their mental health declines. Expressing natural behaviors is so important that David Mellor lists it among the [five provisions of animal welfare](#).

Enrichment is most often thought of as important for “higher” animals like birds and mammals, but scientific evidence shows that even “simpler” animals like reptiles can benefit significantly from the addition of enrichment to their routine. Zoo practices often influence the exotic animal hobby, so it should come as no surprise that enrichment is starting to become a thing among progressive American reptile keepers.

If anything, it’s been a long time coming. When reptiles have regular access to enrichment, keepers start to see benefits like:

- Fewer vices and behavioral problems
- Increased alertness, engagement, and curiosity
- Increased resilience to stress
- Better body condition
- Increased intelligence
- Strengthened bond between animal and keeper

How do you provide enrichment for a reptile?

Enrichment ideas can be divided into two broad categories: environmental enrichment and enrichment activities.

Environmental enrichment encourages natural behavior through species-appropriate enclosure design that promotes freedom of choice and sensory stimulation.

Enrichment activities encourage natural behavior through presenting challenges. Animal training is also a form of active enrichment.

For best results, both types of enrichment should be present in your reptile’s routine. The greater diversity of enrichment you can provide, the greater the benefit will be for your reptile.

Environmental Enrichment Ideas:

- Climbing logs/branches and ledges
- Variety of hiding places
- Varied diet
- Loose, naturalistic substrate for digging/burrowing

- Rearrange furniture
- Move the food or water dish
- Place food and water dishes in separate areas of the enclosure
- Live, edible plants
- Shell brush station
- Cohabitation (for social species only)

Enrichment Activity Ideas:

- Puzzle feeder
- Live prey
- Hanging greens
- Multiple feeding stations
- Holey ball
- Scent trail
- Hidden food
- Foreign object in enclosure
- Handling
- Tong feeding
- Target training
- Supervised free roaming

This is not the limit of what you can do to enrich your reptile's life. For more ideas, consider the natural behaviors that your reptile would pursue in the wild, and ask yourself how you can facilitate that behavior in captivity. This will likely take some research into the species' natural history – field guides and iNaturalist.org can be a great sources of inspiration! For example, if you have a pet ball python, some research will tell you that they are known to hunt in trees. An activity you can try, then, is putting the snake's food on a branch for it to find.

Of course, not all of these ideas may be appropriate for your particular reptile. For example, if you have a green tree python, providing a “burrowable” substrate is going to be less beneficial than it would be for a hognose snake.

Don't forget safety!

Before trying a certain form of enrichment, ask yourself: is this an “appropriate” challenge for my pet? Is it safe? Here's a basic checklist to help you decide:

- Is this challenge appropriate for my pet's capabilities?
- Can my pet potentially get trapped in the enrichment item?
- Can the enrichment item get stuck in my pet's mouth?
- Can my pet potentially hang itself from the item?
- Is there an ingestion or choking hazard?
- Could my pet potentially get injured by this item?

- Can this item be used to escape from the enclosure?
- Could this activity make my pet sick?
- Is this item toxic or irritating in any way?

Conclusion

Why did you get your reptile? Unlike dogs, cats, horses, birds, etc., you don't get a pet reptile to play with it — you get it because you find them interesting simply for what they are. When kept in minimalistic, unenriched enclosures, reptiles are unable to express the behaviors that make them so fascinating to us in the first place. For example, are ball pythons widely considered “pet rocks” simply because they're commonly kept in tiny, barren enclosures?

Keep in mind that your attempts at enrichment may not get results at first. You have to keep at it, consistently present new challenges, but also stay within the range of your pet's current capabilities. That may be fairly limited at first, but they will grow.

Enrichment isn't a one-time thing. It shouldn't even be particularly special. Enrichment is simply part of keeping your pet reptile happy and healthy – just like dogs need walks, chew toys, and human interaction, reptiles need enrichment too.

If you're looking for more information on how to enhance your reptile's quality of life with enrichment, start with these sources:

- [Zoo Snippets](#)
- [Lori Torrini on YouTube](#)
- [ReptiFiles: Expanding on the 5 Freedoms of Animal Welfare](#)
- [Animal Welfare Institute: Environmental Enrichment: A Review](#)

Image by [sipa](#) from [Pixabay](#)

The Dude Abides