

Why Reptiles Need Enclosure Décor

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Many reptile keepers make the mistake of thinking that enclosure décor is just for the human looking at the enclosure. It's called "décor" because it's just a bunch of aesthetic accessories with no functional value right?

Wrong.

While décor definitely can make an enclosure more attractive, that's not its primary purpose. The main purpose of putting décor in your reptile's enclosure is to provide *enrichment*. What's enrichment? Enrichment is the practice of using items and activities to strategically encourage an animal to indulge its instincts and exercise natural behaviors.

If we go one step further, *environmental enrichment* pertains to designing an animal's enclosure in a way that provides enrichment. This means going beyond the basic necessities of food, water, and shelter:

Décor Creates More Places to Hide

Although enrichment requires going beyond the basic necessities, sometimes providing options in those necessities becomes a form of enrichment in itself. Shelter is one of those things.

Reptiles can be found just about anywhere, but chances are that you don't see them very often, even when you go outside with the express purpose of finding them. Why? Because they're VERY good at hiding. Most reptiles prefer to spend most of their time hiding, because that's how they avoid predators and conserve energy, which enables them to stay alive long enough to reproduce.

Most of the décor in your enclosure should provide additional places for your reptile to hide, whether it's in the shade of a large plant, under some leaves, or inside a hollow log or plastic cave. Like humans, reptiles do best when they have options.

Many reptile keepers are under the false impression that they shouldn't provide too many places for their reptile to hide, because then it will spend all of its time hiding and the keeper will never get to see it. However, just the opposite is true. Not having places to hide makes reptiles feel exposed to predators, which makes them very stressed — imagine someone with social anxiety in the middle of a mosh pit, and you'll have a general idea of how they feel. Stressed reptiles suffer from reduced appetite, get sick more easily, have difficulty recovering from illness, and are likely to have a much shorter lifespan than non-stressed counterparts. In fact, dying from stress is a real diagnosis.

The good news is that if you provide lots of different places to hide (rather than just one or two) you will be more likely to see your reptile out in the open. Of course, this varies depending on what type of reptile you have, but chances are good that they will feel more comfortable exposing themselves when they know that they have a bolt-hole nearby.

Décor Provides Things to Explore

Imagine your current living space. Now take away all of entertainment — no books, no computers, no video games, no TV, no Internet, no board games, no craft supplies, nothing. Don't think about leaving your house, either, because you're locked in (quarantine flashbacks, anyone?). Sure, your home will still be perfectly functional, but you just might die of boredom.

As it turns out, that's pretty similar to how things are for reptiles when they're kept in barren enclosures with nothing to engage them. Many people believe that reptiles are simply too dumb or simple to care, but the fact is that they're not dumb or simple. They're quite smart actually — after all, in the wild, they need to be able to find their own food and water, remember places to hide, and recognize the limits of their territory. These activities require intelligence. And where there is intelligence, there can be boredom.

Providing a variety of décor in your reptile's enclosure to challenge your reptile and vary their surroundings helps combat that boredom. Enrichment items like climbing branches, edible plants, and a natural, burrowable substrate all encourage your reptile to engage with its habitat and exercise. In turn, your reptile will enjoy better heart health, better muscle tone, healthier weight, less strain on its organs, and likely a longer lifespan. Plus, you get to watch them

explore the things that you've provided for them! Few things are as satisfying as seeing your ball python climbing a branch or your bearded dragon digging its own burrow.

For extra enrichment value, switch up your reptile's décor every now and then. Move a log. Add something new. Rearrange the enclosure. Whatever you do, watch your reptile's reactions and adjust accordingly. Don't overdo it if you have a reptile that is easily stressed.

Décor Satisfies Their Instincts

Let's take a quick break from all these blocks of text. Take a look at these gorgeous landscapes. These are examples of where you can find reptiles in the wild. What do these habitats have in common?



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At first, these pictures don't look like they have much in common. They're very different types of habitats. However, they have one very important thing in common — or rather, it's something they don't have: empty space!

Nature is CHOCK FULL of stuff — mostly plants, but also logs, branches, twigs, leaves, moss, rocks, pebbles, dirt, sand, you name it. And as it happens, nature is the place where reptiles evolved. They didn't evolve in an empty box with paper towel and a water bowl. Evolution drives animals to make the most of the resources available to them, and that means your reptile has instincts to look for and use these resources. You don't need to perfectly replicate your reptile's native habitat, but the basic elements should still be preserved:

If you have a crested gecko from the forests of New Caledonia, then you will need an enclosure with plenty of vertical space, vines and branches for climbing, and leaves to hide behind.

If you have a bearded dragon from the scrublands of central Australia, then you will need an enclosure with both horizontal and vertical space, a deep layer of dirt or fine sand for digging, a cozy burrow, an edible plant for nibbling, and at least one sturdy branch for climbing.

If you have a western hognose snake from the plains of North America, then you will need an enclosure with plenty of horizontal space, a deep layer of dirt for digging, leaf litter to hide under, and a rock to bask on.

That's just the basics, but you get the idea.

Conclusion

Bioactive enclosures are convenient because they are all about décor since it happens to serve important functions in ecosystems. But even if you don't have a bioactive or even naturalistic enclosure, you can (and should) still make a point to provide lots of décor for your reptile.

Of course, that makes décor one of the biggest expenses when setting up a reptile enclosure. There are ways to decrease this cost, but the fact remains: If you want to meet the requirements for your reptile's physical and psychological wellbeing in captivity, décor isn't optional or just an aesthetic choice — it's a necessity.

When creating your reptile's enclosure, use photos of your reptile's natural environment and study up on their natural behaviors, then arrange their enclosure accordingly. The goal is not to make it look pretty — the goal is to make it functional for your reptile.

Your enclosure also need to be large enough to facilitate enrichment. If you're worried about how to put more décor in your reptile's enclosure because you don't have enough space, then that's a sign that you probably need to upgrade.

When you prioritize enrichment (décor) in your reptile's environment, you will have a healthier, happier pet reptile that will be more of a pleasure to watch and interact with.

The Dude Abides