



10 Tips for Using Herptiles & Invertebrates in Educational Outreach Programs

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The use of reptiles in education programs faces the same issues as the use of other animals. Reptiles are neither more nor less dangerous than other animals and, like other animals, some are more appropriate than others for use in certain educational settings. The use of reptiles, however, may provide more opportunities for growth and change given the largely negative view of them held by the general public.

1. Know your state and local exotic animal laws

Each state/locale is different in what they allow. Before you get started, make sure you know and adhere to all applicable laws and regulations.

2. Represent the animals accurately

Be sure the facts you present are accurate and current. Don't add to the list of "old wives' tales" regarding these animals. Remember, your role as educator includes dispelling myths and untruths.

3. You are presenting with live animals, not inanimate objects

Live animals should be treated with respect and understanding. Always keep animals in their containers or safely displayed in your hands--not around your neck, across your shoulders, clinging to your shirt, etc. Minimize your movements as you speak. Young children are especially impressionable, and this is your opportunity to teach them how to respectfully and safely handle any wildlife.



4. Choose appropriate individuals for outreach

Sure, that snake may be rare and beautiful...but is it a good candidate for outreach? Choose animals for outreach based on personality and ease of handling. Does the animal get too stressed? Does it continuously bite handlers? Is it difficult to transport or display safely? Audiences don't want to see you having to wrangle a snake that is too heavy for you to handle or a tarantula that throws its hairs. Bear in mind that you are teaching about respect for animals as well as their natural history. Having a calm, worry-free ambassador is key for effective education.

5. Decide whether an animal ambassador is appropriate for audiences to touch

Not all animal ambassadors are cut out for being handled by just anybody. Does stroking a snake really help get your educational message across? Is your objective to help others get over their fear? Before your program, think through what is most important, safe and sensible for the animal and the audience.

6. Transport animals with their health in mind

Be mindful about booking events in the cold winter with herps and inverts. While you can take heat packs, electric blankets, etc., in your vehicle, consider how you will keep critters comfortable while walking from the car to the program location or once you are inside the

building. And in summer, even while many animals depend on extra heat sources to survive, remember that they can over-heat. Accept the fact that on some days you may not be able to present a program due to animal safety concerns, and so consider how you would modify your approach.

7. Don't scare the audience

You are a wildlife educator, not an entertainer. It's simply bad practice to reach into an animal container and then scream, pretending to be "attacked." This truly frightens many audience members, both young and old, and does nothing to help get them over a fear of these animals.

8. Health and well-being come first

It's not appropriate, or safe, to take animals that are in the midst of or getting ready to shed. This is uncomfortable for them and can be dangerous (especially with snakes) for you and your audience. Don't take ambassadors with health concerns like mites or injuries. The animal's health, comfort, and safety should always come first when it comes to educational programs.

9. Teach about proper care as pets

If your audience is interested in keeping some species of education animals as pets, be ready to teach them proper care. Provide information to sway them toward easy-to-care-for species rather than those with a high potential for ending up in rescues should the animal become too big or too burdensome to care for. Again, refer to the locale's animal laws, as some don't allow certain species to be kept as pets at all.

10. Make time to properly care for animal ambassadors when not at programs

While having a variety of herps for programs can be beneficial for educational programs, also consider whether you have enough resources, volunteers and time to provide daily care for all the animals. No animal should ever be forgotten because there are simply "too many." Animals that are not properly cared for have a higher chance of having bad sheds (for reptiles) or being dried out (amphibians), and thus should not be shown to the public.

