

5 Lessons I've Learned from Keeping Turtles

Curtis Ippolito

If you've been keeping turtles long enough, you likely have a running list in your head of the most valuable things you've learned along the way. I know I do, and if you'll allow me the self-indulgence, I'll share with you the top five things I've learned from keeping and breeding turtles the last 12 years, augmented with some thoughts from friends whose experience and insights I value.

1. Captive-bred is better

Captive-bred turtles really do better when compared with wild-caught animals in most cases; there's no way around it. I'm reminded of my own path of folly in recent years, as I gathered up adult female Spotted Turtles with the idea of increasing my production, to find every single one not only didn't produce but also slowly died off. I was going on plausible

deniability when acquiring these females that were surely recently wild-caught animals. Thankfully, I've also been raising up a group of a dozen or so captive-bred specimens that should make solid breeders in a season or two.

"I couldn't agree more with this," says Reid Sneddon, who operates SoCal Reptiles. "I want to gobble up the wild-caught [*Indotestudo forstenii*] that come into the country to help them, but most are riddled with parasites and disease that can wipe out your entire collection. Captive-bred stock should be clean and way fewer treatments are required compared to a recent import."

I would be remiss if I didn't admit wild-caught animals are a necessary means in many cases to establishing a captive breeding group, such as the



One of five *Cuora bourreti* purchased with "turtle money."



Juvenile Yellow-margined Asian Box Turtle, *Cuora flavomarginata*. Photo by Russ Gurley.

case with *I. forstenii*. After all, none of us would be producing captive-bred animals without the founder stock of wild-caught individuals. And there are many capable keepers who are able to treat even the most disease-ridden wild-caught animals and are probably scoffing at this entire section.

2. Patience is rewarded

Patience is one attribute I struggle with the most in life, but one that is critical if you're to have any amount of success in this hobby; whether it's treating a sick turtle, raising up a baby to maturity or simply keeping a group healthy and/or producing healthy offspring. Slow and deliberate wins this marathon.

Will Espenshade, who operates Kapidolo Farms, says, "I find where patience is a virtue is the purchase of one sex but not the other, hoping/knowing the opposite sex animal will become available sooner or later."

Patience will pay off in the long run. Your baby turtle will grow into a mature breeder with time and patience; the tortoise of opposite sex will become available for Will.

3. Learn from other's successes and failures

Every success I've had I can trace back to an idea or insight I took from someone else and the TTPG conference is an invaluable breeding ground for such ideas, as I'm sure you know. It's easy to emulate what has worked for someone else, as long as they're willing to share their process with you.

Learning from others' failures is equally invaluable. We're all more reluctant to share failures than successes, but if it prevents someone else from making the same mistakes, it's our responsibility to do so for the sake of the animals we keep.

"Never let yourself slip into the mindset that you know all there is to know," Paul Vander Schouw says. "Keep learning, growing, and expanding from the knowledge and experiences of others."

4. Reinvesting "turtle money" and trades are most rewarding

I have a group of five *Cuora bourreti* that I acquired in 2014 and 2015 as captive-bred hatchlings and they might possibly be the pinnacle of my turtle purchases. Not because they're one of the 25 most endangered freshwater turtles or because they're a rare *Cuora*, or even because they are as easy to keep as Eastern box turtles, in my opinion. No, the reason I value the purchase so much is because I bought all of them with money I generated from hatching and selling my own turtles. This is the goal with most turtle purchases I make.

I also get a thrill with trading captive-bred hatchlings with friends. Making a trade with a friend seems to me to be the purest form of this hobby.

5. A recharge is crucial; burnout is real

My "turtle year" is very cyclical. Spring is full of anticipation and excitement as turtles wake up and begin breeding; summer is a blast as turtles are laying eggs and clutches hatch. Then, fall arrives, activity



Eat! GROW! Patience is required to ensure this captive-bred Coahuilan Box Turtle grows to maturity evenly and correctly.

slows, preparations for hibernation need to be made, and it's about this time when the drag of cleaning out ponds and doing water changes catches up with me. Thankfully, it's also about this time that the annual TTPG conference takes place. I inevitably arrive in Mesa, Arizona on turtle-keeping fumes, but quickly receive a resurgence of energy from the presentations and camaraderie and find myself racing home with a head full of ideas and innovations I want to add to my husbandry. Winter may be the most productive time of turtle keeping for me. Not only because 75 percent of my collection is hibernating and I have more time, but the conference really recharges my passion. My tanks are the cleanest, the indoor turtles are probably the best fed, babies are doted upon, etc.



Captive-bred box turtles (*Terrapene carolina bauri*).

And yes, burnout is very real. I've seen it with friends and experienced it myself. The conference is a crucial part of my year to mitigate burnout.

Kurt Edwards hits the nail on the head: "Sometimes you have to stop and consider why you're keeping animals. Prioritize your goals and reassess your collection to benefit both your charges and yourself."

We often operate in a silo, to use a corporate term, as keepers. But we don't need to. If you're struggling, keeping too many animals or not "feeling the passion" like you once did, consider downsizing or at the very least reach out to a friend and express how you're feeling. The animals should never suffer as a result of your state, bottom line.

Honorable mentions:

Don't use credit cards for turtle purchases (for the most part)

No turtle is worth jail time or fines

Admittedly, this article is based mostly on my personal experiences and insights, but that's what makes this hobby of ours communal; we grow and become better keepers and breeders by sharing with each other (see tip 3). I really enjoy the time we spend with each other at the TTPG conference, or hanging out at reptile shows or showing off our collections and enclosures in person or on social media.

Let me know what you've learned from your years of keeping turtles. Share your thoughts if you see me at the conference, or drop me a line at curtis9980@hotmail.com.

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Curtis Ippolito lives in San Diego, California and keeps and breeds *Clemmys guttata*, *Kinosternon acutum*, *Mauremys annamensis*, and several species and subspecies of *Terrapene*. He produced his first captive-bred turtles in 2013 and in 2018 he hatched *Terrapene coahuila* for the first time. He hopes to breed *Cuora bourreti* before the year 2050.