

Breaking the Glass Box

an editorial by Devin Edmonds

Poison dart frogs seemed out of place in Joliet. As one of the fastest growing cities in Illinois, urban sprawl had wiped clear any former wetlands in the area. On the drive into town I didn't pass through any lush tropical rainforests—the tree-like telephone poles didn't hang with bromeliads or other epiphytic plants. Leaf litter blew across Joliet's streets, but was outnumbered by fast food wrappers and plastic bags, likely tossed out the window of passing cars. Nevertheless, in a place where concrete dominated the landscape, amongst White Castle and Wal-Mart, were hundreds of the world's most elegantly colored and exceptionally rare amphibians, on display and for sale at a Holiday Inn.

Midwest Frog Fest is held annually at a hotel in Joliet, and the contrast between the conference room and the tropical life contained within strikes me every year. Dozens of species of captive-bred exotic frogs are present, their bright aposematic coloration radiating from vendor tables like ornaments on a Christmas tree. The 2008 show had the most diverse selection of species yet, with tree frogs, toads, and newts alongside the usual dominating presence of poison dart frogs. As always, I was struck by the beauty of the frogs, and I could see that other attendees shared my experience. I have to wonder, though: when amphibians are priced as goods at a frog show in a hotel, how easily can they be viewed as part of the natural world? The disconnect I saw here should be obvious to all who attend this event, but I'm not so sure it was. When I first started attending reptile and amphibian shows, it wasn't apparent to me, either.

I grew up observing nature in cages. Weekend trips to the pet store were routine throughout my youth. As a child conditioned to view exotic animals primarily as a fascinating commodity, a captive amphibian's monetary value and care requirements were most important to me. Information about their natural history, ecology, and conservation status

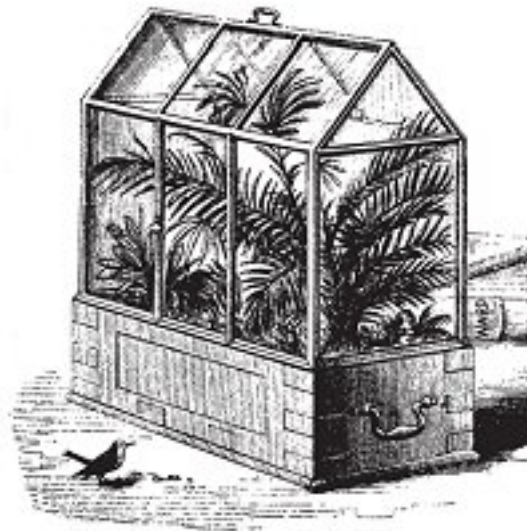
held less weight. When I had the opportunity to go herping outdoors, the creatures I found under logs and in ponds were a separate type from the kind being sold in pet stores. They came without a price tag, belonging solely to the world. In my mind, these wild amphibians were unrelated to the caged ones at the store. They were a different sort.

The connection I originally failed to see between captive amphibians and their wild counterparts eventually made itself known. I traveled abroad, photographing frogs in the wild that I kept at home in terrariums. In Peru, I saw the effect that smuggling has on wild frog populations. Here

too, in the depths of the Amazon rainforest, animals were equated with money. I also travelled in the U.S. to visit large scale reptile and amphibian importers. Wild-caught frogs came in by the boxful to these warehouses of live merchandise, and were quickly piled into stock tanks to await shipment to pet stores or middlemen dealers. These wild frogs would end up in the hands of hobbyists like me who, in addition to supplying the demand that supports the trade, also produce the fine captive-bred offspring found for sale at frog shows. I mentally followed the trail of these animals

from their origin to the terrariums in my bedroom, from the wild to captivity. The connection became clear.

So what's the point of keeping frogs when we are so disconnected from nature that we can only appreciate their beauty inside a glass box? Where does this leave us? Those who are not involved in the exotic animal hobby might believe a person should have to get mud under their nails in order to view creatures as striking as the frogs we keep in our living rooms. They might feel that we must climb mountains and walk trees over rivers, get bitten by ants and stung by bees. I don't disagree with this view. Although we can learn about a frog's behavior in captivity -- watching them breed, feed, or defend territories -- to truly know a species we must also experience the natural environment in which they live.



Being in the field not only gives hobbyists a new appreciation for the amphibians we keep, it also liberates our minds from the concrete boundaries most of us live within daily. While searching for frogs outdoors, our senses focus in a new way, allowing us to finely tune in to the natural world. It's in this state of mind where the sterility of the Joliet-environment is allowed to dissipate from our systems, and as a result, we can develop a new attitude about the amphibians we keep.

Many have said that the terrarium serves as a way to bring the beauty of the natural world into the home. However, I see the terrarium as serving a much larger role than pure aesthetics: it invokes an interest in nature. I have watched people who were raised in urban environments travel to remote natural places as a result of their involvement in the exotic amphibian hobby. Those who take the time to do so usually come back with a different understanding of their amphibians. The mentally projected dollar signs on their tanks sometimes dissolve, being replaced by a true admiration for the tropical creatures that dwell within. Perhaps this sort of experience should be a prerequisite, viewing a species in the wild first before keeping it in captivity, reversing the role of the terrarium in the home by first creating an interest in nature.

Those of us involved in this hobby have one thing in common: our interest in amphibians. We are a diverse group with varied backgrounds. As we progress in the hobby, our views tend to change as a result of communicating with other hobbyists. Unfortunately, I have too often seen this play itself out like a funnel, with attitudes of genuine interest in an animal directed toward the shallow fulfillment of collecting exotic species as if they were stamps. This effect can be reversed, but may require the temporary abandonment of the conveniences of urban life. Get outside and into the field. If you can't afford a trip to the places your exotic frogs originate, find a nearby pond to visit each spring and watch your local *Rana* or *Bufo* species mate. Doing so may be the only way to prevent our hobby from fully becoming like the wetland-devoid, chain store-dominated, urban landscapes in which our frog shows are hosted.