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CAIMAN CARE

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The spectacled caiman (*Caiman crocodilus*) is a popular animal among reptile enthusiasts. It is easy to understand their appeal, hatchlings are widely available outside California and make truly fascinating pets. Unfortunately, if fed and housed properly they can grow a foot per year for the first few years and can rapidly outgrow their accommodations. Crocodylians are illegal in California without special permits. Most crocodylians are severely endangered (some are close to extinction) but spectacled caimans are one of the few species that aren't, therefore zoos are not interested in keeping them. Within a few years the endearing pet becomes a problem that nobody, including the owner, wants. They are difficult to give away. Some elect euthanasia at this point but most caimans die from inadequate care before they get big enough to become a problem. Other crocodylians are so severely endangered that it is illegal to own or trade in them, live or dead, without federal permits. Obviously I discourage individuals from purchasing an animal that within a few years will be an unsuitable pet. Although I can't endorse caimans as pets, I still feel if one has a caiman it should be cared for properly.

One must realize that almost all crocodylians (the American Alligator is an exception) are tropical reptiles, thus they need a warm environment. Water temperature should be 75 to 80 F at all times. Fully submersible aquarium heaters work admirably for this.

Wild crocodylians rely on basking to warm their bodies and this is also beneficial in captivity. Caimans need a "haul-out" area where they can get completely out of the water, dry off and bask. A flat rock or piece of driftwood supported by bricks laying just above the water level with a 75 to 100 watt incandescent bulb with reflector shining down onto it works well as a haul-out area. The light should be left on for 12 to 14 hours per day. Alternatively one can attach a dry land section to the cage. The air temperature should drop to a low of 75 at night and gradually warm to 85^o or 90^o F during the day. A thermometer is essential to monitor temperatures. Fluorescent ultraviolet lights, such as a blacklight and Chroma 50 (General Electric Co.) or Vitalite (Durotest Corp.) combination, are also recommended 18 to 24 inches over the basking area. Make sure there is no glass or plastic between the caiman and the light or the ultraviolet light will be filtered out.

Water quality is as important for caimans as it is for aquatic turtles. Frequent (1 to 3 times per week depending on the aquarium size) full water changes are the best way to guarantee clean water. Large capacity out of tank filters can be used but I do not recommend them. Even if the water looks clean it should be changed regularly because of unseen urinary wastes. Dechlorination of water is not necessary.

Aquariums make beautiful cages but keep in mind that caimans grow rapidly so start with as large an aquarium as is possible at first. Galvanized watering troughs, plastic wading pools, koi ponds or sealed refrigerator liners also make good cages. Make sure the cages have secure fittings lids or the caiman will climb out. For ease of cleaning do not put any gravel in the bottom. Cages with a half land section built into the aquarium and filled with gravel are impossible to clean and should be avoided. Keep in mind the simpler the cage, the easier it will be to keep clean and the healthier the caiman will be in the long run.

Diet is another difficult area. Feed as much variety as is possible! Insects of all types (crickets, waxworms, mealworms, grasshoppers, moths, etc.), earthworms, goldfish, smelt, chopped or whole trout, squid, trout chow and mice are all good. If caimans are offered food from a dish placed on the haul-out area they will eventually eat anything placed in it with alacrity. Purina Trout chow can be soaked into mush then reformed into small strips by adding unflavored gelatin (follow instructions on the package for dissolving). Chicken necks, gizzards and livers can be offered occasionally but are not a balanced diet by themselves. Avoid strips of raw beef or hamburger. Fresh whole fish such as trout or goldfish are preferable to frozen processed fish such as smelt or mackerel. The latter two should only make a small percentage of the diet (see below). Whole mice are nutritionally balanced and should provide the bulk of the diet. Larger specimens can be fed whole plucked chickens or pigeons, rats, rabbits and trout. Hatchlings should be fed 3 times per week and larger caimans once or twice a week. Remember variety is the key to a healthy diet, with a balanced diet heavy vitamin and mineral supplementation is probably detrimental.

The most common problems in caimans result from poor diet. Metabolic bone disease, a chronic calcium deficiency, is common in caimans fed beef strips, insects and chicken parts without whole animals such as mice in their diet. Signs include spinal curvatures, deformed jaws, fibrous osteodystrophy of the long bones and teeth jutting out at oblique angles. Steatitis, fat inflammation and degeneration, is a common cause of death in caimans fed large amounts of frozen fish such as mackerel or smelt which have large amounts of rancid fat in them. Often there are few clinical signs besides anorexia. With a well balanced diet with a wide variety of foods including whole animals (not just organs) both of these conditions should be avoided. Pox virus causes small white plaques on the skin and generally resolve with time if the cage is cleaned frequently.