

# Having Safe Fun With Herps!

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

## Introduction

What is a herp? “Herp” is a general term for any amphibian or reptile. Interacting with amphibians and reptiles can be educational and fun! That’s one reason why the Vivarium and Bio-Trek center were established at Cal Poly. To have a safe experience, it is important to understand that these are wild animals. They are kept in a man-made environment designed to simulate their natural habitat. Some can bite or scratch if threatened. Some amphibians are poisonous, and some reptiles are venomous. A small number of species can cause medical problems or in rare cases, death. Some amphibians and reptiles also can harbor microorganisms that can be potentially hazardous to humans. The term zoonosis refers to any animal disease that is transmittable to humans. Of these organisms, *Salmonella* is most prevalent. Bacterial infections can be contracted via bites, scratches, or direct contact with mucous membranes, such as those of your mouth and eyes.

The following information is not meant to limit your participation in our activities. Rather, it is meant to ensure your safety and that of the animals with which you interact. The Vivarium and Bio-Trek center are places for fun and education in a safe environment. Your willingness to follow instructions will make your experience a memorable one.



A. K. Lappin

## Following Instructions

- Always follow safety guidelines.
- Only handle animals when authorized to do so.
- Never tap on the glass of an animal enclosure.
- Do not disturb the animals. Respect them.
- No eating or drinking is allowed in the facility.

## Herps, Humans, and the Environment

The growing human population, pollution, and poor land use planning has destroyed the natural habitats of countless animals, including many you will see today. The Cal Poly Pomona Vivarium and Bio-Trek facility house the animals you see for educational purposes. Today you will have the opportunity to interact with these magnificent creatures. We must respect these animals and preserve their natural habitats for future generations. Many are important in the control of pests, such as certain insects and rodents that spread disease and destroy food crops. Others are important in scientific research. The College of Science and Department of Biological Sciences at Cal Poly strive to educate the public, particularly the young people who will inherit the consequences of the decisions we make today.



**VENOMOUS  
PROFESSIONALS ONLY!**

J. Y'Deen

## Amphibians

Salamanders and frogs have skin that is much like the mucous membranes inside of your mouth. Therefore, one must be careful of what contacts their skin. For example, soap or cosmetics residues on your hands can be harmful. Some frogs and toads (one family of frogs) can secrete toxins through their skin. So be sure not to touch your mouth or eyes and to wash your hands after handling these animals!

## Turtles

Cal Poly is home to several species of turtles and tortoises (one family of turtles). Most are harmless and not aggressive. However, snapping turtles have powerful jaws and can snap a broomstick with one bite. Some turtles have sharp claws. To avoid bites, never place your fingers near the animal's mouth.



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## Crocodylians

The American alligator and caiman must not be touched or handled, as a bite from one of these animals can result in a serious wound.

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## Lizards

Lizards have various defense mechanisms to protect themselves from predators. Most lizards can release their tail, so do not hold or pull on a lizard's tail. Some large lizards, like green iguanas, can whip their tail when they feel threatened. Although the bite of most lizards is harmless, large species can inflict a painful and potentially damaging bite. Of the approximately 4500 species of lizards, only two are venomous. The Gila monster has venom in its saliva that can cause vomiting, nausea, edema, severe pain, and in extreme cases death. It is to be handled only by a professional.

## Snakes

Snakes often have needle-like teeth, which are used to hold on to prey. Some snakes constrict their prey or inject venom into it, but not both. The vast majority of snakes are non-venomous. However, those that are venomous should be handled only by a professional. Rattlesnakes are the only venomous snakes in southern California that can be dangerous to humans. The vast majority of bites are the result of humans (primarily young males) attempting to move, destroy, or otherwise pester rattlesnakes, which are important in the control of rodent populations. Venomous snakes must be viewed from a safe distance. Most constricting snakes are not dangerous to humans. However, large constrictors are incredibly strong. When handling constricting snakes, do not allow the snake to coil around your neck. Keep snakes away from your face, as they can bite and damage sensitive areas, such as the eyes.



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## Preventing Infections

- Wash hands with soap and rinse with warm water before and after handling the animals.
- Do not allow the animals or your hands to come in contact with your mouth after handling.
- Children must be supervised by an adult.
- High risk groups might reconsider participating in handling activities. These include individuals with compromised immune systems or lesions on their hands or fingers, and women who are pregnant or think that they could be pregnant.
- Do not eat, drink, smoke, or apply cosmetics or contact lenses while in the animal areas.
- If bitten or scratched, notify your guide, who will provide any necessary instructions.

## Related Links

<http://www.csupomona.edu/research/acuc>

<http://www.cdc.gov>