

Supportive care for lizards

Adaptations to fire

The cryptic behaviour of reptiles see them seeking shelter in the fire. Rock and soil provide excellent insulation from the heat.

A slow metabolic rate sees reptiles able to go for periods of time without food while the forest habitat recovers and the prey, such as small rodents or other reptiles return.

Treatment of dehydration

- It is imperative that rehydration of reptiles is performed. This is most simply done by placing the reptile into a clean, warm water bath for 10 minutes daily. This is also the time needed to bathe the burns.
- Oral fluids should be given at least twice daily, following the rehydration guidelines for the first two weeks.
- Access to water in the enclosure at all times is needed.

Treatment of burns

- Debriding under vet supervision using anaesthesia is needed for to remove dead skin and scales in the first week of treatment.
- Day 0–10: burns are treated by daily application of Flamazine®. The Flamazine® is kept in contact with the burn using an adhesive dressing such as Opsite Flexigrid® (Smith and Nephew).
- Day 10–14 or until new skin has formed, DuoDERM Extra thin® (Covatec) may be used over the burn. Flamazine or Solusite may be continued if this is unavailable. Skin and scales will have returned within 28 days of the burn with correct treatment.
- Hypafix® (BSN Medical) can be used to tape dressings onto the skin.

Medications

- Antibiotics, such as enrofloxacin and ceftazidime (Fortum®) are effective against the pathogens present in burns of reptiles and are given for 21–28 days.
- Pain relief such as meloxicam and opiates (buprenorphine, tramadol – chelonians, morphine–lizards) are suitable for reptile species and is given for 7–10 days.

Housing burnt reptiles

- Intensive care: The enclosure should be kept clean. Newspaper flooring should be changed daily. The water bowl may need to be only large enough to drink from while dressings are in place. Once the skin has healed, a wide, shallow water bowl is required.
- A hide-hole, such as a cardboard box, cardboard roll, or plastic container must be offered.
- Access to UV light by placing the lizard in a secure container in dappled sunlight for 20 minutes three times weekly will avoid the need to provide UV via a lamp.
- Reptiles need to be heated into their Preferred Body Temperature Zone (PBTZ) for the immune system, and thus healing to be maximized. Reptiles should not be kept cool or the infection will overwhelm the animal. Heating is provided, preferably by a wire-caged lamp above the animal. Avoid hot-rocks and cables as these are unable to warm the enclosure and the animal will stay on them to get warm, placing it at risk of burns.
- The PBTZ for various species:
 - Blue tongue lizard is 28–32°C
 - Shingleback lizard is 28–32°C
 - Lace monitor is 22–28°C.



Left: Blue tongue lizard burnt in Blue Mountains Fires. Photo courtesy of Dr Robert Johnson

Right: A partial thickness burn on left of abdomen of blue tongue lizard. Deep partial thickness burn to right. Photo courtesy of Anne Fowler

- Pre-release enclosure: this is not commonly used as environmental heating is difficult to manage. Most reptiles are taken from an intensive care enclosure and released into the wild.

Feeding burnt reptiles

A high protein diet is required for healing. a/d® (Hills), a convalescent diet for dogs and cats available from veterinary clinics is very palatable and energy rich and has been used as an emergency food for reptiles for 1–2 weeks when mixed with Wombaroo® Reptile supplement.

- Force-feeding may be required. Open the mouth gently from the side and insert the nozzle of the syringe. Inject a small amount of food and permit the reptile to swallow.
- For lizards, which are the most common species to enter care, chopped fruit and vegetables sprinkled with Wombaroo® Reptile supplement can be given on alternate days. Provide enough food to be eaten in 3–4 hours and then remove the bowl of food.
- Blue tongue lizards should be offered 3–5 large snails daily.
- Monitors are fed thawed frozen rodents, or day old chicks.
- Fresh water is provided daily in a shallow bowl.

Criteria for release

- The burn need to have healed and the skin shed at least once to ensure that any scales associated with the burn are not interfering with the shed. For this shed to occur, the lizard must be housed at the preferred body temperature range and be fed on daily/alternate days.
- If the burns of reptiles have not healed sufficiently by March, due to depth or a late season fire, then the animal may need to be kept in care until the following September for release.