



LIVE IGUANA FOUND INSIDE DUMPSTER BEHIND PETCO IN WICHITA FALLS, TEXAS

The following is a statement by Mike Comella regarding the finding of a live iguana in the dumpster of the Petco pet store in Wichita Falls, TX:

I am the caretaker of an old farm property currently, and a wildlife rehabilitator who specializes in reptiles. I founded WFRR in 2006, and it began with an animal I rescued from Petco, bought with my own money, to get her out of there. She died only 3 days later because of severe emaciation. I primarily center on assistance to injured, ill, or displaced wild reptiles, however, the issue of indiscriminate live animal sales, such as the mill operations that big chain pet stores are in my opinion, is an area where I also advocate.

I found the iggy there because I frequent the area some days of the week in search of items to salvage, which Petco throws away. These could be perfectly good aquarium filter systems, 80lb of bird seed, or a cracked aquarium which would be easily repairable for a few dollars by purchasing a piece of plexiglas at Home Depot. Petco throws these items away for marginal issues at times, and they get credit as they write them off, but they then place them in the dumpster instead of turning these usable items over to a needy rescue organization. Most of the time they completely destroy the item, making it unusable, but every now and then I get lucky and find something I need and can use for the critters I rescue on a tight budget.

I found this iguana at approx 5:15pm on 9/7/12 when peeking in the dumpster. I found nothing of interest initially and was about to walk away, but as I picked up the box (which I thought to be empty), which was stated to have contained (2) iguanas, I saw something inside the nylon mesh moving around. It startled me at first and I was horrified. After quickly verifying that he wasn't suffering any visible external trauma and wasn't in immediate need of life saving medical care or euthanasia, I had the presence of mind to leave him right in the bag that I found him in, and I stepped 5ft over to my car to retrieve the camera. After the troubles I have had with this store over the years with regard to their, in my opinion, substandard treatment of animals (particularly reptiles), I knew that I had to document this right then...before I drove off...before I forgot to capture the scene as it was when I found him inside the Petco box.

I then took the iguana into the store with me, and confronted the on duty aquatics/reptile specialist about the matter. He seemed shocked, but stated he had "just clocked in". I then confronted the assistant store manager, Sarah, and she told me flatly and unapologetically, "...and I don't know that you didn't just put it in there [the dumpster]". I was livid and told her that I would be taking the matter to social media, and that it was an easy matter for corporate to call down and ask them to reconcile their all too convenient iguana shipment from that very day, with inventory on the floor, and their register transactions. These animals all have an item number, and such things would be reflected and make my case for me better than I could make it myself. Instead of seeking to get to the bottom of the matter, when confronted about a live animal in their dumpster, inadvertently or not, the management of this store sought to frame this as a hoax.

On my way out of the store, Sarah followed me to the parking lot to get my license plate number to report me to the police. For what exactly I have no idea. I informed them of an atrocity and they acted as if I were a criminal for bringing it to their attention.

After getting the little iguana home, I triaged him and found him to be a bit dehydrated and underweight, but active, alert, bright eyed, and in good shape, considering. Because he was in a steel dumpster when it was quite hot yesterday, I surmise he luckily couldn't have been in there for long. If a dog or a child can't withstand a hot car for very long, then neither can a baby iguana survive long inside a dark green steel dumpster. He got VERY lucky in my opinion.

After assessing him, I posted this matter to my Facebook page and YouTube in order to inform the public. One of my friends posted the video link to Petco's corporate Facebook page, and I am drawing up a formal complaint of my own. I have contacted an animal rights advocate attorney about the matter. This is only the beginning for me. I plan to ensure his story is told, just as the last one two weeks ago which was lost to neglect at the same store.

The best outcome for this situation, in my opinion, is wide distribution of this story to bring attention to the matter, and effect some changes...policy wise and personnel changes if that's what it takes to prevent a live animal from being cast into a dumpster like this again.

The little iguana so far appears fine, and last night he received a nice warm soak in shallow water. Iguanas are semi-aquatic and very much enjoy the water, not to mention he was a little dehydrated. He will be given my typical rehabilitative care for his slightly emaciated and dehydrated state, and I would give his prognosis as excellent - but only because he was found in time. He may be adopted in the near future, but iguanas can grow to be large and powerful animals, and are not suited to novice keepers, therefore, I typically only consider previously experienced iguana keepers for such adoptions. Any adopter will be required to pass an application process and fill out a contract.

Mike Comella
Wichita Falls Reptile Rescue