

Organizing an Aquarium **Pet Surrender Event**



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Information in this guide was adapted from Habitattitude, Be a Hero Release Zero, and aquarium pet surrender initiatives led by Wisconsin Sea Grant, Minnesota Sea Grant, Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant and the Illinois Natural History Survey. Event-specific recommendations reflect two aquarium pet surrender events held in Erie, Pennsylvania. The events were organized and hosted by Pennsylvania Sea Grant, the Erie Humane Society, and the Herps Alive Foundation.

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Questions about the guide or the process can be directed to Sara Stahlman at sstahlman@psu.edu.





Helping Aquarium Owners Find Long-Term Solutions for their Pet

Owning an aquarium can provide numerous benefits, both for personal enjoyment and overall well-being. However, for some species like turtles or goldfish, their size, longevity, and the expense to feed and care for them may prove challenging to some owners. Being a responsible pet owner means ensuring the pet is cared for its whole life. Organizing an aquarium pet surrender event, where the animal will be safely and responsibly rehomed, can be a helpful way to support pet owners who need to find a new home for their aquarium pet. Pet surrender events also help native species and the ecosystem, as they prevent aquarium pets from being released into the wild. Releasing aquarium pets into the wild can be detrimental to the pet, to the native species living there, and to the ecosystem.

This guide serves as a resource for anyone interested in organizing and hosting aquarium pet surrender events.



Introduction & Background

Aquariums and aquatic pets are very popular hobbies in the United States. In 2022, more than 11 million households owned freshwater fish, and 5 million owned reptiles such as turtles (spots.com pet owner statistics). Many of the brightly colored and attractive fish, turtles, crustaceans, plants, and other creatures purchased for aquariums are not native to Pennsylvania.

When owners decide they no longer want or can no longer care for the animals and plants in their aquariums, they often choose to do what they feel is the most humane option, releasing them into the natural environment. For many released animals, the new environment is unsuitable, and they can't survive. For released animals that do survive, they can establish reproducing populations and may cause harm to other organisms, becoming aquatic invasive species (AIS).

Aquatic invasive species (AIS) are non-native plants, animals, or pathogens that can cause harm to the environment, the economy, and human or animal health. They compete with native species by altering the food web and consuming valuable resources. They may also have negative impacts on water quality and the dynamics of natural ecosystems.

Preventing the spread of AIS is important because once introduced, these species are very difficult to control and manage, and can cost large amounts of time, money, resources, and lost revenue.

Currently, more than 150 aquarium species, such as goldfish, red-eared slider turtles, and plants like Hydrilla and Brazilian waterweed, have spread to new habitats in Pennsylvania after being released into waterways.

Most pet owners would prefer to find their pet a new home if they are not able to care for it. Unfortunately, finding a new home for aquarium pets can be difficult. A community-organized aquarium pet surrender event provides a safe and convenient alternative to releasing into the wild.

Purpose

This guide was designed as a tool to help individuals and organizations who may be interested in organizing and hosting an aquarium pet surrender event. Aquarium pet surrender events provide a convenient aquatic pet adoption or return option for owners with unwanted pets and avoids potentially harmful releases into the environment. The information presented is guidance only and should be adjusted as necessary.

What is an Aquarium Pet Surrender Event?

An aquarium pet surrender event is a collaboration between community partners that provides a safe and judgment-free option for pet owners to surrender their aquarium pets. Typically, it is a one-day event centered in a city or town at a readily accessible and familiar location. The event can be anywhere from two hours to a full day depending on staffing or volunteer capacity and availability of space. This guide focuses solely on surrender events for aquarium pets and plants.





Aquarium Pet Surrender Event Logistics

Securing **partnerships** is an important component in maximizing the value of the event and should lead to mutual benefit for all parties involved. These partners will shape the scope and public perception of the event, determine which species can be accepted, and how much public exposure the event will receive.

Partners may include entities that can take on one or more of the following roles:

- **Site Host** – Acts as a site host or location venue. May also be an organization which can accept, care for, and adopt out the surrendered animals.
- **Promotion and publicity** – Entities that can assist with promotion of the event through media and outreach, and education and outreach about AIS and the importance of the aquarium pet surrender campaigns. Media partners may include news and radio contacts, local Sea Grant programs, academic institutions, and other community groups. This is also an opportunity for volunteers to get involved and connect with the public.
- **Animal Welfare** – Staffing is necessary to ensure proper care of all surrendered animals during the event. Depending on the size and scale, organizers should consider assigning roles to expedite the process and ensure animal safety. This might include:
 - Identifier, or someone experienced enough to correctly identify species within each taxa
 - Handler, or individual experienced with handling a variety of species within a taxa to avoid injury to both humans and animals
 - Veterinarian and/or vet tech who can assess the health of each animal.

In some cases, these roles can overlap (e.g., individual volunteers or organizations able to identify species and have experience handling them), and one or more individuals or organizations may be needed of each role.

Sample list of partners

- Sea Grant
- Humane Society or other animal rescue group
- Local businesses
- Hobbyist clubs and societies
- Aquariums
- Zoos
- Environmental Learning Centers
- Flea markets
- Civic groups
- Public and Private Schools
- Girl and Boy scout troops
- Watershed organizations and other environmental non-profits
- News and Radio outlets
- Veterinary Hospitals



Surrender Event Considerations

a) Timing

Consider the seasonal timing of the surrender event to maximize participation and the number of pets being surrendered. Late spring, when college students are leaving dorm rooms and teachers are clearing out classrooms can be an ideal time for an aquarium pet surrender event. Students may have had dorm pets they can no longer care for, and teachers often have class pets they need to find homes for. Late summer or early fall can also be an ideal time to hold an event as students return to school, often leaving behind pets with parents or family members.

b) Location

Choose a convenient, easy to access location that is well known by the community. Examples can be animal shelters, nature centers, universities, aquarium clubs, local businesses, or connecting with existing community events in your area. Considerations when choosing a venue may include amount of foot traffic and access to regular visitors, ability to offer promotional assistance, capacity to house animals, traffic and visibility, and human capacity. For example, animal shelters are typically a well-known community asset, can assist with promotional efforts, and may be able to house and re-home surrendered animals. An Alternative to hosting a solo event would be to participate with existing community events. Doing so may help maximize promotions and visibility, save time and effort in finding a suitable location, and in organizing logistics. However, participating in an existing event may result in less control over the timing, location, and logistics.

c) Location set up

Setting up the event space will depend on the location, indoor or outdoor setting, available space, and partners in attendance. Consider the general flow of traffic at the host site and how your set up will appear to passersby. If the event is held in a public setting, this creates an opportunity for additional education about invasive species. A diagram of a sample location setup can be found in Appendix C.

d) Registration

Pre-Registration - Offering or requiring pre-registration, if feasible, helps organizers to plan in advance for logistics such as adequate staffing or volunteers, length of the event, and knowing the types of animals to anticipate. Pre-registration may involve registering online via a website or social media app, or by contacting the organizer electronically or by phone. Pre-registration can also reflect the success of promotional efforts, such as unique URLs or QR codes developed specifically for the event.

On-site registration - In conjunction with pre-registration, or as an alternate process, owners may be encouraged or allowed to simply walk in on the day of the event. This can be quickly and easily done by having owners complete a surrender form, including species information, reason for surrender, and age and length of time in owner's care.

A sample registration form is included in Appendix A.

Aquarium pet surrender surveys and forms - Aquarium pet surrender events, surrender surveys, and intake forms provide an opportunity to gather information about owner behavior and choices, to help plan future events, and gauge level of outreach and education needed to prevent the spread of invasive species.

A surrender form is a tool that can be used to collect program evaluation data and should be required for each participant. This form will collect relevant information about the animal being surrendered, why they are being surrendered, how they learned about the event, and any other relevant information event organizers would like to collect. Questions to ask participants may include,

- Why are you surrendering your pet(s)?
- How did you hear about the event?
- What might you have done with your pet, had this opportunity not been available?



Additional questions that measure owner knowledge and of invasive species before and after the event and any anticipated behavior change, may be helpful in planning future events and to gauge outreach or education needs. These questions can be included in the registration and intake forms, or as a separate survey. Examples of pet surrender surveys can be found in Appendix B.

e) Publicity

Once the partners have decided on a location and date for the event, planning should focus on promotion and owner participation.

Promotion may include issuing press releases to local earned media, paid advertising, social media posts, television and radio PSA's and interviews, and distributing or posting flyers or fact sheets to local universities, coffee shops, and other appropriate locations.

Promotional materials should include information for would-be participants, such as registration and guidelines, the types of aquarium pets that will be accepted, event-specific information, such as how they heard about the event and rationale for

participating can assist organizers when debriefing and planning for future surrender events.

Promotional mediums also make great tools for spreading general awareness about aquatic invasive species and prevention messages. Regardless of whether a surrender event brings in one pet, or 20, media promotions for the event will inevitably reach a broad and diverse audience, making it important to include the messages and information important for the audience to know.

If budget allows, investing in paid advertising through local news and radio stations offers a unique opportunity to expand the event's reach and include audiences that may not have access to social media. If paid advertising budget is an issue, consider asking local TV and radio stations to donate to the cause by running on-air or online public service announcements about the event.

Examples of a pet surrender forms, sample media post, and other logistics for hosting an event can be found in the "Tips and Tools for Hosting a Successful Pet Surrender Event" section of this guide.



Case Study: Erie Pet Amnesty Days

Partners/Organizers: Pennsylvania Sea Grant, Erie Humane Society, and the Herps Alive Foundation.

Timeframe: May 2021, through May 2023

Location: Erie, Pennsylvania

Roles:

Pennsylvania Sea Grant – led the event planning, promotions with news and media contacts, sharing social media promotions, education and outreach, development of do not release materials, and facilitation with girl scout troops to assist with community outreach.

Erie Humane Society – Event venue. Developed and promoted Facebook event, assisted with promotional efforts.

The Herps Alive Foundation – Identified types of pets considered for surrender, accepted surrendered pets, kept records of types of pets surrendered, handled rehoming and adoptions after the event.

Please Note:

These events took place during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Four aquarium pet surrender events took place at the Erie Humane Society in Erie, Pennsylvania. The first event, “Erie Pet Amnesty Day” was held on May 1, 2021, from 11 AM-3 PM. The Herps Alive foundation, a non-profit public charity dedicated to saving, rehabilitating, and caring for unwanted reptiles and amphibians, accepts the surrender of turtles, snakes, lizards, fish, and other aquarium pets. By simply filling out a surrender form, pet owners felt assured that their pets would be rehomed to responsible owners or would be cared for at the Herps Alive sanctuary until they found new homes.

To enhance education and outreach efforts, the pet surrender team partnered with local Girl Scout Troops to disseminate “Do Not Release” and “Habitattitude” campaign messages to local pet

stores and retail partners. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, these outreach interactions were unable to take place as planned. Instead, the girl scouts participated in an art contest centered around safe and responsible pet ownership. The artwork was displayed during the pet amnesty event and shared on Facebook and other social media platforms. This initial event resulted in a lot of media interest, including local news coverage at the event, an interview for NPR based out of Pittsburgh, and several other local news stories and publications.

This event resulted in two pet owners traveling from the Pittsburgh region to surrender two red-eared slider turtles and one large goldfish. While the initial turnout of surrenders was low, this event promoted local discussion with about the issue of pet release.





The partners organized a second aquarium pet surrender event on May 21, 2022. Prior to this event, Pennsylvania Sea Grant and project partners elevated promotional efforts by developing social media posts well in advance of the event, and releasing a YouTube video about the aquarium pets, the trade industry, and the impacts of releasing aquarium pets. Additionally, Pennsylvania Sea Grant purchased promotional television and radio spots and online advertisements with a local television station. This event ran similarly to the first, with Pennsylvania Sea Grant and Herps Alive setting up educational booths at the Erie Humane Society. While participants were encouraged to pre-register, walk-ins were also accepted. Ten individuals pre-registered for the event using the online registration option, and three walked in to surrender animals. A total of 17 surrendered pets, including multiple species of turtles, tortoises, and fish were turned over to Herps Alive. The owners expressed gratitude for having an option for pets that were either too large to care for, became too much of a commitment for them, or belonged to children who have since grown and went off to school.



On November 22, 2022, a third event was held. The main promotional strategy for this event included a Facebook Event page hosted by the Erie Humane Society and a series of social media posts shared by partners. Television and radio promotions were not used. There was a significant decline in the number of registrations, with one participant surrendering a large yellow-bellied slider.



A fourth event was held on May 6, 2023. During this event, 19 individual pets were surrendered from 10 participants. The species surrendered included six species of turtle (two yellow-bellied sliders, a river cooter, a musk turtle, a West African mud turtle, and an African helmeted turtle); a Russian tortoise, a Savannah monitor lizard, a snail, and 10 fish, most of them being goldfish. Reasonings for pet surrender were like previous events, with pets being too large to care for, the maintenance was too much to handle, they belonged to a loved one who had passed away, or to children who have since left home. For this event, a television ad was aired approximately two weeks prior to the event and 50% of participants claimed they heard about the event through this promotion.



Important reminders and reflections

Ensuring the public has a clear understanding of what types of animals will and will not be accepted is extremely important in preventing any confusion on the day of the event. Additional guidance, in advance of the event, should focus on safety measures for transporting pets to the event, such as plastic tubs or shoe boxes for turtles, and buckets for fish.

- Clarifying the types of pets that can be surrendered.
- It is important to remember that measuring the success of the event is not only focused on how many participants show up, or how many pets are surrendered, but by how much knowledge (and ultimately behavior change) was shared through education surrounding the event. While only three species were surrendered in the May 2021 surrender event in Erie, outreach from the event resulted in an NPR news interview, multiple articles, press coverage at the event, and members of the public reaching out with questions about their own pets.

Resources

Aquarium Pet Surrender Campaigns for responsible aquarium ownership

The following are public information campaigns designed to inform pet owners about the seriousness of AIS and provide alternatives to release. These campaigns also provide materials to help organize and publicize aquarium pet surrender events.



Habitattitude

Habitattitude is a national education campaign created by the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. It focuses on raising public awareness on invasive species issues to help consumers, industry, law enforcement, and natural resource managers make wise choices to protect the environment from invasive species related to aquarium species and water gardening. Habitattitude uses unified messages to provide alternatives to release, such as:

- Contact a retailer for proper handling advice or for possible returns
- Give/trade with another aquarist, pond owner, or water gardener
- Donate to a local aquarium society, school, or aquatic business
- Seal aquatic plants in plastic bags and dispose in the trash
- Contact a veterinarian or pet retailer for humane disposal guidance
- Know your state regulations regarding these alternatives

Be a Hero, Release Zero

Be a Hero, Release Zero is an education program developed by Illinois Indiana Sea Grant, the Illinois Natural History Survey, and the Prairie Research Institute provides water gardeners, aquarium owners, and teachers with information on AIS. While the program and information are based in Illinois, *Be a Hero, Release Zero* provides basic AIS information and alternative native species recommendations, and alternatives to release including resources for aquarium pet owners.

Aquatic Invaders in the Marketplace

Aquatic Invaders in the Marketplace is an educational program developed by Illinois Indiana Sea Grant and the Illinois Natural History Survey that provides individuals with the information and tools they need to help prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species commonly found in trade.

Don't Let it Loose

The Don't Let it Loose program is sponsored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is managed by the Invasive Species Action Network. It promotes rehoming information and educational resources for aquarium pet owners.

SEA GRANT RESOURCES

Preventing the Spread of Aquatic Invasive Species in Pennsylvania
Tips for Aquarium Owners



The aquarium industry is a very popular hobby in the United States. More than 13 million households maintain aquariums, and businesses such as medical offices and restaurants can account for thousands more. However, when owners decide they no longer want, or can no longer take care of the animals and plants in their aquariums, species are often released into the natural environment where they can establish and become invasive. It is important that aquarium owners understand the impacts that AIS can have and take actions to ensure these plants and animals are disposed of in a proper manner and are never released into the natural environment.

Aquatic invasive species (AIS) are non-native plants, animals, or pathogens that cause harm to the environment, the economy, and human or animal health. Preventing the spread of AIS is important because once introduced, these species disrupt ecosystems, reduce biodiversity, and cost communities huge amounts of time, money, resources, and lost revenue.

Many of the brightly colored and attractive fish, crustaceans, plants, and other creatures purchased for aquariums are exotic and not native to Pennsylvania. If released, they have the potential to become harmful invasive species. These releases can be intentional or unintentional. Unintentional introductions can occur if species escape and make their way into a water source. Intentional releases can occur if pet owners decide they can no longer care for their pets or plants, and think the most humane option is to release them into a local pond or river. Unfortunately, the intended good deed of releasing that species could have dire consequences for native species. Released species can often outcompete native species by altering the food chain and consuming valuable resources needed by native species. AIS also have negative impacts on water quality and have the ability to completely change the dynamics of natural ecosystems.



Photo courtesy of Shree Sri Sri Images.

Best Management Practices for aquarium owner's fact sheet

Preventing the Spread of Aquatic Invasive Species in Pennsylvania
Tips for Water Gardeners



Water gardening is becoming an increasingly popular hobby and is one of the fastest growing branches of the aquarium trade. While water gardens are beautiful and promote feelings of serenity and calm, they can also represent troubled waters as invasive species can often appear and be accidentally spread by water gardening activities. It is important that water gardeners understand the impacts that AIS can have and take actions to ensure these species don't spread while still enjoying their hobby.

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Invasive plants, snails, and fish often make attractive additions to water gardens; however, if released, they can become a huge problem. These species are often readily available for purchase at local retail outlets, by delivery from online sources, or hitchhike in the packing material, soil, or water accompanying your purchase. Unintentional introductions become more likely if a water garden is built near a natural body of water. Extreme weather events, such as heavy storms and flooding, can spread species as high waters and winds can carry plant fragments, debris, seeds, and even the species themselves to neighboring waterways. Invasive species are typically hardier, grow faster, reproduce often, and can outcompete native species and cause harm to ecosystems and the food web, and therefore should never be disposed of or released into a natural water system.

Water gardeners can unintentionally spread AIS when they unintentionally purchase an invasive species from retail stores. If built water gardens too close to a natural waterway, or if disposal of aquatic plants by preventing them into a natural waterway. By following a few simple steps, water gardeners can play an active role in reducing the spread of AIS (see other side).



Photo courtesy of Shree Sri Sri Images.

Best Management Practices for water gardener's fact sheet

INVASIVE REPTILES
Red-Eared Slider
Trachemys scripta elegans



The red-eared slider is a hardy freshwater turtle that is popular as an aquarium pet in the United States. It gets its name from the broad red stripes present behind each eye. Its popularity in the pet trade has helped account for its numerous introductions worldwide, and it is now designated as one of the "100 World's Worst Invaders".



Species Description
 The most distinguishing characteristic of the red-eared slider is the unique broad, reddish-orange patch or "ear" found behind each of the eyes. The shell is yellowish to dark green with black or off-white stripes. The skin is olive to brown in color with yellow stripes or spots. Adults can reach up to 30 cm (12 in) in length, and female sliders are typically larger than males. The species of turtle may be confused with the invasive yellow-bellied slider, which has a yellow patch behind each eye instead of red, or the native, red-bellied turtle, which has a distinctive orange to reddish color on the underside of the shell.



Native & Introduced Ranges
 The native range includes the Mississippi basin within the Gulf Coast basin and the Mississippi valley extending as far east as West Virginia. Since the 1970s, massive numbers of young turtles have been generated on turtle farms to be sold in the pet trade. In Pennsylvania, the first recorded occurrence of the red-eared slider was in 1995 in Lanthan County. This turtle can now be found in many counties across Pennsylvania.

Biology & Spread
 Red-eared sliders are the most commonly exported turtle species and are sold as hatchlings measuring over four inches in length. Adult sliders can reach lengths of up to 30 cm (12 in), and unsuspecting owners are rarely prepared to continue maintaining them in captivity at this size. The owners then dispose of them by releasing them into local waterways and impoundments, which has led to their introduction and spread into the natural environment. Besides doing harm to the ecosystem, this practice is illegal in Pennsylvania.

Fact sheets on red-eared sliders, goldfish, and other aquarium species





AIS Field Guide App



Habitattitude Table banners, floor banners, and other outreach materials

PENNSYLVANIA'S FIELD GUIDE TO
Aquatic Invasive Species



Sea Grant
 Pennsylvania

Aquatic Invasive Species Field Guide

To request copies of the Pennsylvania Aquatic Invasive Species Field Guide or other outreach materials available for loan, contact paseagrant@psu.edu.

Appendix

Preventing the Spread of Aquatic Invasive Species in Pennsylvania

Tips for Aquarium Owners



Photo courtesy of Wikipedia Commons via Encyclopedia of Life

The aquarium industry is a very popular hobby in the United States. More than 13 million households maintain aquariums, and businesses such as medical offices and restaurants can account for thousands more. However, when owners decide they no longer want, or can no longer take care of the animals and plants in their aquariums, species are often released into the natural environment where they can establish and become invasive. It is important that aquarium owners understand the impacts that AIS can have and take actions to ensure these plants and animals are disposed of in a proper manner and are never released into the natural environment.

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Many of the brightly colored and attractive fish, crustaceans, plants, and other creatures purchased for aquariums are exotic and not native to Pennsylvania. If released, they have the potential to become harmful invasive species. These releases can be intentional or unintentional. Unintentional introductions can occur if species escape and make their way into a water source. Intentional releases can occur if pet owners decide they can no longer care for their pets or plants, and think the most humane option is to release them into a local pond or river. Unfortunately, the intended good deed of releasing that species could have



Photo courtesy of iStock by Getty Images.

dire consequences for native species. Released species can often outcompete native species by altering the food chain and consuming valuable resources needed by native species. AIS also have negative impacts on water quality and have the ability to completely change the dynamics of natural ecosystems.

Appendix A: Best Management Practices for aquarium owner's fact sheet



HABITATTITUDE™
 PROTECT OUR ENVIRONMENT
www.habitattitude.net

Many aquarium species, such as goldfish, red-eared sliders, and numerous aquarium plants like Hydrilla and Brazilian waterweed have already made their way into Pennsylvania waters. National campaigns such as *Habitattitude™* provide alternatives for releasing unwanted aquarium pets and plants. By following these simple steps, aquarium owners can help prevent further release of these species and play an active role in preventing the spread of AIS.



Photo courtesy of Jon Sullivan, Biolb.cv via Encyclopedia of Life.

Alternatives to Release:

- 1 Contact a retailer for proper handling advice or for possible returns.
- 2 Give/trade with another aquarist, pond owner, or water gardener, or donate to a local aquarium society, school, or aquatic business. If your plant or animal finds a new home with one of these locations, be sure to emphasize “Don’t Release” into the environment.
- 3 Seal aquatic plants in plastic bags and dispose in trash. These materials should not be composted because their seeds and other plant parts may spread.
- 4 Contact a veterinarian or pet retailer for guidance about humane disposal of animals. Disposal of live organisms should be considered as the last resort.

Photo courtesy of Pennsylvania Sea Grant.



References:

Alternatives to Releasing Unwanted Aquarium Pets: *Habitattitude™*

Where to report new invasive species infestations: Sea Grant online reporting form

Pennsylvania Sea Grant AIS fact sheets:

Aquatic invasive species mapping in Pennsylvania: iMap Invasives

Additional AIS information: Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission
 Wildlife Forever

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Pennsylvania Sea Grant is a partnership of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Pennsylvania State University, 2023.

Preventing the Spread of Aquatic Invasive Species in Pennsylvania Tips for Water Gardeners



Photo courtesy of iStock by Getty Images.

Water gardening is becoming an increasingly popular hobby and is one of the fastest growing branches of the aquarium trade. While water gardens are beautiful and promote feelings of serenity and calm, they can also represent troubled waters as invasive species can often appear and be accidentally spread by water gardening activities. It is important that water gardeners understand the impacts that AIS can have and take actions to ensure these species don't spread while still enjoying their hobby.

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Invasive plants, snails, and fish often make attractive additions to water gardens; however, if released, they can become a huge problem. These species are often readily available for purchase at local retail outlets, by delivery from online sources, or hitchhike in the packing material, soil, or water accompanying your purchase. Unintentional introductions become more likely if a water garden is built near a natural body of water. Extreme weather events, such as heavy storms and flooding, can spread species as high waters and winds can carry plant fragments, debris, seeds, and even the species themselves to neighboring waterways. Invasive species are typically hardier, grow faster, reproduce often, and can outcompete native species



Photo courtesy of iStock by Getty Images.

and cause harm to ecosystems and the food web, and therefore should never be disposed of or released into a natural water system.

Water gardeners can unintentionally spread AIS when they 1) unknowingly purchase an invasive species from retail stores; 2) build water gardens too close to a natural waterway, or 3) dispose of aquatic plants by releasing them into a natural waterway. By following a few simple steps, water gardeners can play an active role in preventing the spread of AIS (see other side).

When Constructing a New Water Garden:

Choose a location away from natural waterways and flood-prone areas. *This will help ensure that the plants and animals in the water garden will not be carried into local streams, ponds, or lakes as a result of heavy rainfall.*

When Adding Plants:

Purchase from licensed nurseries. Many jurisdictions require that the license be posted. If the license isn't clearly visible, ask an employee about their licensing.

Choose regionally-native or non-invasive plants. *This will reduce the amount of plant-removal (i.e., weeding) needed to maintain the garden while also reducing the risk to nearby waterways should any plants be moved by wind, animals, flooding, etc.*

Check with your state natural resource agency to confirm which plants to avoid for your region. *Many states maintain regulated invasive species lists.*

Rinse plants in a bucket before planting. Remove all dirt and any attached debris including other vegetation, animals, or eggs before planting; dump bucket water on dry land. Strain debris from water before dumping and dispose of debris in a plastic bag. *This will help keep unwanted plants and animals from being accidentally introduced into the water garden, and keep these same organisms out of storm drains that might lead to natural waterways.*

When Doing Maintenance:

Check that the water garden remains isolated from natural waterways and areas that flood. *If this is not the case, the above recommendations regarding plant choice and rinsing are even more critical; installation of standard landscape water diverting structures (i.e., water bars, swales) or relocation of the water garden should be considered.*

Remove uninvited plants that colonize your pond. *A plant that moves into your pond and becomes established is likely an invasive species. It should be removed and disposed of properly (see below).*

Freeze unwanted plants in a sealed plastic bag and dispose in the trash. *Unwanted plants should not be composted because their seeds and other reproductive plant parts may remain viable.*

Find a new home for unwanted fish such as a pet retailer, animal shelter, or other water gardener. *If your animal finds a home with another water gardener, make sure that it won't be released into the environment in the future. If euthanasia is an option, consult with a veterinarian.*



Photo courtesy of iStock by Getty Images.

References:

Prevention steps for water gardeners

Where to report new invasive species infestations:
Sea Grant online reporting form

Aquatic invasive species in Pennsylvania

Aquatic invasive species mapping in Pennsylvania:
iMap Invasives

Additional AIS information:
Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission
Wildlife Forever

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Pennsylvania Sea Grant is a partnership of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Pennsylvania State University, 2023.



Copy of Erie Pet Amnesty Day Registration

Be a Hero, Release Zero! Fill out this registration form to safely and responsibly surrender your aquarium pets on Saturday, May 6, 2023, from 11:00 AM- 2:00 PM at the Erie Humane Society. We will be accepting fish, turtles, amphibians, snakes, lizards, and other aquarium pets.

1. First Name	7. Which species do you intend to surrender at this event? (you may choose more than one)
2. Last Name	<input type="radio"/> Fish
3. Address	<input type="radio"/> Turtle
4. Phone Number	<input type="radio"/> Snake
5. E-mail Address	<input type="radio"/> Frog
6. How many pets do you intend to surrender?	<input type="radio"/> Snail
<input type="radio"/> 1	<input type="radio"/> Crocodilian
<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> Crayfish
<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> Lizard
<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> Other
<input type="radio"/> 5+	Other (please specify)
	<input type="text"/>
	8. Briefly describe the pet(s) you intend to surrender. Include information such as species or type, size, gender (if known), and any other details you would like to share.
	<input type="text"/>

Appendix C: Sample Registration Form

Copy of Erie Pet Amnesty Day Registration

9. Please indicate the reason(s) for surrendering your pet that most closely resonates with you. This question is optional; however, the information will be used to help us in finding a suitable new home for your pet.

- I no longer have the space for my pet
- This was my child's pet
- I didn't realize how long my pet would live
- The maintenance of this pet is too much to handle
- This pet is aggressive
- Cannot afford veterinary costs
- Other

Other (please specify)

10. In which time slot would you prefer to surrender your pet(s) on Saturday, May 6, 2023?

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> 11:00 | <input type="radio"/> 12:30 |
| <input type="radio"/> 11:10 | <input type="radio"/> 12:40 |
| <input type="radio"/> 11:20 | <input type="radio"/> 12:50 |
| <input type="radio"/> 11:30 | <input type="radio"/> 1:00 |
| <input type="radio"/> 11:40 | <input type="radio"/> 1:10 |
| <input type="radio"/> 11:50 | <input type="radio"/> 1:20 |
| <input type="radio"/> 12:00 | <input type="radio"/> 1:30 |
| <input type="radio"/> 12:10 | <input type="radio"/> 1:40 |
| <input type="radio"/> 12:20 | <input type="radio"/> 1:50 |

**Herps Alive Foundation
1687 Lee Road
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118
216-374-1392**

OWNER NAME:

ADDRESS:

CITY, STATE, ZIP:

PHONE:

SPECIES:

AGE AND SIZE:

IDENTIFYING MARKS OR INJURIES:

IS THE ANIMAL NATIVE TO THE STATE OF OHIO?

IS THE ANIMAL ENDANGERED OR SUBJECT TO ANY FEDERAL OR INTERNATIONAL LAW?

IF SO, IS THE ANIMAL CURRENTLY LICENSED AND/OR MICROCHIPPED OR PIT TAGGED?

HOW, WHEN AND WHERE WAS ANIMAL ACQUIRED?

IS THIS ANIMAL COMING TO THE HERPS ALIVE FOUNDATION AS A SPONSORED OR SANCTUARY ANIMAL?

REASON FOR SURRENDER

This signature gives title of the above described animal to the Herps Alive Foundation

DATE OF INTAKE:

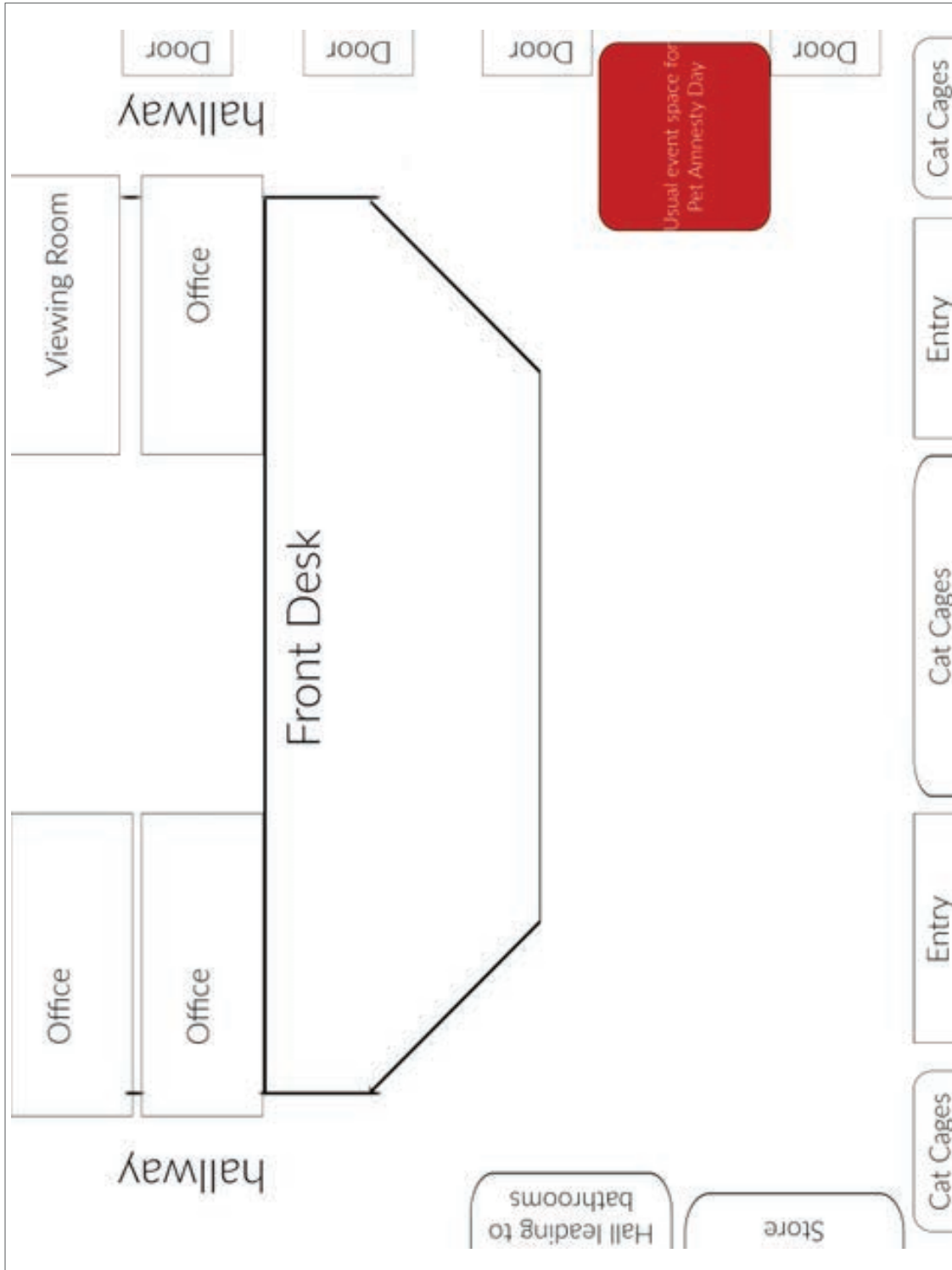
SURRENDERING OWNER:

BY (Print)

SIGNATURE FOR HERPS ALIVE FOUNDATION

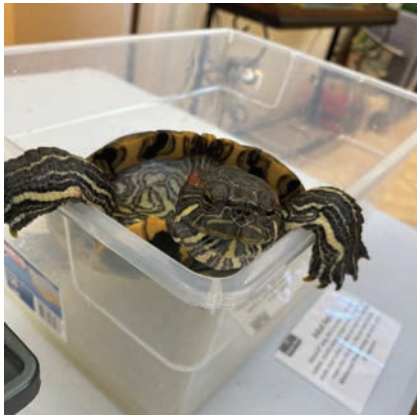

SIGNATURE

Appendix D: Sample Pet Surrender Form



Appendix E: Sample Site Layout

APPENDIX CONTINUED

Pet Amnesty Day Social Media Posts Spring 2023	
Post	Photo
<p>DON'T LET IT LOOSE! Aquarium pet rehoming event – May 6, 2023, 11am-2pm, Erie Humane Society</p> <p>Did you know that owning an aquarium is the second most popular hobby in the United States? When fish, turtles, and other aquarium pets become too large, or the owner can't care for them, they are often released into the wild. This video highlights the various ways that aquarium pets and plants impact the environment after release.</p> <p>Organized by Pennsylvania Sea Grant, The Erie Humane Society, and Herps Alive</p> <p>Register for Pet Amnesty Day here:</p> <p>Or visit the event for more information:</p>	<p>PASG Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBi6-V87IJY</p>
<p>BE A HERO – RELEASE ZERO! Aquarium pet rehoming event – May 6, 2023, 11am-2pm, Erie Humane Society</p> <p>If you are an aquarium pet owner and need to rehome your pet – register today for the next Pet Amnesty Day. There is NO FEE to safely rehome your pet through this event.</p> <p>Organized by Pennsylvania Sea Grant, The Erie Humane Society, and Herps Alive</p> <p>Register for Pet Amnesty Day here:</p> <p>Or visit the event for more information:</p>	 <p>ALT TEXT: Red-eared slider turtle in a plastic container, on its way to finding a new home at an aquarium pet surrender event</p>
<p>AQUARIUM PET OWNERS – surrender opportunity – Erie, PA – May 6 – NO FEE</p> <p>Don't release – rehome instead! It's the humane thing to do – Register today to rehome your aquarium pets safely and responsibly.</p> <p>Register TODAY! There is NO Fee</p> <p>Organized by Pennsylvania Sea Grant, The Erie Humane Society, and Herps Alive</p> <p>Register for Pet Amnesty Day here:</p>	 <p>ALT TEXT: Don't release, rehome instead! Safely and responsibly rehome your aquarium pet at the next Aquarium Pet Surrender Event on May 6.</p>

Appendix F: Sample Social Media Guide



Over 20 Years of Coastal and Great
Lakes Research, Education and
Extension Programs in Pennsylvania

May 16, 2022
Contact: Sara Stahlman, Sng121@psu.edu

BE A HERO – RELEASE ZERO – AQUARIUM PETS, THAT IS
Erie Pet Amnesty Day avoids release of unwanted aquarium pets through re-homing

May 21, 2022
11:00 AM – 3:00 PM

Erie Humane Society, 2407 Zimmerly Road, Erie, PA 16506

(ERIE, PA) – The Erie Pet Amnesty Day will provide a safe, convenient, and humane alternative for pet owners to surrender unwanted aquarium pets including fish, turtles, amphibians, lizards and other aquarium animals, so that release into the environment is never considered. Pennsylvania Sea Grant, the Erie Humane Society, and Herps Alive Foundation are hosting the Erie Pet Amnesty Day, to encourage the connection between responsible pet ownership and environmental stewardship. Aquarium pets may be surrendered on Saturday, May 21, 2022, from 11:00 AM to 3:00 PM, at the Erie Humane Society located at 2407 Zimmerly Road. [Register today to surrender a pet.](#)

The goal of the effort is to offer a safe and environmentally friendly alternative to releasing aquarium pets, which can result in the introduction and spread of aquatic and terrestrial invasive species. Invasive species are non-native plants, animals, or pathogens that cause harm to the environment, the economy, and human or animal health. An aquarium pet can become an invasive species when an owner releases it into the wild, where it is not natively found, and where it may prey on and out compete native species. Releasing a pet into the wild may seem like the most humane action for owners who are no longer able to care for their pet due to size, behavior, health, or some other reason, but there are alternatives. The event organizers hope to reach pet owners by providing an alternative that is safe for the pet and for the environment.

The aquarium trade, and home aquariums are the second most popular hobby in the United States and are unfortunately one of the primary ways AIS are spread into local waterways and lakes. Over 150 of these 'pet' species have already found their way to non-native habitats worldwide.

One example is the red-eared slider turtle, which is the most popular turtle for sale in the United States. When purchased, these tiny turtles capture the hearts of many children and adults who are unaware that their new pet can grow to be over 10 inches in diameter and live for more than 25 years in captivity. The Red-eared slider's unfortunate fate is often to be released into local lakes and waterways, where they do not belong, and where they take over the food sources and habitats of native turtles such as the Painted turtle.

For more information about invasive species, visit Pennsylvania Sea Grant online at <http://seagrant.psu.edu>.



Sample Supply List:

- 2-3 tables
- Table covers
- Habitattitude banners and floor displays
- AIS outreach materials (watch cards, fact sheets, tip cards, etc.)
- Sample specimens
- Give-away items (pencils, magnets, stickers, temporary tattoos, etc.)
- Pens
- Hand Sanitizer
- Snacks and water
- Rubber bands
- Notepads/paper
- Paper Clips
- Masking Tape
- Pins
- Business cards

(May be supplied by the surrender organization)

- Buckets
- Aquariums
- Nets
- Extra fish/turtle food
- Surrender Forms
- Donations bucket

Appendix H: Sample Supply List

References

Aquatic Invaders in the Marketplace. 2016. < <http://takeaim.org/>>.

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Habitattitude. 2022. < <https://www.habitattitude.net/>>

Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and Prairie Research Institute. 2017. *Protocol for Hosting an Aquatic Animal Surrender Event*. [White paper].

Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and Prairie Research Institute. 2021. *Be a Hero, Release Zero: Fight the Spread of Aquatic Invaders* < <https://www.transportzero.org/release-zero.html>>.

Pet Ownership Statistics. 2022. <<https://spots.com/pet-ownership-statistics/>>



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