

Exotic animals are *not* pets

Monkeys, skunks, crocodiles, hedgehogs and porcupines. All animals you may expect to see on a wildlife programme – but in someone's home? These are just some of the many different species traded in the UK as 'exotic pets'.

More than 1,000 species of exotic animals are kept by private keepers in the UK, outnumbering the range of traditional domesticated species such as cats and dogs and making exotic animals (those who are non-native and non-domesticated) the fastest growing sector in the UK pet market.

One study found over 150 big cats (including 12 lions and 14 tigers), 500 monkeys and 250 poisonous snakes licensed to private keepers in the UK.

Where do the animals come from?

Worldwide, an estimated 4 million birds, 640,000 reptiles, 40,000 primates and 350 million tropical fish are recorded in trade each year.

Although some are bred in captivity, many are still taken from the wild: as many as 84% of all live reptiles imported into the UK in 2003 were wild-caught. Over 95% of marine fish are similarly taken from the wild.

Animals are sold through adverts in local newspapers, animal keeper magazines, even specialist websites selling big cats, zebras and anteaters. People buying these animals don't always know where they are from, with some, including alligators and monkeys, being handed over from car boots at motorway service stations.

The sale of exotic pets over the internet is growing and is virtually impossible to properly regulate. Pretty much any animal can be bought this way, the vast majority without showing that the buyer is capable of caring for the needs of the animal. A 2008 investigation concluded that illegal wildlife transactions via the internet are rife because of a lack of enforceable legislation and weak monitoring. The trade in live exotic birds "accounted for nearly 20% of total activity identified in this investigation, and was second only to the trade in elephant ivory".



A growing problem

Many exotic animals are bought when they are young – and small! But before long they grow large and unmanageable. A rock python can grow up to 5 metres, an iguana to 1.5 metres and a terrapin over 30cm. A small tank soon becomes useless; even a whole room can't provide the space these animals need.

With parrots living for 80 years, snakes and monkeys for 30 and an iguana for 20 years, few people can provide a lifetime of responsible care. Many exotic animals are passed from home to home, never receiving adequate care or a stable environment. In the wild, primates spend their entire lives in the company of others, something human owners cannot provide. Many primates in private homes don't even have the company of another of their species.

Welfare concerns

Promoters of exotic pets often claim they are simple to care for, with reptiles described as "perfect for people with busy lives as you don't need to take them for a walk or need a lot of space for them to live in". However, every species is highly adapted for its own unique environment and occupies a specialised place in the ecosystem and a human home cannot provide for all of the animals' needs.

Reptiles can suffer respiratory diseases, fungal infections, rickets, and mouth-rot from incorrect humidity and insufficient light. Many are burned because of the misuse of lamps and other heat sources. Even basic provisions can be life-threatening: the wrong litter used in enclosures can be fatal if ingested.

Malnutrition has been found in up to 15% of pet reptiles and most reptile and bird cases seen by vets are associated with poor husbandry.





Pet shops

Most people obtain their exotic animals from pet shops, yet the standards of care and advice to customers is often highly inadequate.

An RSPCA study found:

- 16% of pet shops questioned about their sale of exotic pets said the animals did not get ill;
- 68% did not ask whether the person had experience of this kind of animal;
- 60% did not provide care advice to people with no experience of keeping the animal before.

Another RSPCA survey in 2008 found that only about one-third of surveyed shops provided free information for new owners on how to care for the animals and this dropped to just 7% when sheets provided by a major pet chain are discounted.

A study of pet shops in Scotland found that more than half kept animals that showed abnormal behaviours, an indication of poor welfare.

"It is virtually impossible to replicate the environmental conditions found in the wild for tortoises kept in captivity."

RSPCA Report: Shell shock: the continuing illegal trade in tortoises

A survey of tortoises imported into pet shops showed that within the first year an average of 26.5% died. Within 4 years 92% were dead. They died when owners were unable to provide the environmental conditions they need to survive.

It's not just reptiles who suffer, of course. 90% of birds presented to a Scottish veterinary school suffered from vitamin deficiency as a result of unsuitable diet. Parrots often self-mutilate because their full range of needs are not being met. A leading bird behaviourist comments: "Self-plucking, nervousness, biting and screaming for attention are often caused by the bird being frustrated and misunderstood."

Hedgehogs, a popular exotic pet, are afflicted by a fatal nervous system problem caused by intensive breeding, affecting 10% of African hedgehogs kept as pets in the USA.

Natural sunlight is essential to the health of primates and, with many kept indoors, they may suffer tooth decay, abscesses and rickets. Some have their canine teeth removed to stop them biting or are castrated to prevent aggression, leaving them physically and psychologically damaged.

Primates are taken from their mothers at a young age in order to get them used to handling by humans for onward sale. During a CAPS study, investigators were offered monkeys as young as six weeks old; one baby marmoset was advertised as "just started eating solids".

Many of the animals sold in the pet trade are normally social species, yet are kept individually. Sugar gliders, a small marsupial, are very social and, if they are not given enough attention, may self-mutilate or die from the stress of loneliness.

Few vets have the specialised knowledge to either treat exotic animals or advise owners on their care. Many refuse to treat primates because of

the disease risks. Those vets that do specialise are few and far between – and expensive. With reptiles being sold as cheap pets to keep, how likely is it that people can afford, or want to pay for, specialist treatment?

Snatched from the wild

During the capture of marine fish, those with spines may have them clipped to prevent injuries to others. They spend several days in plastic bags before being taken to holding tanks. Starved for 48 hours, some will be shipped via several countries before reaching their end destination. Between 40-80% die on the long journey from the collector to exporter.

Prior to an EU-wide ban on imports of wild-caught birds in 2007, up to 75% of birds died before reaching their final destinations because of poor handling or disease.

Captive-bred is not the solution

Animals bred in captivity still suffer the same welfare problems as those taken from the wild and are just as likely to be abandoned once the novelty wears off or owners can't keep up with the expense and commitment.

Captive-bred is not the same as domesticated and these animals are still damaged by their confinement. They have the same instincts and needs as those born in the wild.

"Parrots are not domesticated creatures and even captive-bred birds retain all their wild-type behavioural needs. In the wild, parrots live as pairs within a large flock but captive parrots often live alone, are caged and denied flight."

Greg Glendell, bird behaviourist

Abandoned

Exotic pets are about following the latest craze. *Mutant Ninja Turtles* sparked the novelty of keeping red-eared terrapins, *Harry Potter* films started a craze for owls and *Finding Nemo* caused a surge of people wanting to keep tropical clownfish.

When the excitement of an exotic pet fades, or owners realise how difficult and expensive it is to care for them, many animals are abandoned. Some are handed over to rescue centres, others simply released. The RSPCA deals with more than 5,000 calls about exotic animals a year.

There are numerous stories of animals, such as degus and red-eared

terrapins, being released, many dying because they can't find suitable food or cannot survive in the unnatural climate and habitat.

Damaging conservation

The capture of animals from the wild for sale to the exotic pet trade has devastating implications.

Coral reefs are sometimes damaged to reach fish and cyanide is still used to stun and capture tropical fish, killing others. Some of the fish caught play important roles in their ecosystems (removing parasites from other fish or feeding on algae) and their removal can damage the ecology of coral reefs.

The Oscar-winning film Finding Nemo has been held responsible for an increase in the purchase of clownfish as pets, with the result that populations in the wild have fallen by 75% in some areas in the five years since the movie first came out.

"If the UK is seen to tolerate (or even encourage) the keeping and trading of primates at home, this will weaken efforts to end hunting and trade in primate range states, which include many of the world's poorest nations. How can we call on these countries to clamp down on the trade and keeping of primates as pets, while a rich country such as the UK is openly tolerating it?"

Ian Redmond, Chief Consultant to the UN's Great Ape Survival Project

The rarity of a species is often used as a selling point, with dealers urging potential buyers to purchase the most endangered species. After a smuggler was caught in Madagascar with 300 tortoises, a government official said: "If buyers continue to exist, then collectors will continue to exist in Madagascar."

Even the legal trade in captive-bred animals can create a market for taking animals from the wild, when demand outstrips supply.

Disease Risks

"The global trade in wildlife provides disease transmission mechanisms that not only cause human disease outbreaks but also threaten livestock, international trade, rural livelihoods, native wildlife populations, and the health of ecosystems."

Wildlife Conservation Society, USA

Around 75% of the emerging diseases affecting people are zoonotic (transmitted from animals to humans). 50 million people worldwide were infected with zoonotic diseases between 2000 and 2006 and as many as 78,000 have died.

Most wildlife, whether wild-caught or captive-bred, arrives in a country with minimal disease screening and some species, including reptiles and amphibians, are not subject to quarantine regulations. Chytridiomycosis, a fungal disease identified as a major cause of the extinction of 30% of amphibian species worldwide, has been spread by the international trade in African clawed frogs.

However, even an improvement in quarantine and post-arrival screening are not necessarily feasible or practical to use on the large volume of animals that are being imported. Disease experts believe that:

"Ultimately, import restrictions may be the only means of preventing introduction of exotic infections."

It's not just diseases that put people at risk. Many of the animals traded are dangerous in other ways, becoming aggressive as they grow older and causing injuries through bites and scratches.

A number of infectious agents have been spread globally by the wildlife trade. 80-90% of all macaque monkeys are infected with Herpes B virus, which is shed particularly during periods of stress. It is harmless to them but often fatal to humans. To protect the public from attacks and exposure to zoonoses, the US National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians recommended banning the breeding and sale of primates as pets.

Avian diseases

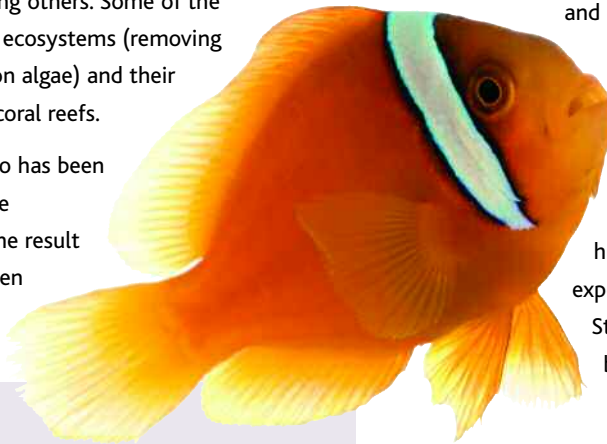
The H5N1 strain of avian influenza (bird flu) caused a "very real" "prospect of a global pandemic" not only for birds, but humans too", with around 250 confirmed human deaths over a four-year period.

Bird flu reached the UK in 2005, with birds imported from Taiwan to a major UK dealer being the most likely source of the virus, leading to a ban on bird imports for the pet trade across Europe, although the illegal trade in birds, and imports for non-commercial purposes, ensures the risk remains.

Other risks include psittacosis (parrot fever), primarily transmitted by inhalation of contaminated faecal dust, which can be spread on contaminated clothing between people as well as from birds to humans. The disease is most commonly encountered after recent importation or moving of premises, when birds are stressed and weakened and in humans can lead to severe pneumonia and non-respiratory health problems.

Salmonella

Salmonella is often associated with eating undercooked food, but exotic pets are also an important risk factor in the illness which causes diarrhoea, fever and abdominal cramps, even death. 11% of salmonella illnesses in young people in the USA – 74,000 cases annually – are thought to stem from direct and indirect contact with reptiles and amphibians.



Public health authorities recommend against keeping reptiles as pets in households that include children and people with compromised immune systems (particularly pregnant women and the elderly). In 2000, the Chief Medical Officer for England issued a warning when a three-week-old baby died after contracting salmonella and five other children became ill from the families' pet reptiles.

The UK's Health Protection Agency even discovered cases of salmonella in breast and formula fed infants, stating: "it is unlikely that they acquired their infection from a source other than indirectly, via the parents, from the family's pet reptile".

A law prohibiting the sale of small turtles in the USA has been described as "the most effective public health action" to prevent salmonella outbreaks associated with turtles, preventing an estimated 100,000 cases in children annually.

Monkeypox

Monkeypox is a rare disease related to smallpox, usually occurring in rainforest countries of Central and West Africa. It causes rashes and fevers, with death rates from 1-10%. There is no proven, safe treatment for humans.

In 2003, the first documented outbreak of monkeypox in the western hemisphere was reported in the USA. Within months, there were over 70 cases of the disease and at least 14 people were hospitalised.

Most patients became ill after buying prairie dogs as pets. The prairie dogs, captured in South Dakota, had been housed together with Gambian giant rats, imported from Ghana, at an exotic animal shop.

An immediate embargo was placed on the importation of all rodents from Africa and the transportation or sale of prairie dogs and some African rodents was prohibited. The EU also banned imports of prairie dogs from the US and rodents from sub-Saharan Africa following the outbreak.

Case Studies

Capuchin monkey **Joey** was taken from the wild as a baby and spent the next nine years living on his own in a tiny cage in London. He had never been outside or seen another monkey since he was three months old. An inappropriate diet and lack of sunshine resulted in his bones never forming properly. He suffers from a curved spine, jaw and teeth problems and displaced hips. Joey now lives at the Monkey Sanctuary Trust in Cornwall where, despite his physical and social problems, he is learning fast and his lust for life is a joy to watch.



Pressy, an African Grey parrot, once flew free in a flock in Central West Africa until being caught for the pet trade. The physical trauma incurred during capture/import resulted in a prolapsed eye lid. Sold in an English pet shop, he lived in a small cage and solely on a poor quality seed diet. This treatment resulted in muscle weakness, malnutrition and subsequent disease. Pressy was fortunate enough to end up at New Life Parrot Rescue. Through appropriate treatment and good care (including three operations to remove tumours) he is now enjoying good health and the companionship of another African Grey parrot.

Born to be wild

The trade in wildlife as exotic pets brings with it a great deal of misery and death. It will exist as long as there is a market for these animals, bought and sold as novelty creatures.

Help us to prevent this cruelty: don't buy exotic animals as pets.

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