

Exotic Animals as Pets



Would you keep a cat in a fish bowl? Or a hamster in a horse stable? Would you feed rabbit chow to your dog, or try to train a snake to sit? Yes, these are silly-even dangerous-things to do. Unfortunately, people are doing something similar when they keep exotic animals as pets.

Honey bears, sugar gliders, corn snakes, green iguanas, black panthers, rosy boas, flying squirrels, bearded dragons, veiled chameleons, spotted pythons, leopard geckos, even poison dart frogs and pot-bellied pigs-these are just some of the exotic animals people sell as pets. It may be easy to buy an exotic animal, but it is not a good idea. It is bad for the animals, bad for us, and bad for the environment. And although it may be borderline legal to sell some of these animals, in many places it is illegal to buy them.

IT'S BAD FOR THE ANIMALS

Experts believe that it took at least five thousand-perhaps more than ten thousand-years for wolves to evolve into dogs. So, there are thousands of years of difference between a wild and a domestic animal. Domesticated animals such as dogs and cats don't do well without people, and wild and exotic animals don't do well with people.

In addition, the little we do know of the needs of exotic animals shows us that we simply cannot meet these needs in captivity. Many monkeys, birds, and wild cats, for example, can all travel several miles in a single day. A walk on a leash through the park won't cut it. Since the vast majority of people who keep exotic animals cannot meet their needs, the animals may be caged, chained, or even beaten into submission. Sometimes, people will have an animal's teeth or claws removed, so that the animal can't harm the owner even when he does struggle.

Malnutrition, stress, trauma, and behavioral disorders are common in exotics kept as pets. Unfortunately, getting medical care is extremely difficult-and not just because it may be illegal to have them. For one, many exotic animals hide symptoms of illness. And even when illness is suspected, finding a proper vet could require a visit to the zoo. It's not easy to find a vet to treat your sugar glider's salmonella or your lemur's herpes!

IT'S BAD FOR US

As one dealer put it, "If it walks, crawls, slithers or flies, chances are we have it." That's true of diseases, too. Estimates vary, but experts agree that at least one in three reptiles harbors salmonella and shigella. The percent of reptiles with salmonella is probably 77 to 90 percent. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says that 90 percent of imported green iguanas carry "some strain of intestinal bacteria."

Renquist and Whitney (1987) give an excellent summary of many of the diseases that primates alone can transmit to people. They report that up to 25 percent of both imported and domestically bred macaques have or have had herpes B.

A partial list of diseases that exotic animals can infect humans with are: chlamydia, giardia, hepatitis A, rabies, ringworm, tuberculosis, measles, monkey pox, marburg virus, molloscum contagiosum, dermatophytosis, candidiasis, streptothricosis, yaba virus, campylobacteriosis, klebsiella, amebiasis, as well as infections from various nematodes, cestodes, and arthropods. Although some of these diseases are not life-threatening, some are very serious, even fatal.

If the bugs don't hurt us, the bites will. Exotic animals, by definition, are not domesticated. Exotic animals are unpredictable. Their behavior may change with seasons or life cycles in ways we don't understand. They rarely bond with their owners. Pet primates, big cats and reptiles have attacked and seriously injured their owners, unsuspecting neighbors and bystanders.

IT'S BAD FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Where do exotic animals come from? It is very hard to breed most exotic pets in captivity-one of the many tell-tale signs that even experts don't understand what these animals need. To meet the demands of those who keep exotic animals as pets, dealers often have to take the animals from their native lands. This disrupts the ecosystems they are stolen from, and can disrupt the ecosystems they are taken to, if they escape or are set loose.

Most people who buy exotic animals have no idea what they're getting into. Eventually, the owner may realize it is impossible to meet the animal's needs, and come to understand the inherent cruelty of keeping the animal captive. Even the most well-meaning person can become frustrated after trying to meet to high demands and special needs of a "pet" monkey for 30 years. But, what can a person do? Most shelters aren't equipped to handle exotic animals. Reputable zoos won't take them-and the dealer won't take the animal back! There are a few sanctuaries for exotic animals, but space is very limited.

In the face of so few options, some people will set the animal loose-which is dangerous and illegal. The animal can spread diseases to native species, or could kill native animals and free-roaming pets. Setting the animal loose is also cruel to the animal, since he or she is not adapted for the habitat. Ultimately, local governments and taxpayers bear enormous responsibility when exotic animals are set loose or escape and must be recaptured, or when they are seized due to neglect or because they are endangering the community.

THE LAW

The government responds to the problems posed by exotic animals kept as pets, but the laws are often inadequate. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have each opposed certain exotic animals as pets. Some state and local laws prohibit the sale or keeping of exotic animals. Other states require that a person obtain a license. Still other states have no laws.

Unfortunately, the government is often only able to do too little, too late, as dealers and disreputable pet stores adapt to avoid the law. For example, in the early 1970s, the FDA banned the distribution and sale of baby red-eared slider turtles after a quarter of a million children were diagnosed with salmonella contracted from turtles. However, the sale of turtles with shells larger than four inches was not outlawed, and it is still easy to buy baby turtles illegally.

Even though the government does try to help, we have to rely on our own common sense and ethics to prevent the cruelty and damage that owning an exotic animal causes. Exotic animals are not good pets. Let's concentrate on saving these animal's natural homes-not removing the animals from them! **ASPCA.**