It's time to think 'Positive'

A call for a positive list (or approved list) of species that make suitable pets

The keeping of a companion animal or pet should enhance both the welfare of the animal and the keeper and should not be detrimental to the wider community or the environment. However, many species traded as exotic* pets are wholly unsuited to a captive life in close proximity to people. The associated problems with the keeping of exotic animals as pets vastly outweigh the benefits.

Restricting the types of species kept as pets by way of a 'positive list' or approved list of suitable species would significantly improve animal welfare, species conservation, and public and animal health. A positive list would also reduce the negative economic impact of the wildlife trade and the regulatory burden on enforcement bodies.

The United States Congress is currently considering federal legislation that would require risk assessments to be carried out on all non-native species in the pet trade. In order to be placed on an approved list it must be established that the species in question is not likely 'to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to other animal species' health or human health'. There are now calls for EU Member States to adopt positive lists of species that can be kept by private individuals based on similar objective and scientifically based criteria.

Why do we need a positive list?

Animal welfare:

For some exotic species, very little knowledge exists about their basic care. For other species, good quality information on captive husbandry is available but only in the form of scientific texts that are largely inaccessible to the general public. For both of these reasons, animals suffer.

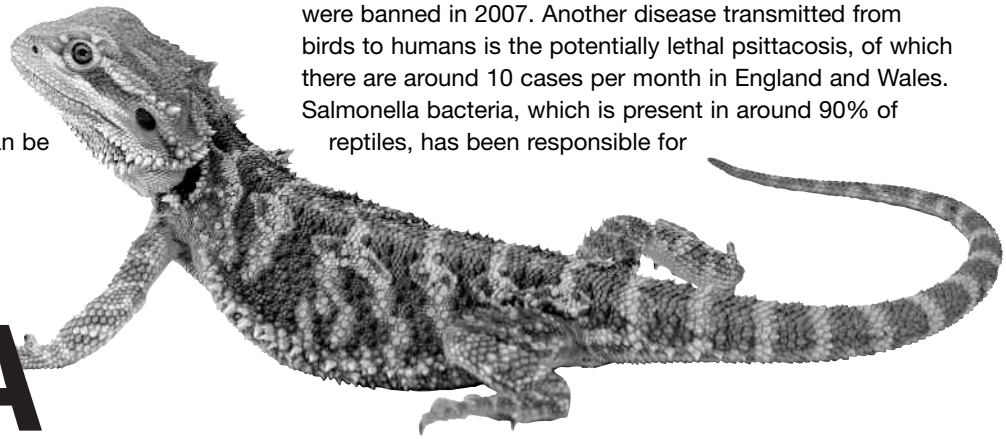
Specialised accommodation is required to meet the welfare requirements of many exotic species. Reptiles and amphibians, for instance, need spacious and naturalistic enclosures with a variety of temperature and humidity regimes. Pet birds need to live in environments that are stimulating and allow them the space to fly. Providing these conditions in ordinary households can be very problematic.

An additional concern is that animals may be procured by methods that cause suffering and high mortality, such as in the case of wild-trapped animals or species that are intensively bred for the pet trade. The longevity of some species means that they will outlive their owners, which again presents major welfare problems.

Human health:

Around 75% of new human diseases are zoonotic (transmissible from animals to humans). Some of the most serious zoonoses are those associated with wild, exotic or imported animals.

The legal and illegal wild bird trade is known to have played a significant role in the global spread of avian influenza and, as a result, imports of wild birds into the EU for the pet trade were banned in 2007. Another disease transmitted from birds to humans is the potentially lethal psittacosis, of which there are around 10 cases per month in England and Wales. Salmonella bacteria, which is present in around 90% of reptiles, has been responsible for



APA
Animal Protection Agency

* For the purposes of this document, the term 'exotic' is defined as non-native or non-domesticated.

two child deaths in England in the last ten years and poses an increasing risk as the reptile trade continues to expand. Exotic mammals, especially primates, also pose a human health threat; transmissable diseases include monkeypox, herpes B and tuberculosis.

Some exotic species present a risk of injury to humans eg, venomous snakes, pythons, crocodilians, large cat species and primates.

Environment and species conservation: The capture of animals for the pet trade is regularly cited as a major cause of species decline and a significant factor driving biodiversity loss. For instance, cyanide used to stun tropical reef fish (to make them easier to catch) causes the delayed mortality of many fish and also kills non-target fish and shellfish, as well as eggs and larvae.

Non-native species that are accidentally or deliberately released by pet owners can become invasive and threaten native species with extinction. Furthermore, diseases in the pet trade can infect wildlife, sometimes with devastating consequences. For example, the pet trade has contributed to the spread of Chytrid fungus, which is depleting amphibian populations around the world and is thought to be a major contributory factor to the current global amphibian extinction crisis.

Economy:
The negative impact of the exotic pet trade on native species either via direct exploitation or the dispersal of invasive species and diseases to wildlife, or the threat posed to human health from zoonotic disease clearly outweighs the economic benefits of trade.

The exotic pet trade also threatens the farming industry. It is estimated that damage to livestock industries caused by disease outbreaks resulting from wildlife trade has cost hundreds of billions of dollars globally. For example, in 2000, the US banned the import of three species of tortoises that had the potential to carry heartwater disease and could cause mortality rates of 60% in cattle and up to 100% in sheep.

Positive vs. Negative

Seventeen European countries have already adopted 'negative lists' ie. those that identify prohibited rather than permitted species – usually for human health and safety reasons or to underpin restrictions on international trade for conservation purposes.*

Negative lists, however, may be exhaustively long and require regular additions as new species are exploited for the pet trade. A positive list, therefore, is preferable as it presents a far more workable and efficient solution.

Further reading:

Schuppli, C A and Fraser, D. A Framework for Assessing the Suitability of Different Species as Companion Animals. Animal Welfare 2000 9: 359-372.

APA
Animal Protection Agency
Brighton Media Centre, 15-17 Middle Street, Brighton BN1 1AL
Tel: 01273 674253 Fax: 01273 674927 info@apa.org.uk www.apa.org.uk