

### **Why Some Exotic Animals Should Not be Pets**

The illegal exotic animal trade is a major problem causing suffering and death, and you may be a part of it. The lives of many animals are put on the line daily, and most people are completely unaware. One of the main reasons for the exotic animal trade is to profit from selling them as pets. Illegal smugglers are not direct with their sources which means people don't know if the animal was imported illegally. Additionally they are often "intentionally mislabeled as captive-bred and exported legally" (National Geographic, 2021). Although it is impossible to locate and ban all illegal smugglers, it is everyone's responsibility to make sure everyone is informed of the horrors in an effort to reduce these activities. It is understandable that owning an exotic pet may be very exciting, but there are many things to understand before making a decision.

Some animals are suitable to be pets, but others are not domesticated and should not be pets. Animals such as domestic dogs, cats, hamsters, rabbits, and some responsibly bred bird species may be examples of good pet choices. The more common pets such as dogs have been comfortable with humans for thousands of years and all veterinarians are qualified to treat them. However, this is not the case for many exotic pets. According to the World Animal Protection Charity, exotic animals are defined as wild, meaning not domesticated, and the American Humane Organization says that an exotic animal is also non-native to the country or area. Frankly, exotic animals deserve to thrive in their natural habitat but are often taken from their homes and forced to be pets, making it extremely easy for anyone to buy an exotic animal. Everyone should be well informed that although most of the exotic pet trade is legal, WorldWildLife states, "illegal smuggling and collection has intensified due to increasing demand

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for rare and unusual species, compromising conservation efforts and profiting criminal gangs worldwide”. For example, the axolotl is a critically endangered species, partly due to the pet trade and their popularity between consumers. Some people may unknowingly buy wild axolotls instead of captive bred ones, which is why it is important that you must understand where the source is, and make sure the breeders are legitimate.

Additionally, in the last twenty years, the demand for exotic pets has boomed due to social media making them more accessible and easier to keep (*World Wildlife Fund, 2023*). Social media normalizes and paves the way for ownership of exotic animals, resulting in more people buying exotic pets. On social media, only the cute and likable parts of exotic pets are shown, and not the realities of owning an exotic pet. Many owners have admitted to finding inspiration for their exotic pets on social media. Unfortunately, if there is an increasing amount of exotic pets being bought, more have to be caught in the wild. Many of these people are also not qualified to own these animals. *Born Free USA* states, “Exotic animals require special care, housing, diet, and maintenance that the average person cannot provide”. Impulsive buyers do not realize that these animals can have safety issues and suffer in their care because basic necessities are not enough. A lot of these problems originate from exotic pet sellers who don’t inform you or prepare you, but it also results from lack of proper knowledge. Before deciding on a pet, you must make sure that the pet you want to buy is domesticated, responsibly bred in captivity, not endangered or protected by law, legal, etc.

Keeping animals that are not meant to be pets can come with many downsides for both animal, owner, and community. While many owners turn in proper paperwork to get their pets authorized and know exactly how to handle exotic pets, many do not put such effort into their

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pets. Owning a dangerous animal is a larger responsibility than people think. Reports have shown exotic animals such as tigers, monkeys, or snakes attacking humans and other animals (*Born Free USA*, 2018). These cases are not the fault of the animal, yet they are blamed for the damage. Owing to the fact that these are still wild, undomesticated animals, they have their instincts and special needs. When these needs aren't met, the animals may suffer physically or mentally. In the US, it is illegal to own animals that may be a threat to humans, the environment, or agricultural health, and there are also rules specific to states, counties, or cities (WorldWideLife). Some of these regulations are put in place due to zoonotic diseases or harm from the animals that put humans in risk; while some are efforts to avoid spreading invasive species. Sometimes, when exotic pets are released, they can become an invasive species which are extremely harmful to agriculture and fisheries, and can lead to biodiversity loss (WorldWideLife). However many people may be unaware of this and privately own illegal pets anyway. Although there are many exotic pets that are allowed, the American Veterinary Medical Association, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are all strongly opposed to keeping exotic pets.

Additionally, we don't see that many animals die during transportation, even legally imported ones. A customs agent confessed that, "We [see] a mortality rate of about eighty or ninety percent" (SafeWorldwide). The harsh reality of illegal animal transport are baby parrots traveling with their beaks and feet taped together squished in a tube, tiny turtles stuffed into socks with tape over their shells to keep their heads inside, and pygmy monkeys wrapped in underwear (SafeWorldwide). Back in 1995, a wildlife inspector found dozens of dead or dying frogs "crushed together". There were no precautions to even attempt to keep the frogs alive

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during their transportation. The company in charge was Bronx Reptiles, and although the owner was found guilty, the court later reversed the decision. The US government is not acting and there is no serious consequence for the inhumane treatment of animals shipped into the US. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) regulates the international import and export of certain species, but the problem is that it doesn't cover many species. It is inhumane that humans are causing innocent animals harm, and that the ones that die are only replaced by more captured from the wild. The ones lucky enough to survive transportation are not even guaranteed safety once at its destination.

Although many are treated well, chances are, they will already have trauma from their journey of being transported as well as being kept in unethical mills before they are sold. In many cases, exotic animals are abused just like cats and dogs. Some examples of abuse include confinement in small enclosures, chaining, beating, or mutilations (*Born Free USA*, 2018). Additionally, many people rehome pets after realizing that they can't care for it. WorldWideLife says, "Should you no longer be able to keep your pet, contact your local rescue center, responsible pet store, accredited zoo, veterinarian, or other trusted home to find someone that can take it in. Do not post your animal for sale online and never release them into the wild". Even when people turn in their exotic pets to zoos or sanctuaries, these places aren't able to accommodate the growing number of unwanted animals. According to *Born Free USA*, "This results in the innocent animals being euthanized, abandoned, or living in deplorable conditions".

In conclusion, the exotic animal trade should be closely watched and regulated by the government. We should take more precautions to see that illegal smugglers are not able to successfully smuggle pets, especially in inhumane ways. When caught, illegal smugglers have to

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be penalized harshly for abusing and murdering wildlife. We all live on the same planet, therefore, it is our responsibility to take care of the other organisms sharing it with us.

Additionally, we must work together to make sure everyone is educated about how gruesome the exotic pet trade is. Once it becomes widely known, we will have succeeded in terminating illegal smugglers and the animal abuse coming with it. On the other hand, someone who already owns an exotic pet should consult experts to make sure they are providing the best life possible for the animals. For those who are looking for a pet, the best way to help advocate for the issue is to adopt domesticated animals from shelters, providing them a new home and a better quality of life. Those buying exotic pets from illegal traders are not providing a healthy life for the animal, but rather tearing them away from their home. It is important to note that there are many other animals dying during transportation so that you are able to buy one that survived. Point proven, it is crucial that the hype for exotic pets comes to an end, and illegal smugglers are punished for their crimes.

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