

KEEPING OF EXOTIC ANIMALS AS COMPANION ANIMALS

Current situation

There is increasing evidence that the import of exotic species for the pet trade threatens not only the survival of wild species but the risk for health of humans, domestic animals and native wildlife. For many species of animals their welfare and the safety of humans and other animals cannot be assured when they are kept in captivity by private individuals.

The origin of exotic companion animals is one source of concern in the debate over keeping such species. In 2005, the EU was the largest importer of live reptiles with trade valued at seven million Euros⁸⁷. Imports appear to be increasingly from captive-bred sources, yet wild-caught specimens once represented about 90-95% of the trade⁸⁸. The standards of care in mass-breeding centres have also generated animal welfare concerns⁸⁹. It has been suggested that the fewer import restrictions on captive-bred versus wild-caught CITES animals has led to the “laundering” of wild-caught species into the pet trade⁹⁰.

Many exotic species have complex needs when it comes to nutrition, housing, temperature requirements, exercise and social structures. Few countries require pet shops or breeders to provide customers with information on housing and care for the animals. Consequently, animals suffer from metabolic bone disease, inappropriate feed and medical treatment, burns from the misuse of artificial heating devices, and behavioural problems from being kept in isolation. A German study found that over 40% of European tortoises died after one year⁹¹.

As animals reach maturity, become costly to maintain, develop behavioural problems and turn into a long-term commitment (parrots can live up to 80 years), owners no longer able or willing to handle the animals are hard-pressed to find a solution as many zoos refuse such animals and rescue centres are full. Consequently, animals are often neglected, euthanized or released into the wild.

Exotic species can be carriers of dangerous diseases such as rabies, monkeypox, herpes B virus and salmonella. Trade in amphibians with a fungus causing chytridiomycosis has been lethal for certain amphibian populations and the cause of recent extinctions⁹².

⁸⁷/Engler, M. and Parry-Jones, R. (2007). “Opportunity or threat: The role of the European Union in Global Wildlife Trade”, *TRAFFIC Europe*, Brussels, Belgium.

⁸⁸/Altherr, S and Freyer, D (2001), “Morbidity and Mortality in private husbandry of reptiles”, A report by Pro Wildlife to the RSPCA.

⁸⁹/Animal Welfare Institute Quarterly (2009), “Life behind bars: the exploitation of caged-birds”, Vol.58, No.1, p.6-7.

⁹⁰/Engler, M. and Parry-Jones, R. (2007). “Opportunity or threat: The role of the European Union in Global Wildlife Trade”, *TRAFFIC Europe*, Brussels, Belgium.

⁹¹/Blatt, G and Muller, P (1974), Die Mortalitätsrate importierter Schildkroten im Saarland, *Salamandra* Vol.10, cited in Altherr and Freyer (2001).

⁹²/Schloegel et al. (2006), “The Decline of the Sharp-Snouted Day Frog (*Taudactylus acutirostris*): The First Documented Case of Extinction by Infection in a Free-Ranging Wildlife Species?”, *EcoHealth*, Vol.3, No.1, p.35-40.

A rabies infected Egyptian fruit bat sold in a pet shop in France led to the vaccination of nearly 130 people and the euthanasia of animals in which it had contact before its own death from the disease⁹³.

The collection of exotic animals for the pet trade is contributing to declines in wild species and threatens biodiversity, when non-target species are killed, trees cut down to reach animals, and poison used to stun fish. A study on bird exports from Senegal estimated a 70% mortality rate during capture, export, and quarantine⁹⁴.

Experts estimate the illegal trade in wildlife species to be worth billions of Euros annually, second only to weapons and drug trafficking⁹⁵. Wildlife products that are traded legally are also subject to illegal trade.

Some exotic species can directly threaten local wildlife and environments when accidentally or intentionally released into the wild. Europe spends an estimated 12 billion Euros annually on invasive species damage and controls⁹⁶. EU Wildlife Trade regulations restrict the import of ecologically threatening species including the red-eared terrapin and American bullfrog, yet many other exotic species threaten habitats, native wildlife, and economies⁹⁷.

Relevant legislation

Conservation

The most important instrument for the control of wildlife trade from a conservation standpoint is the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)* which aims to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. The convention is implemented through the national legislation of its 175 Parties⁹⁸. It divides the species into three categories: Appendix I lists species essentially barred from commercial trade, Appendix II lists those which can be traded subject to conditions, and Appendix III lists species for which individual countries have notified their own trade and protective restrictions. The EU implements CITES through *Council Regulation 338/97/EC* which also incorporates controls on the sale and possession of wild animals, birds and plants found within the territory of the EU as well as CITES species through the creation of four separate Annexes. Additionally, Article 8.2 allows Member States to prohibit the holding of certain species. Unfortunately, CITES regulations are focused on trade and not the welfare of the animals. Many of the exotic animals kept as pets are not CITES species, as there is a lack of data on the conservation status of many amphibians and reptiles.

In future the invasive species policy currently under development could become an important tool for regulating the keeping of exotic species as companion animals. The EU is currently revising its strategy on invasive species⁹⁹ and the control on imports and keeping of wild species could be fully included in the prevention part of the policy. It could take the form of a white list of species which are authorised for importation and keeping or a black list of species for which the trade is banned.

⁹³/Moutou, F (2008), "Biodiversite et zoonoses", *Urgence pratique*, Vol.87, p.21-23.

⁹⁴/Carter and Currey(1987), "Research into the conditions of capture, transportation and export of wild-caught birds from Senegal". In: Thorton A (ed) *The Trade in Live Wildlife. Mortality and Transport Conditions*, pp.10-18. The Environmental Investigation Agency: London, UK.

⁹⁵/IFAW, http://www.ifaw.org/ifaw_canada_english/join_campaigns/fight_illegal_wildlife_trade/index.php

⁹⁶/EU Commission, Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions Towards an EU Strategy on Invasive Species, COM(2008) 789, http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/invasivealien/index_en.htm

⁹⁷/EU Wildlife Trade Regulation, Council Regulation 338/97, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:31997R0338:EN:NOT>

⁹⁸/As of February 2009.

⁹⁹/http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/invasivealien/index_en.htm

Health

The EU has established a few requirements for health controls related to the trade in animals to and within the Community. *Council Directive 92/65/EEC of 13 July 1992 laying down animal health requirements governing trade in and imports into the Community of animals* provides for the establishment of specific health requirements for imports into the Community. Health controls for the movement of circus animals are applied through *Commission Regulation (EC) 1739/2005 laying down animal health requirements for the movement of circus animals between Member States*. Circuses and their animals must be registered to move to another member state. A passport must be issued for each animal of the circus, except for birds and rodents, for which collective passports are issued. A ban on the import of wild-caught birds to the EU, *Commission Regulation 318/2007*, came into effect 1 July 2007. This regulation also sets strict requirements for the import of captive-bred birds. Birds imported for conservation programmes, pets accompanying their owners and animals intended for zoos, circuses, amusement parks or experiments were exempted.

Welfare

While all EU Member States have an Animal Protection Law, levels of protection, animals covered and related details vary greatly, including restrictions on keeping of exotic animals. Two-thirds of EU countries have signed the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals, which includes a 1995 resolution discouraging the keeping of wild animals as pets.

Belgium created a positive list of mammals which are allowed to be kept, and any mammal not on this list is prohibited in private ownership. Other countries have developed a negative list of species that may not be kept, usually dangerous and poisonous animals such as large carnivores or snakes. In theory any animal not appearing on the negative list is allowed to be kept. The United Kingdom has a list of dangerous animals which can be kept with a license. Currently, only Belgium has a true positive list, while 17 countries have negative lists covering only a few species (e.g. great apes) to extensive lists with many animal species including mammals, reptiles and amphibians. Even though 16 countries require some variant of notification of authorities or licensing, few provide guidance on minimum requirements for the keeping of exotic animals to ensure the safety of owners, the community and the animal.

Future action

- Member States should create a positive list of animal species that encompass the whole animal kingdom (not simply mammals) which are allowed to be kept by private owners. A set of clear criteria can be used to determine which species are suitable as companion animals¹⁰⁰.
- Improve education on the requirements for the keeping and handling of species to discourage purchases and to ensure the welfare of animals currently in captivity. Breeders and pet shops selling exotic animals should provide prospective owners with detailed information on the physiological, ethological and ecological needs of the animals.
- Improve enforcement and oversight of the exotic animal species currently being kept by private individuals through strict recordkeeping and permitting by Competent Authorities and CITES Authorities (for those species covered by CITES).
- In the framework of the Invasive Alien Species policy currently being developed, the EU should adopt strict control measures on the import and keeping of exotic animals which present a risk of invasiveness, and a precautionary approach for those species where insufficient data is available. These measures could take the form of a white list of species which can be imported and kept, the other species being prohibited.

¹⁰⁰The suggested criteria is a combination of that used in for the Belgian positive list for mammals and criteria suggested by Schuppli, C and Fraser, D (2000), "A Framework for Assessing the Suitability of Different Species as Companion Animals", *Animal Welfare*, Vol.9, p.359-372.