

Animal Health Risks Associated with Importing of Exotic Animals

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Introduction

An exotic pet is a rare or unusual animal pet, or an animal kept within human households which is not commonly thought of as a pet. The term, "Exotic Animal" may also be used for a species which is non-indigenous to the owner's locale. In this presentation, the term 'exotic animal' is taken to include any animal privately maintained in captivity, which is not a common pet, or is not locally indigenous. The health of animals, is considered to include populations as well as individuals, both free living and in captivity.

The Keeping of Exotic Animals, creates a number of Animal Health Risks:

Wildlife population: We are all now well aware of the decimation of wildlife populations (mammals, birds, plants and aquatic species), due to the sometimes excessive harvesting of individuals. Limitations are often set (under CITES regulations Council Regulation 338/97/EC), by local national government environmental departments, typically in third world countries, where the demand for hard cash, will on occasion outweigh the real needs and requirements of the wildlife population. As a society, we should by now have appreciated that the harvesting of wildlife populations for the pet trade is disadvantageous, typically not sustainable and is contrary to the interests of the individual animal and the population from which it comes.

There is also a risk of escape and creation of a detrimental invasive new population of an undesirable species within the EU ecosystem. Different imported species need to be assessed in respect of their risk of escape, how invasive a species they are considered to be and the perceived risk to the endemic ecosystem.

Individual wildlife: there are ample publications relating to the very low survival rates of animals from wildlife population, from capture to reaching end user (pet trade). It is in my opinion, totally unsustainable, for any wildlife population, of any species, to be harvested, maintained in captivity, transported overseas and sold into the pet trade. I would respectfully suggest that the time has long since come, for a total ban on the trapping of any wildlife species (including fish), for sale into a pet trade in their own, or any other country.

Individual captive bred exotic animals: there is evidence, all be it of variable reliability, that a significant percentage of captive bred exotic animals suffer from husbandry or management related diseases. It is in my opinion wholly appropriate, to take action to ensure (as far as possible), that the welfare of all exotic animals in captivity, is of the highest standard. This means that the animals are

of known health status (whilst wild caught individuals typically are not), that they are only ever sold through specialist exotic animal outlets, by staff with additional 'exotic animal training', to responsible members of the public who can prove adequate experience and knowledge to assure good care and welfare (see later).

Risk of Disease to other Animals: we are well aware that the vast majority (>70%) of new infectious diseases, effecting humans as well as captive animal populations develop in and are contracted from wildlife populations. Important diseases include: West Nile Virus, Monkeypox, *Salmonella* ssp., *E coli* 0157, *Coxiella burnetti*, *Chlamydia psittaci*, *Borrellia* spp., *Mycobacterium bovis*, Hepatitis A & B, *Brucella* spp., Rabies, Tularaemia, Primate retroviruses, avian influenza, Trinchinellosis, *Toxoplasma* spp., and Rickettsia. Both indigenous and imported wildlife populations present the same risk of infection to captive animal populations, save that imported animals have a greater risk of transferring 'novel infections' to naive populations. For this reason, the importation of 'wild sourced exotic animals', is seen as a significant risk to animal and human health, and should in future be prevented. The limitation of such imports in to keeper categories 2 & 3, with mandatory health screening should minimise such risks.

It may be argued, that some of the above risks are justified on the basis of research of conservational benefit, protecting endangered species, etc., however such roles should be fulfilled by academic, or licensed institutions, such as licensed academic, research or zoological collections, where standards of welfare, health screening and treatment can be assured by correct application EU wide, of the zoo licensing legislation.

Considerations:

Whilst there is a good argument to ban the importation of wild caught or 'ranch produced' individuals, there is in my opinion no justification for any ban on the importation, the keeping or breeding of 'captive bred individuals', so long as the species, is one which can be maintained well in captivity without compromising the individual's welfare (see animal categories below). The illegal trade in the importation of animals into EU, is considered to be second only to weapons and drugs, worth billions of Euro annually. If the importation and keeping of exotic pets into EU, were to be banned this situation would only worsen, most importantly it would be uncontrolled or monitored.

If the keeping of captive bred exotic animals were to be banned, this would in my opinion make their maintenance in captivity even more attractive, to many of the current keepers, thereby forcing the hobby 'underground', such that the keeping and care of such individuals can no longer be monitored, corrected, improved or individuals treated where the need arises.

Suggested Solutions:

Ban on the importation of wild caught or 'ranch produced' exotic animals or all species.

Classification of species and keepers, by category of risk, in respect of being maintained within the EU in captivity.

Animal Category

Category 1: 'entry and keeping prohibited';

Category 2: 'restricted to high security, off show, research and academic collections';

Category 3: 'other licensed zoological collections';

Category 4: 'Private ownership, but subjected to annual inspection and licensing'

Category 5: 'entry and keeping unrestricted'; and

Category 6: 'pests already widespread'.

Keeper Category

Category 1: 'High level, licensed, academic and research organisation, without public access'

Category 2: 'High level, inspected and licensed zoological collections, with public access'

Category 3: 'Private ownership, annual 'Dangerous Wild Animals Inspection' and certification'

Category 4: 'Unrestricted pet ownership'

Category 5: 'Pest species, keeping in captivity and release to the wild prohibited'

Mandatory training (web based, with post training MCQ testing, specific to the species you wish to keep), of all would be owners, prior to purchase of any exotic animal. This would achieve two benefits, an improved level of knowledge by the keeper, whilst also creating a natural cooling off period, such that impulse purchase is avoided.

Improved vendor training (and control of internet trading), such that only those with 'higher training and knowledge' could sell any 'exotic animal'.

Additional mandatory training of owners would be necessity be paid for by future owners, increased training of pet shop staff, would increase the cost of exotic animal purchase. Increased purchase price, leads on to increased perceived value, greater care by the owner in maintaining them in good health, rather than replacing them when they are ill. Moving away from the concept of a replaceable children's commodity.

Improved veterinary training in exotics: it is now well accepted that owners take horses to equine vets, farm animals to farm vets, but the majority of 'exotic animals' are still presented to companion animal vets, who have generally only ever received training in conventional companion animals (dogs, cats). EAEVE and each national competent authority is encouraged to make the teaching of exotic pets mandatory. The provision of an 'exotic animal clinical service' in each EU Veterinary Establishment, is seen as the only way to ensure under graduates have a real knowledge and experience of learning about the care and welfare needs of these species.

Apart from encouraging all under graduates to learn about exotic animals, the public should be encouraged to use the services of clinicians with post graduate training and experience in this discipline.