



PHOTO: Rainforest Reptile Refuge

What is an exotic pet?

The term 'exotic pet' usually refers to animal species that have not been domesticated by man. Domesticated animals, such as dogs and cats, have been bred to live with people for thousands of years and, generally, have adapted to human contact and companionship. Exotic animals, such as reptiles, monkeys, lions and tigers, are wild – and they retain their wild instincts and behaviour even if they are bred in captivity. They can often appear to be 'tamed' but they never really adapt to captivity or the human environment. Their behaviour is unpredictable, making them potentially dangerous.

Where do exotic animals come from?

WILD-CAUGHT ANIMALS - Your local pet store might sell boa constrictors, iguanas, parrots and other animals not native to Canada. Similarly, private breeders advertise non-native species - from crocodiles to tarantulas – in newspapers. Some zoos have been known to sell 'surplus' animals (even lions and tigers!) to private individuals. But where do these animals come from in the first place? There is a multi-million dollar global trade in wild animals – much of it illegal – that supplies the pet industry and private buyers. Animals are captured in the wild and transported to various countries to be sold as pets. They suffer severe stress from capture, transport and 'storage' and many die before they reach their destinations. A high percentage of exotic animals are wild-caught. For example, it is estimated that up to 95 per cent of reptiles traded internationally are wild-caught.

CAPTIVE-BRED ANIMALS – Private keepers of exotic animals often breed them in captivity for sale to the pet trade or to other keepers. Although these animals never experience life in their natural habitat, they retain the same instincts and needs of their wild counterparts.

Why don't exotic animals make good pets?

IT'S CRUEL TO THE ANIMALS – Exotic animals, whether wild-caught or captive-bred, have evolved over millions of years to survive and thrive in very specific environments that cannot be re-created in captivity. All their instincts and ways of behaving are suited to their natural habitats. If they are removed to unnatural conditions they suffer. Imagine an iguana, which naturally forages in the trees of the rainforest, living in a cage in someone's living room. It can't engage in its normal activities. The result: boredom, frustration, stress and often illness and premature death. **That's cruel.**

Some exotic pet enthusiasts learn a great deal about their animals and do their best to 're-create' natural habitats. They invest in special equipment, build large enclosures and provide special diets. But they can never provide the space, stimulation and freedom that exist for animals in the wild. The animals are deprived of the fundamental experiences that nature provides. **That's cruel.**

Many people buy reptiles from pet stores only to find that they are unable to care for them. They grow larger than expected or their care requires more time or money than people can afford. The result is that some people abandon their pets in the local community, where they die of starvation or of exposure to a climate too harsh for them. **That's cruel.**



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IT'S DANGEROUS TO PEOPLE – Exotic animals retain their complex natural behaviors, so they can be difficult and dangerous to keep. Snakes, lizards and other species can bite and many people are injured (or even killed by venomous species).

IT'S A SERIOUS HEALTH RISK – Many exotic animals are carriers of diseases. For example, most reptiles carry salmonella (in their feces), which is communicable to humans through direct and indirect contact. Salmonella can cause serious illness in humans and a number of public health agencies have warned of the risk of infection from reptiles – especially to children.

IT'S A THREAT TO OUR NATIVE WILDLIFE – Some species do survive when pet owners release unwanted exotic animals into the local environment. When this happens there is a risk that they will become competitors to native species, sometimes replacing them. This means indigenous wildlife could disappear from some areas, changing the local environment irreversibly.

Aren't there laws to protect exotic animals?

Laws concerning exotic animals in Canada are generally weak and vary from place to place. Federally, Canada is a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which is intended to control trade in endangered species. Unfortunately, the CITES provisions are not rigorously enforced, leaving the risk that endangered, wild-caught exotic animals continue to enter Canada.

Most provincial and municipal legislation does not address the trade or keeping of exotic pets. Only a few areas have bylaws that restrict the trade and these are limited in scope.

THE RESULT IS THAT, IN MOST PLACES, ANYONE CAN BUY A TIGER OR A BOA CONSTRICTOR AND KEEP IT THEIR BACKYARD OR LIVING ROOM.

What should be done?

The Vancouver Humane Society believes that the sale, trade and keeping of exotic pets should be banned. More local authorities need to pass bylaws that would provide for such a ban, stopping pet stores and breeders from selling these complex, sensitive animals as commodities and ending the suffering of exotic pets.



PHOTO: Mike West



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IF YOU WOULD LIKE MORE INFORMATION ON THE VHS AND ITS POSITION ON EXOTIC ANIMALS, PLEASE CONTACT:



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COVER PHOTO: Mike West

Exotic pets – a good idea?

Many people are fascinated by wild and exotic animals. Some are so interested in certain species that they want to own them. The novelty of having a pet snake or lizard at home can be a real attraction. But is keeping an instinctively wild animal a good idea? This leaflet explains some of the reasons why it can be cruel to animals and dangerous for people when exotic pets are held in captivity.

