

**Submission from the Vancouver Humane Society re:
The British Columbia Wildlife Act Review Discussion Paper**

**The need for regulation of the sale and keeping of
captive exotic animals in British Columbia**

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Introduction

This submission confines itself to issues raised in the Wildlife Act discussion paper regarding captive exotic animals in BC. It aims to describe current and potential problems created by the sale and keeping of exotic animals and by the lack of regulation concerning these activities.

The key problems surrounding the keeping of captive exotic animals relate to:

Public safety (biting, clawing, venom)

Public health (zoonotic diseases)

The environment (invasive species)

Animal welfare (appropriate conditions and husbandry)

This submission will argue that the keeping of exotic animals is a threat to all of the above and that this threat is likely to increase in light of the growth of the exotic pet trade.

Unless these problems are addressed through strong regulation to eliminate or severely restrict the keeping of exotic species, BC's human population may be unnecessarily put at risk, our environment may be degraded and animals will suffer under inhumane conditions.

Background

Definitions of the term 'exotic animal' vary, but usually refer to undomesticated, non-native animals that are either wild-caught or captive-bred. In legislative terms, exotic animals are usually defined in municipal bylaws through a selected list of animals and these lists vary from municipality to municipality.

In Canada, captive exotic animals are primarily dealt with at the municipal level, with a patchwork of bylaws restricting the sale and/or ownership of certain animals. Some provinces, most notably Alberta, have regulations to address the keeping of exotic species.

In B.C., about 20 municipalities have exotic animal bylaws. These have generally been put in place for a mix of reasons (safety, health, environmental and animal welfare). In areas outside these municipalities there are no restrictions (either federal or provincial) on

the keeping of exotic animals. Hence there are an undetermined number of private owners of a variety of exotic species ranging from lions to primates to large reptiles.

The worldwide trade in exotic animals has boomed in recent years. Canadian statistics regarding this trade are difficult to obtain but in 2003 Marshall P. Jones, Deputy Director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, described the US situation to a senate committee as follows:

“U.S. wildlife trade has grown over the past decade, heightening concerns about species conservation, the introduction of injurious animals and plants, and potential risks to human health and domestic wildlife. In particular, the demand for live wildlife has escalated, driven in part by the increasing popularity of exotic pets in the United States. The ease of travel, transport, and transaction (including e-commerce) has removed barriers to wildlife trade. Wildlife importers have access to ample financing, the latest computer and communications technology, and overnight air cargo shipping services from virtually any place in the world. The economic boom of the 1990s spurred international travel, giving Americans new opportunities to visit exotic locales and acquire exotic wildlife.

“From 1992 through 2002, the number of species regulated under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) – the international treaty which regulates trade in species that are endangered or threatened, or that are otherwise vulnerable to the effects of trade – increased 75 percent, and the number of CITES member nations rose from 115 to 162. U.S. trade in wildlife and wildlife products grew 62 percent, with declared shipments jumping from 74,620 to more than 121,000. The number of different species in trade increased 75 percent, jumping from some 200,000 in 1992 to more than 352,000 a decade later. Overall, in 2002, over 38,000 live mammals, 365,000 live birds, two million live reptiles, 49 million live amphibians, and 216 million live fish were imported into the United States.”¹

There is no reason to believe Canada has not experienced similar growth, as market demand is similar, as are import regulations. There are numerous exotic animal (especially reptile) breeders and import/exporters on the Internet, including Canadian-based operations. Captive exotic animal breeding is common and there are several operations in B.C.

The Internet has vastly increased access to animals for sale locally, nationally and internationally. This is in addition to those sold through classified advertising, auctions, trade shows and amongst members of hobby clubs. This does not include the illegal trade in wildlife.

¹ U.S. Senate Committee on Environment & Public Works
Hearing Statements: Importation of exotic species and the impact on public health and safety, July 17, 2003

The number of captive exotic animals in B.C. is unknown, but several local councils have felt it necessary to restrict their sale and/or ownership through bylaws. Most recently, the City of Vancouver passed a bylaw that prohibits the ownership of certain exotic animals and also prohibits the sale of a longer list of animals. This followed incidents in which large caimans (crocodile-like reptiles) were discovered in residential properties – one having fallen from an apartment balcony and another found in a child’s wading pool. Similarly, the Central Okanagan Regional District implemented an exotic animal bylaw following the discovery of a large python being kept loose in a household with small children in Kelowna in 2002. When these incidents took place local authorities were powerless to take action due to the absence of legislation or regulation.

The most serious exotic animal incident to take place in B.C. to date, the fatal tiger attack on a woman in Bridge Lake in May 2007, is perhaps the clearest illustration of the lack of regulatory power on the part of government. The Bridge Lake tiger facility was not subject to any safety standard (or animal welfare standard*) or requirements and therefore no agency had the ability to inspect and enforce appropriate measures to ensure public safety.

* (The B.C. Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act and the Criminal Code are applicable only in cases of gross cruelty.)

The threat to public safety from exotic animals

Some of the exotic animals that are popular as pets are large and powerful and possess sharp teeth and claws capable of causing serious injury or death. Many smaller animals can also inflict serious bites and scratches, while a range of reptiles and invertebrates carry potentially lethal venoms. Many of these animals experience poor conditions and are deprived of any real ability to engage in natural movements or to express natural behaviours. Consequently, they become bored, frustrated and stressed, making them more unpredictable.

Without safety standards for the construction of enclosures, captive exotic animal facilities are without appropriately strong barriers, double door entry gates, secure containment areas and proper handling equipment that would be found in professional zoos. In Canada, tigers have jumped out of their cages because fences were too low; venomous snakes have escaped from insecure aquariums and monkeys have escaped because cages were not properly secured.² The risks created by unsafe facilities are increased by inexperienced and untrained animal owners.

² Zoocheck Canada fact sheet – The Dangers of Keeping Wild Animals as Pets

The Bridge Lake tiger incident is not unique in Canada. In 1994, a tiger attack resulted in the death of a 16-year-old boy at a private display near Wiarton, Ontario. Several other 'big cat' attacks and escapes have taken place in Ontario (which has no exotic animal legislation) over the last 15 years. In B.C. a tiger escaped while being transported on the Alaska Highway in 2006 and had to be recaptured by conservation officers. In 1992, Larry Moore of Langley, B.C., founder of the B.C. Association of Reptile Owners, died after being bitten by his pet cobra.

The threat to public health from exotic animals

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), during the 1990s more than two-thirds of emerging diseases originated from animals.³ WHO, and other authorities, have pointed to the increase in mass population movements, the growth in international travel and the transportation of live animals as some of the key reasons for emerging infectious diseases. A number of medical and public health bodies have cited the global pet and wildlife trade as a source of disease, which threatens both human and animal health. In July 2003, the medical journal *The Lancet* described the wild animal trade as “a disaster ignored” and called for the practice of taking animals from the wild to “swiftly be brought to an end.”

Marshall Jones of the US Fish and Wildlife Service also testified to the senate committee about specific disease risks associated with wild animals:

“Live wildlife presents the highest risk for introduction of diseases that may be transmitted to humans or animals. Live mammals have been associated with rabies, brucellosis, herpes-B, hantavirus, Ebola, plague, tularemia and several other diseases that are transmissible to humans. According to Centers for Disease Control, 70,000 people get salmonellosis from live reptiles each year, and live birds have been responsible for transmitting avian chlamydiosis.”

Most reptiles carry salmonella, posing a risk to anyone who handles them. A 1997 study by the National laboratory for Enteric Pathogens in Ottawa found that: “an estimated 3 to 5% of all cases of salmonellosis in humans are associated with exposure to exotic pets.”

³ Removing Obstacles to Healthy Development, WHO, 1999

It concluded: “Salmonellosis associated with the importation of exotic pets is once again being recognized as a rapidly emerging disease in Canada.”⁴

The popularity of certain reptiles may be increasing the risk of infection. According to a paper published in January 2007 in the journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases* (EID), “the number of human cases of salmonellosis, especially in very young children, increased dramatically in parallel with iguana pet ownership.”⁵

Imported exotic animals are a recognized disease threat. Writing in EID in March 2004, Dr. Abdu F. Azad, of the University of Maryland School of Medicine, analyzed outbreaks of tularemia (an infectious bacterial disease) and monkeypox. He described the outbreaks as a wake-up call for better surveillance of wild-caught animals before they are sold internationally and imported. He concluded: “In introducing seemingly harmless furry friends, the trade of exotic pets brings together species that have never encountered one another in nature, with unpredictable and sometimes tragic results.”⁶

It has been claimed (by breeders) that captive-bred exotic animals are less disease prone, but they remain susceptible to disease introduced by new imported breeding stock. In any case, there is no certification or registration process to determine whether an animal is captive-bred or wild-caught. Although the importation of some exotic pets has been banned, previously imported animals have been bred and are traded within Canada. For example non-human primates can be found for sale in B.C. in classified advertisements. Non-human primates are notorious for harboring deadly and contagious illnesses such as tuberculosis, Hepatitis, and Simian Herpes B.

The threat to the environment from exotic animals

Some exotic pet owners abandon their animals in the wild or in local parks or rural areas, risking the introduction of invasive species that can threaten biodiversity. A report by the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) describes one such case:

“Occasionally, reptile pets that are abandoned into foreign environments with climatic conditions similar to their countries of origin may survive. In some cases, they prosper with devastating effects to native wildlife... For example, in Toronto, red-eared slider turtles now populate part of Grenadier Pond and Riverdale Farm, where they have

⁴ Human Salmonellosis Associated with Exotic Pets, David L. Woodward, Rasik Khakhria & Wendy M. Johnson, 1997

⁵ Wildlife, Exotic Pets, and Emerging Zoonoses, Bruno B. Chomel, Albino Belotto and Francois-Xavier Meslin, 1997

⁶ *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, Prairie Dog: Cuddly Pet or Trojan Horse?, Vol 10, No 3, March 2004

displaced most turtles. Introduced populations of red-eared sliders are now also found in many other locations throughout the Great Lakes region and British Columbia.”⁷

The risks to the environment and wildlife are well documented, including in a Scientific and Technical Review (2002) by the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE). One paper in the review identifies the growing wildlife trade as a contributor to the increase in invasive species: “...with globalization, the exotic pet industry is growing rapidly and encompassing an entire range of organisms as companion animals, not dreamed of by the mass market.”⁸

The welfare of captive exotic animals

Exotic animals have evolved to survive and thrive in specific environments that they are biologically and behaviourally suited to. Most captive animal facilities find it extremely difficult to replicate these environments and, consequently, animals are deprived of the full range the experiences normally provided in their natural habitats. Captive-bred exotic animals retain the same biological and behavioural needs as their wild counterparts.

One obvious and important environmental feature lost to captive animals is space. This is especially true of roaming animals. For example, the territory of a Siberian tiger in the wild may be as large as 120 square miles, allowing it to roam and hunt its prey of elk and wild boar. A cage of a few square metres is a clear denial of this behavioural need. Along with space, captive animals often lose the opportunity to climb, swim, hunt, forage, hide or have contact with their own species.

It is now accepted that captivity, in many circumstances, is often detrimental to the well being of animals. This view is supported by the widespread observation of zoo animals exhibiting “stereotypic behaviour” – prolonged repetition of apparently purposeless activity, such as pacing, head bobbing and rocking. Such behaviour is considered indicative of stress, boredom and frustration.

Some zoos have added a range of features to their animal enclosures and employ various methods and strategies to encourage the expression of natural movements and behaviours thereby reducing the negative impacts of captivity. This “environmental and behavioural enrichment” only partially compensates for the loss of stimulation and activity that would be available to those same animals if they were in the wild. Such enrichment requires substantial investment (for space, appropriate landscaping and materials, etc.), knowledge

⁷ Scales and Tales: The Welfare and Trade of Reptiles kept as pets in Canada, Rob Laidlaw, WSPA, 2006

⁸ International regulation of wildlife trade: relevant legislation and organizations, ME Cooper & AM Rosser, Rev.sci, tech. Off. Int. Epiz., 2002, 21 (1), 103-123

and expertise on the part of staff and constant maintenance. Such resources are usually unavailable to all but the largest, most advanced zoos and conservation facilities.

Established zoos have not escaped criticism for poor animal welfare standards. In B.C., the Greater Vancouver Zoo has frequently found itself embroiled in controversy over the treatment of its animals. In 2006, the zoo faced animal cruelty charges after it kept a baby hippo alone in a small barn for 19 months, with no access to the outdoors. (The charges were later stayed by the Crown, which deemed it “not in the public interest” to proceed.) In 2003, the zoo faced a public outcry over its treatment of Tina the elephant, which it had held for 30 years in a small barren enclosure. The elephant had demonstrated stereotypic behaviour (head bobbing) for years. Despite widespread public concerns about the zoo’s standards, the absence of any regulation governing the keeping of exotic animals precluded any remedial action being taken by authorities.

It should be noted that it is not only larger animals that can suffer in captivity. Reptiles, one of the most popular exotic pets, often face disease, neglect and abandonment and death in captivity.

Many people purchase reptiles with little knowledge concerning their care. The animals sometimes grow larger than expected or require more time and money than anticipated. The result is that they become ill or die, or they are turned over to a refuge. The Rainforest Reptile Refuge in Surrey, B.C. holds several hundred reptiles abandoned by owners who could not cope with their care.

Even knowledgeable reptile owners cannot provide an environment that meets the biological needs of their pets, which are usually kept in small glass tanks. Space matters, as Clifford Warwick, a world-renowned academic in the study of reptiles, has pointed out:

“Range studies of reptiles in nature have made clear that these animals are by no means inactive. In fact, not by a long way. Turtles, tortoises, lizards and snakes frequently wander distances measured in hundreds of metres or kilometres per day.... A reptile in a cage, no matter how spacious and environmentally diverse the cage may be, will still notice it and will be adversely affected by it.”⁹

Addressing the problems associated with captive exotic animals

It is clear that the risks to human health and safety, the environment and animal welfare caused by the keeping of exotic animals needs to be addressed. About 20 B.C. municipalities have done so by passing bylaws restricting the sale and/or ownership of

⁹ Statement of Support, Exotic Pet Legislation, Clifford Warwick C.Biol., F.I.Biol., M.I.B.I., EurProBiol.

such animals. The effectiveness of this “patchwork” of bylaws is undermined by the ability of purchasers to obtain animals in neighbouring municipalities without a bylaw. Restrictions at provincial or federal level would be substantially more effective in controlling the sale and ownership of exotic species.

Most municipal exotic animal bylaws employ a simple ban on a selected list of exotic animals. It has been suggested that, provincially, a permit system be established to regulate the keeping of exotic animals. This would only be effective if the criteria for obtaining a permit were sufficiently demanding in terms of standards as to eliminate all but the most professional, humane and well-managed facilities.

In addition, an inspection and enforcement regime would be necessary to ensure that standards (for public health & safety and animal welfare) were maintained. Such a permit system could eliminate substandard facilities. The introduction of standards would require a transition period, allowing for appropriate relocation of animals or remedial work, or a grandfathering provision. Sub-standard facilities would need to meet a set of conditions including a ban on breeding, acquisition and public display of animals; the provision of acceptable care and housing and annual veterinary checks.

An essential component of any permit system will be an appropriate list of animals to which the system should apply. Most ‘prohibited animal lists’ accompanying municipal bylaws are based on a mix of public health & safety and animal welfare concerns. VHS has produced a recommended list, which is attached as **Appendix 1**.

Alberta provides a useful model for provincial captive animal standards. The standards require that animals be maintained in numbers sufficient to meet their social and behaviour needs; that enclosures be of sufficient size and complexity to provide for animal’s physical well being and social needs; and that features be provided to encourage species-typical movements and behaviours. Importantly, applications for a zoo permit are evaluated using the American Zoo Association’s (AZA) minimum husbandry guidelines for mammals (with guidelines for reptiles and birds to be used when available). The AZA guidelines are inherently superior to accreditation standards of the Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums (CAZA), which are unspecific and lack sufficient detail.¹⁰

Also useful is the United Kingdom’s ‘Secretary of State’s Standards of Modern Zoo Practice’.¹¹ The standards are largely based on a set of principles (known as the Five Freedoms) that aim to ensure captive animals are:

¹⁰ Government of Alberta Standards for Zoos in Alberta, 2005

¹¹ Secretary of State’s Standards for Modern Zoo Practice, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, March 2000

- Free from hunger and thirst
- Free from discomfort
- Free from fear and distress
- Free from pain, injury and disease
- Free to express normal behaviours and to experience normal social groupings

The standards document provides a wealth of detailed information on public safety, animal welfare and the general management of captive animal facilities.

Summary

It is clear that the keeping of exotic animals poses a threat to public safety, human health and the environment. It is also clear that captivity can have severe adverse effects on animal welfare. Some B.C. municipalities have recognized these threats but the effectiveness of their exotic animal bylaws is undermined by the lack of bylaws in the rest of the province.

For these reasons it is imperative that the provincial government introduce comprehensive exotic animal regulation to protect the public, the environment and animal welfare.

A rigorously enforced permit system with high safety and animal welfare standards would eliminate existing substandard captive animal facilities. Such a system should be applied to animals that pose a danger to human health and safety or whose welfare is likely to be compromised in substandard facilities.

The Vancouver Humane Society urges the provincial government to take particular account of the need for regulation to protect exotic animal welfare. While human safety is paramount in bringing forth exotic animal legislation or regulation, the government has the opportunity to address a long-standing public concern over conditions and care of captive exotic animals. If this opportunity is taken, British Columbia could lay claim to having some of the most progressive and humane policies in the world regarding the treatment of exotic animals. This is an aim that is surely worth pursuing.

Appendix 1

Listed below are animals that should be prohibited or subject to permit requirement in B.C. The list applies to wild-caught, captive-bred exotic animals, and any hybrids

resulting from the crossing of exotic animals. It includes references to the specific risks to public safety, public health and animal welfare for each listing.

Felidae (such as lions, tigers, jaguars, leopards, cougars, cheetah, lynx and bobcat, except the domestic cat, *Felis catus*) ***Danger to public safety; Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Canidae (such as wolves, coyotes and foxes, except the domestic dog, *Canis lupus familiaris*) ***Danger to public safety; Public health risk (rabies); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Ursidae (bears) ***Danger to public safety; Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Hyaenidae (hyenas) ***Danger to public safety; Public health risk (rabies); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Mustelidae (such as skunks, weasels and otters, except the domestic ferret, *Mustela putorius*) ***Danger to public safety (biting, spraying); Public health risk (rabies); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Viverridae (such as civets and genets) ***Danger to public safety (biting); Public health risk (rabies, SARS virus believed to have originated with civets); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Procyonidae (such as raccoons and coatimundis) ***Danger to public safety (biting); Public health risk (rabies, salmonellosis); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Herpestidae (mongooses) ***Danger to public safety (biting); Public health risk (rabies, leptospirosis); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Non-human primates (such as lemurs, monkeys and apes) ***Danger to public safety (biting); Public health risk (herpes B virus, poxviruses, measles, rabies); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Dermoptera (Colugos “flying lemurs”) ***Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Proboscidea (elephants) ***Danger to public safety; Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Hyracoidea (hyraxes) ***Danger to public safety (biting); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met***

Marsupialia (such as opossums, wallabies and kangaroos) **Public health risk (salmonellosis, leptospirosis and Q fever); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Xenarthra (such as sloths, anteaters, armadillos and tamanduas) **Danger to public safety (clawing); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Monotremata (such as echidnas and platypuses) **Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Chiroptera (bats) **Danger to public safety (biting); Public health risk (rabies); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Lagomorpha (rabbits and hares, except the domestic rabbit) **Public health risk (tularemia); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Rodentia (except domesticated species, such as the domestic mouse, rat, hamster and guinea pig) **Public health risk (plague, rabies, hantavirus, tularemia); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Scandentia (tree shrews) **Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Ungulata (such as zebra, moose, gazelle, rhino, hippo and giraffe, except domesticated species, such as domestic horse, donkey and llama) **Danger to public safety (charging/trampling); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Pinnipedia (such as seals, sea lions and walruses) **Danger to public safety (biting); Public health risk (erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae, Mycoplasma); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Cetacea (such as dolphins and whales) **Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Venomous reptiles (such as cobras, rattlesnakes and Gila monsters) **Danger to public safety (biting – potentially lethal); Public health risk (salmonellosis); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Crocodylia (such as alligators, crocodiles and gavials) **Danger to public safety (biting); Public health risk (salmonellosis); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met**

Boas and Pythons (such as green anaconda, reticulated python, African rock python, Indian python, Australian scrub python and boa constrictor) **Danger to public safety**

(biting, constriction); Public health risk (salmonellosis); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met

Varanidae (monitor lizards) *Danger to public safety (biting); Public health risk (salmonellosis); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met*

All other reptiles *Public health risk (salmonellosis); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met*

Venomous invertebrates (such as black widow spiders, tarantulas and blue-ringed octopus) *Danger to public safety (venomous biting); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met*

Raptors (such as owls, hawks and eagles) *Danger to public safety (biting); Public health risk (avian influenza, salmonellosis); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met*

Ratites (ostriches, rheas and cassowaries) *Danger to public safety (charging, kicking); Public health risk (avian influenza, salmonellosis); Captivity inhumane if behavioural needs not met*

