

How the exotic pet business has changed from ancient times – and it's not good news!

KEEPING wild animals as pets has its origins far away from our modern-day understanding of animal biology, behaviour and psychology.

Relatedly, husbandry regimes, books, internet sites and an array of albeit largely self-proclaimed experts in animal care distinctly separate old animal-keeping habits from new ones.

What went on distant years ago and what now goes on in the production, management and general lives of probably thousands of species and millions of individual animals could hardly be more disconnected. And, realise it or not, that's nearly all bad news!

The habit of keeping wild animals as “pets” essentially started in remote human communities where indigenous people would acquire one or another “jungle” species, such as a parrot or primate, and basically “adopt” it into the home. That unfortunately often involved killing the animals' parents then imposing on the new captive a group of surrogate human companions.

I say “captive”, but here's the thing – these pets typically weren't caged, chained, or corralled at all. Rather, they would wander between their true forest home and the domestic environment, much like many cats treat our homes as conveniences that offer something in addition to their other existence doing what they want to do.

Modern-day science still struggles to ascertain exactly what wild animal diets consist of, and what nutrients an animal needs for a healthy life. “Ancient” pets weren't subject to the fickle “hit and miss” dietary

understandings that humans visit on exotic pets today, and which frequently actually damage their health.

Spatial needs were never an issue for animals freely able to meander around thousands of kilometres of natural habitat. Nowadays, many exotics are forced to endure miniature prisons of glass, wood and wire, with factory-made heaters and light bulbs, all of

CLIFFORD WARWICK biologist and medical scientist, looks at the poor understanding among the general public of exotic pets and argues that the trading and keeping of them is harmful and wrong



which combine to form a down-market Heath Robinson-like life-support system, all too commonly resulting in little more than an overpriced death-trap.

And a death-trap it is, because in the UK, for example, at least 75% of the one million pet reptiles and over 90% of the 45 million pet fish are dead within just a year in the home.

Interestingly, during 30-plus years within my own field of reptile biology things have evolved a lot too. In 1990, when I wrote what is probably the first major scientific analysis of reptile behavioural and psychological issues, there were almost no, even partly relevant, publications to draw on.

Nowadays, columns of scientific references garnish serious articles on reptile biological needs and sentience. Whereas former perceptions of reptiles (even those held by respected scientific welfarists) commonly viewed these animals as stoical, low demand and easy maintenance creatures, present evidence-based research shows them to have requirements equal to, and in many cases beyond, those of familiar species.

As Professor Gordon Burghardt, a world leader in animal biology and behaviour, recently stated: “...no captive environments can ever hope to fully simulate or mimic those lived in by wild animals, even the smallest and most sedentary species. All we can really do in zoos and aquariums is to work within the parameters of controlled deprivation.”

Given that Professor Burghardt was referring to the relatively high husbandry standards of zoos and aquariums, the implied prospects for exotic pets kept by regular people in the home are clearly stark, and sadly borne out by the known catastrophic premature mortality rates mentioned earlier.

Indeed, almost everywhere one looks in the trade and keeping pipeline resides overwhelming evidence of misery and destruction. For example, a recent study found that over 70% of exotic pets die within just six weeks at wholesalers, and this shocking mortality rate constituted “industry standard”.

Further back along this pipeline of death are the wild-capture mortalities, which can reach almost 100% even at that initial stage, especially among pet fish.

Stressors and maladies

No matter what species one objectively studies, it seems that exotic pets suffer a multitude of stressors and maladies – from commercial handling by dealers to cage confinement by ignorant hobbyists. I can understand how naïve people want to “own” and then mistakenly buy a piece of wildlife, but I find it hard to differentiate between an exotic pet seller or species collector and a common definition of an animal abuser.

However, the sickness and death counts are only part of the disease against nature that the exotic pet business represents, with environmental and ecological issues now also well highlighted. For example, pets make up one-fifth of the multi-billion dollar wildlife trade, of which 25-44% of animals are illegally trafficked, and wild-caught individuals are often mislabelled as part of the façade of being so-called “captive-bred”.

Also, many of the “lucky” survivors of captivity are discarded into local habitats where they can form invasive alien species and disrupt indigenous ecologies. For instance, one study of the London region found 51 types of exotic ex-pet reptiles and amphibians living “wild”.

Clearly, many traders pocket huge sums at the expense of the environment, species conservation and animal welfare. But if you were thinking that all people involved in this form of animal exploitation somehow escape the consequences then think again! For a start, claims by the exotic pet industry that local people benefit from catching and selling their native wildlife need a broader context.

In my long experience as a field scientist, what actually happens is that people cash in on a transient “boom” only to find this dries up as the species are degraded and local pests rise in the absence of sold off predators – disturbing the ecological balance.

Add to this the rapid emergence of



Dead iguanas at a wholesaler (photo: PETA).

about 70 pet-linked human diseases or “zoonoses” and people have a major bug problem on their hands – often quite literally!

This zoonoses issue is no small beer, either. Just one of these diseases, reptile-related salmonellosis, is annually responsible for an estimated 74,000 cases of human illness in the USA, and 5,600 cases in the UK.

Furthermore, published medical data staggeringly show that over one-quarter of all hospitalised salmonellosis events in children under five years are caused by pet reptiles alone.

What all this means is that the more we have learnt about animals, and arguably especially certain previously overlooked examples such as reptiles and invertebrates, the more apparent it becomes that trading and keeping them as pets is inherently harmful and wrong.

Those involved in exotic pet keeping and trading create alien environments where previously pristine wildlife gets reduced to mere unwilling shadows of nature.

Quiet facilitators

Pointing fingers at the culprits behind pet shop counters and lounge curtains alike is easy, yet hiding even deeper in the darkness are the quiet facilitators of the exotic pet fad – the industry's friendly civil servants and a small minority of veterinarians with trade sympathies or direct vested interests.

The wrongful survival of the exotic pet industry relies not on rational argument, science or common-sense, but wholly and entirely on the historical trade-favouring biases of ingrained officials within government departments, who have long mollified wildlife traders to the point of consistently breaking their own rules on adopting evidence-based policy.

However, just as careful scrutiny has exposed the exotic pet trade, so too will governments feel the focus of the same spotlight as a global scientific community increasingly criticises the keeping of wildlife in the home, and all who encourage it.

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