

# The exotic pet industry



**By Clifford Warwick**

PGDipMedSci CBiol CSci EurProBiol FOCAE FSB

Biologist & Medical Scientist



*200 iguanas dead in one shipment of 414.*

PETA



**Hedgehogs crowded together at a wholesaler, many found sick and injured.**

PETA

The exotic pet industry involves well over 1,000 species including invertebrates, fishes, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals in a global market of many millions of animals annually. The fact that we do not know how many is a sign of the way this commercial sector has long evaded normal criteria for business practices. Nevertheless, available numbers are staggering, for example the UK alone imports approximately 40 million pet fish per year – almost all of which die prematurely. Around 700,000 reptiles enter the British pet trade yearly, and about 75% perish in their first twelve months in the home. Worldwide, the market for living curios is both vast and countless. Very many if not most of these animals are wild-caught, although an increasing number are captive-bred under intensive conditions.

Whether stripped from nature to the detriment of species and whole ecologies or crowded into breeding centres, 'wild pets' face a similar catalogue of harm where cramped and crude storage, handling, transport and confinement commonly result in stress, fear, injury, disease and death. Superficial attempts to mask this damage are regularly employed by the pet industry, which frequently misdescribes or plainly falsifies the nature of what goes on behind the scenes, and instead promote the keeping of a lizard or other creature as 'easy'. However,

numerous scientific and high profile investigations have exposed the sanitised facade of exotic pet trading and revealed a translucent membrane stretched thinly across an unsavoury and often covert and illegal business.

Species degradation due to wildlife trade (including for pets) is now well recognised as a major cause of ecological alteration in these animals' home countries, where even subtle disturbances to a former 'balance' can lead to the emergence of pests that were previously prey, predators with nothing to eat, and 'particles' such as viruses that were once stable. Also, importing exotic pets brings new ecological damage, as escapees invade local habitat and displace indigenous species. Controlling 'invasive alien species' costs at least €12.5bn annually in the EU, and could reach 10 times that. Thus dealing with these trade-made pests alone may wipe out a community's entire economic 'benefit' from any exotic pet-related revenues.

Humans are also direct casualties of the wild pet trade, as novel pathogens from remote regions of the world are 'express-delivered' Trojan horse-like to homes in and on the bodies of exotic animals. At least 70 'zoonotic' pet-related infections and infestations are known. For example, pet turtles caused around 280,000 cases of salmonellosis in the USA yearly until the trade in small turtles was banned in 1975. In the UK pet reptiles may ►

*A lizard cramped into a vivarium.*

Animal Protection Agency





A selection of dead animals from one day at a wholesaler.

PETA

cause up to 6,000 cases of the disease each year. Globally, the picture is very concerning. Agricultural animals are also at risk from imported wild pet pathogens, and it is worth noting that the avian influenza virus achieved an early foot in the UK's door via a consignment of birds bound for the pet trade.

Notwithstanding the questionable moral implications of stealing wild animals from one part of the world and then selling them to people in semi-detached houses and apartments elsewhere, the illegal and legal aspects of the pet trade are often so entangled as to make the beginning of one and the end of the other impossible to determine. Regardless the criminal trade is thought to reach \$18-26bn annually.

This Spring a 'European Parliament Resolution on Wildlife Crime' acknowledged some important facts, namely:

*"as long as demand for wildlife products remains high and enforcement effort is low, legal trade will continue to serve as a front for the illegal trade and will drive poaching";*

*"organised crime groups, especially those with smuggling capabilities, find wildlife trafficking attractive because of the lack of law enforcement capacity and implementation, and because of high profits and weak penalties";*

and concludes: *"A main problem is that significant gaps remain regarding the effective enforcement of existing*

*rules, both in the EU and globally. This is often linked to the low political priority given to the issue, insufficient resources at national level, and lack of awareness about the severity of the problem."*

As a scientist who has for three decades investigated all aspects of the wildlife trade, and who has followed animal collectors and other traders through forests, swamps and cities in many regions of the world, I can probably say more than most that the exotic pet trade is out of control. In fact, it has never been under control.

So how has this mess come about? In my view there are two main causes. Obviously the pet industry and its promoters bear practical responsibility. However, civil servants are the problematic facilitators of this harmful trade. Civil servants the world over sit behind desks representing the major regulatory institutions such as CITES (the Convention on International trade in Endangered Species) and are typically not only thousands of miles away from the problems on the ground, but also a million miles away from what is necessary to protect natural resources. Ironically, the exotic pet industry, whose business frequently involves global harm to animals, people and the environment and which includes threats of extinction for entire animal populations and species, is itself being saved from extinction not by its own adaptation but by incompetent government officials. ►



**An adult tortoise being crudely handled at a pet market.**

Animal Protection Agency



**Pythons cramped in a bin at a wholesaler, numerous were dead and crushed as the snakes try to seclude themselves.**

PETA



**Baby tortoises confined in plastic boxes at a European pet market.**

Animal Protection Agency

Most industries adapt to a changing commercial landscape. Often it is only through stricter imposition of controls that change comes, and after extinction looms on an industry itself. However, so far, governmental inertia fueled by civil servants misleading Parliamentarians about what is genuinely achievable, means that the exotic pet industry currently has little need to adapt.

A case demonstrating the disproportionate leniency enjoyed by exotic pet traders involved the world's (and at the time the UK's) most commonly traded reptile - the red-eared terrapin. Despite natural potential longevities of well over 30 years these coin-sized baby turtles frequently had their carcasses flushed down toilets after only a few short yet miserable months. In efforts to protect the terrapin in nature, where many were being wild-caught to form captive-breeding stock, 300 expert turtle biologists issued strong evidential opinions to the UK's environment department stating that the species was being wiped out and needed CITES intervention. In response, the 'competent' civil servants quickly scoured around for counter evidence and found two unqualified pet dealers, one of which said he had heard the species was 'still abundant somewhere' and another who issued a handwritten note stating 'get off my business'. Nevertheless, the UK civil servants replied to the turtle biologists 'clarifying' that the pet trade experts had cast sufficient doubt on the scientific evidence to negate any

protection for the species.

Even in these 'greener' times the pet industry is still influencing civil servants' offices and pulling their strings. In my experience the UK probably has one of the worst records for, let's say, 'unhealthy collaboration' with wildlife traders.

A current example involves the pet fish industry, where the UK government – via its 'Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs' (DEFRA) and its agent the 'Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science' (CEFAS) recently conducted a 'review' to evaluate risks of released fish becoming invasive alien species. Any normal government commercial regulatory mechanism would withhold permission for a business until each product (ie each fish type) had been expressly proven safe for the environment. Instead, DEFRA and CEFAS elected to simply turn to a commercial 'pet book' and put all fish species they could find in trade (except catfish) on a 'good to sell' list (otherwise known as a 'white-list'). Essentially, there was no genuine scientific review (which both DEFRA and CEFAS were supposed to apply) and there already exists scientific evidence showing that they were 'rubber-stamping' known invasive species such as guppies. As if that were not bad enough, DEFRA also decided to make the most commonly traded species of carp (which includes the popular goldfishes) altogether exempt from the new regulations for no greater rationale than because they are so important to traders. This unscientific trade-



Mark Fischer

mollycoddling approach underpins almost all work done on the exotic pet trade by almost all governments, and accounts for the globally pervasive harm inherent to wildlife trade in general. Of course, such fishy business is good for a trader whose activities encourage capturing animals by pouring cyanide into natural waterways to 'stun' their catch, but extremely bad for the fish and the environment.

At a recent European meeting on exotic pets, a number of scientists directly challenged a key civil servant in the European Commission as to why the Commission (who are supposed to serve Parliament and not dictate to it) were insisting on a short list of banned animals to help guard against invasive alien species (a so-called 'blacklist') rather than allow only a short list of permitted species that science could demonstrate in advance pose no threat. The somewhat embarrassed Commissioner's (rather anticipated) reply was: 'The pet trade wouldn't like such a list.' If government agents were to ask all those responsible for commercial harm what type of controls they consider acceptable then this would set the ground for industrial anarchy.

And all this wildlife trade-favouring heel-dragging by civil servants goes on while EU Parliamentarians are calling on the European Commission and Member States to: "...adopt and implement clear and effective laws and policies that dissuade consumption of products derived from vulnerable wildlife species, to educate consumers on

the impact of their consumption of wildlife species, and to provide adequate information on the consequences and dangers inherent in the uncontrolled spread of certain alien species through native ecosystems."

Last month, EU Parliamentarians also elected to 'man-up' and tell the Commission that their trade-accommodating 'black list' idea wasn't good enough and ordered them to do it again. All this emerges amidst the impassioned warnings of Prince Charles and Prince William on the urgent need to act against wildlife crime. That's what it takes to get things done!

There are really only two genuine solutions to the major, diverse and growing problems of the exotic pet trade. The first and most sensible approach is a total ban on any trade in wild animals as pets. Outright bans are proven effective measures. The USA's Wild Bird Conservation Act (1992), the 2007 European ban on the importation of wild-caught birds for pets, a 1982 CITES ban on wild tortoise imports, the 1975 US ban on red-eared terrapins, the 1997 EU ban on red-eared terrapins, and others have turned former massive trades into relative trickles. Some illegal trade in these animals continues, as do illicit drugs and arms, but resolutions lay in better enforcement.

The second approach requires the widespread introduction of the 'positive list' system – effectively a moratorium on animal trade unless there is conclusive independent scientific evidence demonstrating trade is safe for people, animals and the environment. Belgium ►



**Baby tortoises confined in plastic boxes at a European pet market.**

Animal Protection Agency

already uses the positive list, which works better and more economically than anything else. Now numerous countries are considering the system, with the Animal Protection Agency, Eurogroup for Animals, and the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe among three key organisations and many Parliamentarians behind the move.

### Conclusions

That the exotic pet trade exists at all is arguably a defacement of scientific reason, moral substance and common sense. Too often the tail of vested interest pet traders is found wagging the guard-dog of regulation and enforcement. In the medium-to-long terms, complete bans on trading wild animals as pets must be implemented. The common pet industry claim that bans will drive trade underground says a lot about the disrespect for law of many who sell wild animals. In the short-to-medium terms the widespread introduction of positive lists would allow for only extensively and scientifically pre-checked species to be approved for trade. It is unacceptable that the exotic pet trade continues to evade the normal precautionary principles of other, even far less harmful, industries. As human scientific and ethical awareness advances, future generations will reflect on the exotic pet industry as we now do trafficking and slavery of our own species, and condemn it for having ever existed ■

### + More Information

Animal Protection Agency  
[www.apa.org.uk](http://www.apa.org.uk)

Emergent Disease Foundation  
<http://emergentdisease.org>

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals  
[www.peta.org](http://www.peta.org)