



Exotic Animals in Private Hands: The Fate of Primate “Pets” in the United States



Primates as “Pets”

Millions of wild and exotic animals are kept as “pets” by private “owners” across the United States. These animals include, among other species, tigers, lions, cougars, bears, wolves, nonhuman primates, and reptiles. By their very nature, these animals are incapable of being domesticated or tamed. Not only are exotic animals inherently dangerous and unpredictable, but most people cannot provide the special care, housing, diet, and maintenance they require.

Monkeys and other nonhuman primates are among the wild animals most commonly kept as “pets.” A recent investigation carried out by the Animal Protection Institute (API) has provided a graphic account of the poor conditions in which exotic “pets,” including primates, are kept; the suffering they endure; and the inadequate and inappropriate care and treatment they receive — as well as the real threats exotic “pets” pose to public safety.

In many states, there are no laws governing the possession of wild and exotic animals, and people are allowed to keep such animals in their houses and backyards without restrictions and with minimal oversight.

API’s investigation has shown that primates may be forced into unnatural lives in settings that are highly abnormal for them. In fact, many “owners” purchase their primates on a whim with no prior knowledge of the species.

Primates commonly kept as “pets” in the United States include:

- baboons
- gibbons
- spider monkeys
- capuchins
- macaques
- tamarins
- chimpanzees
- marmosets
- vervets

These nonhuman primates are sold by backyard breeders, at auctions, in “pet” stores, or even over the Internet. The animals are usually forcibly removed from their mothers at birth and are hand-raised by humans in an effort to make them more “manageable” before being sold on the open market. Such practices can interfere with the animal’s development and almost always result in dysfunctional behavior.

Many primates kept as “pets” are raised in human households as if they were children. They may be forced to wear children’s clothing and diapers, and be taken around on a leash or in a harness. Some even have pierced ears and wear jewelry. People may try to train their “pet” monkey to sit in a high chair, drink from a cup, and use cutlery. This is an inappropriate and unnatural way to care for wild animals.

Primates are highly social, intelligent animals with complex behavioral and psychological needs. They require companionship, group living, space, and an enriched environment. API’s investigation has shown that, deprived of the companionship of others of their kind and raised like children in human households, these highly social, sensitive, and intelligent animals lead lonely and dysfunctional lives. They often develop abnormal, stereotypical behavior such as pacing, rocking, and self-mutilation. Many “owners” will also deliberately mutilate their “pet” primates to make them more manageable, by





Primate "owners" with their dressed-up "pets" spend time at a Primate Picnic gathering.

having their canine teeth (or all teeth) as well as their fingernails surgically removed. Such practices can be extremely painful and stressful for the animals.

Primates are wild animals and potentially dangerous. They pose a serious safety risk to their "owners" and anyone who comes into contact with them. Usually purchased as cute infants, they start to exhibit unpredictable behavior after the age of two years. As they reach sexual maturity, they become larger and more aggressive, and will attack to defend themselves and to establish dominance. Of monkey bites reported since 1990, many resulted in serious injury to the "owner," a neighbor, or a stranger on the street.

Primates can transmit organisms that can potentially cause dangerous human diseases. These include viruses such as herpes B, yellow fever, monkeypox, Ebola, Marburg, and simian immunodeficiency. Bacterial infections such as tuberculosis can also be transmitted. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) asserts that the increase in macaque monkeys in the pet trade may constitute an emerging disease threat in the United States.

Eventually, primates who become too difficult for their "owners" to care for or who have outgrown their usefulness as "pets" and are no longer cute and cuddly may end up languishing in small pens in backyards, doomed to live under deplorable conditions. They may even be abandoned or killed; a very few lucky ones are placed in genuine sanctuaries to live out the rest of their lives.

Primate Picnics

Primate "owners" discuss issues and share information about the keeping of primates as "pets" in Internet chat rooms. They also belong to clubs and associations through which they regularly meet, often taking their "pets" with them. One such event is called a "Primate Picnic," which is held in various cities across the country. At these national gatherings, "owners" of nonhuman primates come together to eat, talk, and socialize, while proudly displaying their monkeys, often in children's clothes.

Such events are not open to the public and little is known about them. API's investigators, however, were able to visit one such gathering in Centralia, Illinois. The occasion could best be described as a bizarre and grotesque spectacle.

Primate "owners" from across the U.S. traveled to the location with their "pet" monkeys. Some stayed in RVs; others stayed at a local motel. There were around 100 people and 60 nonhuman primates present. Most of the primates were transported in pet carriers, but at the picnic they were paraded around in strollers and harnesses. There were various species, including macaques, gibbons, spider monkeys, and even one female hamadryas baboon wearing an orange dress. Many had had some or all of their teeth removed. Some "owners" even had monkeys for sale.

Many of the animals were clearly disturbed by what was happening around them. They displayed signs of stereotypical behavior, rocking and circling inside their cages and traveling crates, some clutching soft toys. One spider monkey had on a frilly dress with matching underpants and a hat. She also had jewelry, including stud earrings through ears that had been pierced. Another monkey, who also had pierced ears, was dressed like a ballerina. These animals belong in the wild and to see them in frilly dresses and jewelry was a pitiful sight. Events such as these show a clear disrespect for the animals themselves.

Abundant Ignorance

API's investigation dramatically shows how many primate "owners" were clearly ignorant of the complex needs of their "pets."

For example, when one person from Ohio was asked why his "pet" monkey was rocking backward and forward inside her small cage, he replied:

"She always does that. It's just her way of passing time, I think. A lot of them do that."

Such dysfunctional behavior is highly abnormal, but is commonly seen in wild animals kept as "pets," confined in inadequate and inappropriate housing. This man's response demonstrates a serious lack of knowledge — all-too-common among exotic "pet owners" — about the complex behavioral and psychological needs of wild animals and the fact that it is the human being's actions that are producing dysfunctional and disturbed behaviors in the animals.

Another "owner" who attended the Primate Picnic in Illinois had an aggressive rhesus macaque called George. The person was extremely proud of how "good" George was compared to when they first obtained him. Her implication was that she and her husband had "rescued" George by buying him from people who bought him from an exotic animal auction:

"They didn't know how to care for him. He actually ate bird seed, never wore a diaper, never had a bath.... He was a little wild when we got him.... He was about five months, so we didn't get him as a little baby. But he's been great. We've worked with him and worked with him and he's so good."

The woman was under the misguided notion that somehow this monkey's life and behavior had improved because he now wore diapers and could be dressed up and taken around on a leash in public. George's life would have been much better, however, if this woman had taken him to a genuine sanctuary, where he could have lived a more natural life with other rhesus macaques.

Another private owner from Ohio had two Japanese macaques, a male and female, singly housed. Both monkeys displayed severe forms of stereotypical behavior, such as repetitive head and body turns. The owner believed that she was providing a good home for these animals, having apparently "rescued" them from a bad situation. However, both animals were clearly dysfunctional and keeping them on their own in concrete pens and providing them with a television was not giving them the appropriate quality of life.

This "owner" proudly displays her two monkeys at a Primate Picnic. They were dressed in diapers, one sitting on her lap, and the other hiding under her shirt.



In Their Own Words

"I'm fortunate, I know. I'm blessed. And people that don't own monkeys, when they look at these monkeys, see pets. When I look at them, I see children with fur."

— Person at Primate Picnic

"It's really not a good idea to put your face in their face... 'cause I've seen a couple of people who have had their faces bit really bad."

— Private owner, Ohio

"They pulled his teeth and then he still could bite.... Teeth pulling is common for capuchins in the States. You see they are horrendous biters. I mean, they bite so bad that they can just rip tendons and... they go for your jugular."

— Private owner, Ohio

"He has everything but canines.... He'll get you worse with his fingernails.... Now, he'll bruise you up real good if he gets you... but he has never ripped anyone open or anything like that. It's just bruises."

— Person at Primate Picnic referring to a "pet" rhesus macaque

"People in the United States like to buy monkeys and then they don't know what to do with them, they don't know how to care for them right and all that."

— Person at Primate Picnic

"They can hurt you bad, I mean like real bad. I'm thinking the couple of times I got attacked by [one of her monkeys]. If he would have had his fangs, I probably would have been crippled in certain ways because they puncture so bad."

— Private owner, Ohio



A private owner from Ohio describes how she got her first monkey:

"I was reading a newspaper and I read it and it says 'monkeys for sale.' So I called the newspaper. She came over to the hotel with Joe.... He was 10 days old, no bigger than a Coke can, and I bought him. He was my first one and she gave me a bottle, two diapers, and said, 'Have a nice life.' I didn't know what to do."

This person also had an exhibitor's license and, for a fee, took her monkeys to events such as children's parties.

API's Recommendations

API is calling for these key steps to be taken to help protect public safety and animal welfare:

- States must act to pass laws that ensure that the private possession of exotic animals, including primates, is prohibited.
- The breeding, selling, and display of exotic animals, including primates, at roadside zoos and menageries must end.
- The public must be educated about the public safety threats and animal welfare concerns associated with roadside zoos and exotic "pets," and be shown that wild animals do not belong in private hands.
- Where exotic animals cannot be transferred to a genuine sanctuary, existing owners must, at a minimum, increase the standard of care being provided to ensure the safety and well-being of the animals and the public.

Individuals can play an important role in ending this industry in the following ways:

- For the animals' sake and for your health and safety, please do not buy exotic animals such as primates as "pets" and encourage your friends and family not to keep exotic animals as "pets."
- Do not visit or patronize roadside zoos and menageries or disingenuous "sanctuaries" that breed or display animals for profit.
- If your state, city, or county does not already prohibit private possession of exotic animals, contact your state senator and representative or your city and county council members and urge them to introduce such legislation.
- Support legislation at all levels to ban the private possession of exotic animals.



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