



# EXOTIC PETS

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is an exotic pet?

Exotic pets are wild animals belonging to species that have not been through the millennia-long process of domestication who are kept captive in private homes for companionship, hobby or interest, or entertainment. They include animals like lions, tigers, monkeys, reptiles, fish, and birds.

### How many exotic pets are there in the United States?

It is estimated that there are more than 100,000 households in the United States that have exotic pets. The majority of the exotic animals kept are fish, followed by reptiles.<sup>1</sup>

It is estimated that there are more tigers kept privately in Texas than remain in the wild (approximately 5,000)<sup>2</sup> and that there could be up to 15,000 primates kept as pets in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

### What is wrong with keeping exotic pets?

Domestication is a deliberate process that occurs over thousands of years and changes the animal genetically to express traits which make them better

accustomed to living with, or alongside, humans. For this reason, domestic dogs, whose domestication process began over 10,000 years ago, are not the same animal as their wild forebears, the wolf.

Because they have not been domesticated, wild animals have needs and instincts that cannot be met when held in a captive environment. These needs might be social, physical, space-oriented, nutritional, or psychological. When these needs are denied, the animals suffer.

Just because an animal is very commonly kept as a pet, such reptiles, birds, and fish, doesn't mean that they are suitable to be pets.

There are truly very few animals who can thrive when kept by humans in their homes. Dogs are one of the few animals who – if properly cared for – can live a fulfilled life as a pet.

### **How can you tell that the animals are suffering?**

Animals tell us when they are unhappy, stressed, or in pain but it can sometimes be difficult for us to recognize because they are so different from us and may express these experiences differently than we expect. Often, stress manifests in exotic pets in what are known as “stereotypic behaviors,” repetitive, functionless behaviors that serve no apparent purpose. In big cats, this might look like pacing backwards and forwards in their cage or biting the bars. In monkeys and birds, this might mean overgrooming or chewing body parts – sometimes to the point of serious injury. In reptiles, you might see them demonstrating ITB (Interaction with Transparent Boundaries), in which they attempt to climb the wall of their tank repeatedly (often mistaken as trying to “greet” their owner by coming to the edge of the tank).<sup>4</sup> In fish, pacing is common, with the fish tracing the same route repeatedly in their tanks.

Animals may also suffer lethargy, poor health, and nutritional deficiencies among other ailments. They may also suffer premature death.

### **Are animals caught from the wild?**

While many animals are bred with the specific purpose of being sold by dealers into the pet trade, some animals are still captured from their wild homes (both legally and illegally) for the pet trade.

Reptiles, fish, and birds are commonly wild-caught. Even if a pet owner can guarantee that the animal they are purchasing has not been caught from the wild, the demand from countries such as the United States influences trade in wild caught animals in their natural habitats.

### **If you take really good care of them, is it okay to keep exotic pets?**

The concern for exotic animals kept as pets is not that we believe that they are being actively abused by cruel people, but that they suffer in spite of their owners trying to provide the best possible care. The largest, most complex enclosure in your home or yard cannot come close to the natural habitat of a wild animal. For this reason, even if you do everything you can to provide the best captive conditions, life in captivity is a direct cause of wild animal suffering.

### **What are the dangers of keeping exotic pets?**

Aside from the obvious risk of injury – or even death in some cases – posed by an angry big cat or ape, animals can carry diseases to which humans have little to no immunity. Known as zoonotic diseases, these are illnesses that can be passed between animals and humans and vice versa. For example, macaque monkeys are carriers of Herpes B virus which, if untreated in humans, results in death in around 80% of cases.<sup>5</sup> Parrots and other birds can carry a form of chlamydia that can pass to humans.<sup>6</sup> Reptiles can be carriers of salmonella.

### **If exotic pets are banned, what would happen to the animals currently kept?**

If bills such as the Captive Primate Safety Act and the Big Cat Public Safety Act are passed, the primates and big cats currently being kept as pets would be “grandfathered” into the law. This means that animals will not be taken away from their owners under the new laws. The laws would impact future trade in these animals and prevent new individuals from entering the marketplace and being sold.

### **Read more about exotic pets in these reports by Born Free USA:**

- [Public Danger, Private Pain](#) (2021)
- [Downloading Cruelty](#) (2016)

1. Source: <https://www.veterinarians.org/exotic-pets-statistics/>
2. Source: <https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/houston-tiger-population-texas-pets-16170908.php#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20World%20Wildlife,in%20Texas%20by%20some%20estimates.>
3. Source: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/news-monkeys-primates-pets-trade-ethics>
4. Arena, Phillip & Warwick, & Lindley, & Steedman, Catrina. (2013). Assessing reptile welfare using behavioral criteria. In practice. 35. 123-131. 10.1136/inp.f1197.
5. Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/herpesvirus/index.html>
6. Source: [https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/avian-chlamydiosis.aspx#:~:text=Avian%20chlamydiosis%20\(AC\)%20is%20a,commonly%20pass%20infection%20to%20humans.](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/avian-chlamydiosis.aspx#:~:text=Avian%20chlamydiosis%20(AC)%20is%20a,commonly%20pass%20infection%20to%20humans.)

