

## Pet Shops: An Ugly Reality

Pet shops across the United States are often characterized by widespread and serious animal suffering. In these pet shops, animals live in filthy, overcrowded cages; they are denied needed veterinary care; and they show serious signs of psychological distress. For wild animals sold as pets, such as birds and reptiles, these conditions are particularly unbearable.

In light of the conditions present in many pet shops, one can't help but wonder, "Why?" Why do pet shops crowd animals in cages, neglect to clean enclosures, fail to provide enrichment for the animals in their care, deny veterinary care to injured animals, and continue to sell animals who adapt poorly to captivity? The fact is, when retailers are faced with a choice between endangering profits and endangering animals, the bottom line usually wins. So, when animals are exploited for commercial gain, suffering is often involved. Common problems include:

**Unsanitary Conditions.** Many animals in pet shops are denied the most basic aspect of decent care: a clean, safe environment. Filthy cages and enclosures encrusted with feces are an all-too-common sight in pet shops. Such a lack of sanitation can expose animals to bacteria, viruses, or fungi that can cause illness or death and that can also pose public health and safety risks to humans.

**Injury, Illness, and Neglect.** Because the cost of veterinary consultation and treatment can exceed the commercial value of an animal, there is a huge incentive for pet shop owners to deny animals the necessary treatment, meaning that many animals are simply left to suffer or even die from untreated illnesses or injuries.

While animals suffering from such conditions in pet shops are often removed from public view, it is not uncommon to find animals on the sales floor exhibiting such conditions and potentially spreading disease to humans or other animals.

**Small Enclosures and Crowding.** In a retail environment, there is considerable economic advantage in maximizing the amount of "merchandise" kept in any given area. Pet shops are no exception.

Although some domesticated animals may have been artificially selected to better tolerate captive environments, there are always limits to what these animals can endure. Even highly domesticated species such as mice, rats, hamsters, and guinea pigs can suffer in undersized or overcrowded enclosures.

For non-domesticated animals such as reptiles and birds, creating a non-stressful captive environment is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Even wild animals who have been bred in

captivity for generations maintain their wild instincts and the adaptations their species made to living in the wild. As a result, these animals are even more susceptible to problems associated with captive environments.

**Psychological Distress.** Psychological distress manifests itself in a variety of behaviors often seen in animals in pet shops. Vocalizing and/or retreating to a corner of the cage farthest from human observers are common signs of fear. Attempts to escape by frantically flying or running around the cage or jumping toward the top of the enclosure are also signs of distress in captive animals.

Interaction with transparent boundaries, such as continuously walking onto the glass, reflective surface, or walls of an enclosure and either attempting to climb on it or go through, is another sign of distress. This behavior is particularly common in reptiles, whose natural instinct to roam unconfined remains intact, resulting in a lifetime of frustration when forced to live in small, captive environments.

Repetitive behaviors, also known as "stereotypies," are considered important indicators of long-term animal welfare problems. Common examples of such behaviors include "route tracing," or pacing, in which the animal repeatedly follows a predictable and unvarying path; repetitive head bobbing and weaving; bar biting; and tongue rolling.

**Lack of Enrichment.** Many pet shops also fail to provide the animals they sell with any enrichment items, despite the proven benefit of enrichment and the ease with which enrichment items could be provided.

Multiple studies show that providing enrichment such as toys, exercise wheels, hide boxes, and chewing objects to caged animals benefits the animals' welfare. Enrichment can reduce or eliminate boredom, psychological distress, and the development of stereotypic or destructive behavior in captive animals.

### **How You Can Help**

- Use your consumer power to stop animal exploitation by refusing to shop at stores that sell live animals and by supporting only responsible retailers that refuse to sell animals.
- Don't purchase an animal from a pet store. If you feel you are qualified and prepared to provide lifetime care for an animal, adopt one from an animal rescue group, your local shelter or humane society, or someone who has lost the interest or ability to care for an animal in his or her possession.
- Report any inhumane conditions observed at a pet shop to your local animal control agency and to the appropriate local business bureau or consumer affairs agency.