

Exotic pet trade, explained

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Each year millions of exotic animals are sold around the world, destined for people's basements and backyards. The term "exotic" doesn't have a set definition, but it usually refers to a wild animal or one that's more unusual than your standard dog or cat. The booming business in exotic pets is known as the exotic pet trade.

Some of this trade is legal, but many times animals are captured from the wild illegally to supply demand for exotic pets. The illicit sales of live animals comprises a major part of the overall illegal wildlife trade, a multibillion-dollar global black market.

Booming demand

People have kept exotic pets throughout history, but demand for unique creatures has exploded in recent years. Much of this can be attributed to the popularity of e-commerce and social media websites, which have provided a way for people to easily advertise the sale of live animals. They've also popularized exotic animals by providing a place where people can

show them off. A flurry of videos posted to YouTube in 2015 of slow lorises eating rice balls in captivity, for example, went viral and led to poaching of the wide-eyed primates for the pet trade.



Where exotic pets come from

Some exotic pets are bred in captivity. Conservationists often see captive breeding as a way to save wild animals from poaching for the pet trade, and many countries allow for the export of captive-bred animals as long as the proper legal documents are obtained.

But countless animals are taken from the wild before they're sold as pets. After an animal is plucked from the wild—often in violation of the law—it might be used in a breeding operation, sold locally, smuggled out of the country, or intentionally mislabeled as captive-bred and exported legally. Researchers have discovered that people are “laundering” Indian star tortoises from Jordan, red-eyed tree frogs from Nicaragua, and many other species.

The effects of the exotic pet trade

Rampant poaching for the exotic pet trade is devastating animal populations worldwide. It has decimated numbers of Madagascar's prized radiated tortoises, for example, and led to the endangered status of African gray parrots, birds known for their impressive vocal abilities. What's more, many animals suffer during capture and transport—and even if they do end up at their final destination alive, they are often distressed—unable to eat, move, and behave as they would in the wild.

The exotic pet business also affects humans and animals not involved in the trade. Wild animals have the potential to attack their owners or spread disease, such as ebola and SARS. An outbreak of exotic Newcastle disease (END), which resulted in the deaths of 12 million birds in the U.S. in the 1970s, was traced to parrots smuggled from South America.

Efforts to combat the trade

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), an international agreement signed by 183 governments, has voted to ban or limit trade in many animal species sought after as pets. Many countries also prohibit domestic sales or possession of certain animals. In the U.S., laws regulating the ownership of exotic pets vary from state to state.

In addition, nonprofits around the world have been trying to shut down the exotic pet trade by educating people about the harms of owning these animals. Research conducted by the World Animal Protection, a U.K.-based nonprofit, found that the best way to deter people from owning an exotic animal is to emphasize the risks they pose to humans, not the animals themselves.

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