



# Exotic animals as pets

TOGETHER WE CAN...IMPROVE PET ANIMAL WELFARE

## Key facts...

- ★ Exotic animals are increasingly popular pets in the UK.
- ★ The needs of exotic pets, as defined under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, can be challenging to meet because they are fundamentally linked to certain environmental conditions that can be difficult to replicate in a domestic environment.
- ★ The RSPCA is particularly concerned about the keeping of primates as pets, as these complex, intelligent animals suffer disproportionately in a domestic environment. We believe that primates are never suitable pets.
- ★ With the advent of online selling the internet has become a major medium through which breeders, dealers and traders advertise and sell pet animals, including many different exotics.
- ★ The RSPCA has identified a number of problems with the current legislation which regulates the pet trade in general - covering dogs, cats, rabbits, etc as well as exotic animals and believes it should be reviewed and updated to provide better protection for these animals.

## The issue

Exotic animals<sup>1</sup>, particularly reptiles, are increasingly popular as pets in the UK with one recent report estimating the number of reptiles and amphibians kept at between 1.3-7million<sup>2</sup>. Exotic animals have not undergone the same long process of domestication that more familiar companion animals species, such as dogs and cats, have done and therefore meeting their highly specialised welfare needs in a domestic environment can be very difficult. This means many can be kept in poor conditions, impacting on their health and welfare.

## Welfare concerns

The needs of exotic pets (as defined under the [Animal Welfare Act 2006 \(AWA\)](#)) can be challenging to meet because they are fundamentally linked to certain environmental conditions that can be difficult to replicate in a domestic environment. For example, many exotic pets need large enclosures and a carefully controlled environment, including specific levels of heat, light and UV, or they will become ill. They also need to be allowed to exhibit natural behaviours such as burrowing, climbing and basking. The consequences of them not receiving the care they need can be very serious and includes behavioural problems (such as increased aggression) as well as physical symptoms (such as bone disease, known as rickets in humans).

Some sellers are guilty of trading in these animals without ensuring realistic expectations or appropriate knowledge in the buyer<sup>3</sup>. Numerous factors, including a lack of reliable care information and specialist vets, a loss of interest, realisation of false expectations or an inability to provide for the animal's needs, can lead to suffering and/or abandonment. As a result, the RSPCA is seeing the number of calls to our Cruelty and Advice line about exotic pets, particularly reptiles, increasing year on year. For example, in 2015 we received 6,425 calls regarding all exotic pets and investigated 2,772 calls about reptiles (which

<sup>1</sup> The definition of an 'exotic' pet varies greatly but we define them as any wild animal kept as a pet. We follow the principle of Defra's definition of 'wild animal' from the [Secretary of State's Standards of Modern Zoo Practice](#) and define it as 'any species that is not normally domesticated in the UK', which includes reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates, fish, birds (such as parrots) and mammals (such as meerkats and raccoons).

<sup>2</sup> *One Click Away* (Blue Cross and Born Free Foundation, 2015)

<https://www.bluecross.org.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/one-click-away-full-report.pdf> (accessed 03.12.15)

<sup>3</sup> *Handle with Care* (RSPCA, 2004) <http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/other/concerns> (accessed 03.12.15)

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involved 5,765 individual animals). This represents a 50% increase in the number of investigations we are carrying out involving reptiles in just seven years.

RSPCA inspectors have investigated some particularly distressing incidents involving exotic pets in the past year, such as:

- Two corn snakes found dumped with the rubbish in freezing January temperatures in Barrow in Furness. Remarkably, both snakes survived.
- A young bearded dragon dumped in a shoebox in Port Talbot suffering from chronic metabolic bone disease, from which he sadly died.
- Four royal pythons found dead in a stream in Denbigh. The animals were found underneath a footbridge, one in a plastic bag, suggesting they had been purposefully abandoned.
- 12 royal pythons dumped in a cardboard box outside a veterinary clinic in Plymouth. All 12 had respiratory problems (probably caused by a lack of proper heating) and sadly all but two died as a result.
- More than 20 exotic pets (including caiman, monitor lizards, geckos, tarantulas, iguanas and several types of snake such as pythons and an anaconda) found dead in a garage in Edgware, London. The garage had been abandoned for six months, the animals simply left to die inside.

In addition, between 3-20% of exotic animals destined for the pet trade are captured from the wild and transported considerable distances to be sold in the UK, further endangering their welfare. The RSPCA has grave concerns about the way exotic animals are trapped, transported and imported for the pet trade and this concern extends to those exotics who are captive bred.

## Primates

Some exotic animals will never make suitable pets and the RSPCA is particularly concerned about the keeping of primates as pets<sup>4</sup>. Primates are highly intelligent mammals with a range of complex needs. In relation to body size, primates have large brains, which support great intelligence. Many primates have complex language skills, use tools, show advanced learning, numerical ability and planning, perform tactical social interactions, and are capable of human-like emotion. It has been scientifically shown that some are self-aware and can reflect on their feelings and past experiences. Primates are thus likely to have a greater capacity to suffer than many other animals.

For good welfare, both physical and psychological health must be ensured. For example, primates need to be kept in social groups, in complex, specially-designed indoor and outdoor facilities. Yet the RSPCA commonly finds primates kept as pets in bird cages, on their own, in people's living rooms. Owners commonly lack knowledge and understanding of the species they own and this can have serious welfare implications, including bone diseases, diabetes and psychological symptoms such as self mutilation, depression and hair plucking.

## Trends in the way pet animals are sold

In addition to specific concerns about the keeping of exotic animals and primates, the RSPCA also has general concerns about the sale of all pet animals. The types of, and ways, pet animals are sold and traded has changed enormously in the 64 years that the [Pet Animals Act 1951](#) (PAA) has existed. Pet shops are no longer the major players in the pet trade that they once were. For example, looking at the trade in puppies, pet shops now account for less than 5% of puppies sold, whereas most people now obtain their puppies from commercial breeders (around 50%), backstreet breeders, the internet and neighbours (around 25-30%) and rescue organisations (around 15-20%)<sup>5</sup>. This is underlined by the small number of local authorities that license pet shops to sell puppies, estimated by the Pet Industry

<sup>4</sup> See *Do You Give a Monkey's?* (RSPCA, 2014) <http://www.rspca.org.uk/vi/adviceandwelfare/pets/other/primates> (accessed 03.12.15)

<sup>5</sup> Associate Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare. 2009. *A healthier future for pedigree dogs*.

Federation to be 2% in 2008<sup>6</sup>, a figure that had decreased even from this figure by 2011. 57% of licensed pet shops in the UK do sell exotic animals<sup>7</sup>.

With the advent of online selling the internet has become a major medium through which breeders, dealers and traders advertise and sell pet animals. The Westminster Government has started to look at this area, by endorsing the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG) voluntary standards for adverts on websites<sup>8</sup>. This is an important step forward, and has had some success in improving advertising standards on those internet sites that have signed up to them, but has been less successful with those sites that have ignored them and of course can provide no guarantee for animal welfare.

### **Problems with current legislation**

Current breeding legislation only applies to dogs and dates back over 40 years<sup>9</sup>, there are no controls or licensing regimes concerning other species. Additionally this legislation only provides a licensing regime for those who breed animals for 'commercial purposes' and does not appear to cover hobby, back-street or opportunist breeders. While there seems to be confusion amongst enforcers about what constitutes a licensable breeding establishment, it certainly appears that many of the breeders who fall into the latter categories are likely to be making commercial gain from their activities and it is arguable they should be covered by such a regime.

Alongside this, the current licensing regime pays little attention to the welfare of the animals concerned and this is out of step with the thinking and legislative framework set out in the AWA which places ensuring the welfare needs of animals at its heart. Indeed, breeding legislation was supposed to be updated as part of new Regulations under the AWA, however this has not yet occurred.

The RSPCA welcomes the ongoing Defra consultation and review of the current animal related licensing schemes. We believe a good starting point is to look at the provision of Regulations under the AWA which better protect animal welfare (in line with what the Welsh<sup>10</sup> and Scottish<sup>11</sup> Governments have introduced recently) with species-specific Codes of Practice. These could bring in an updated licensing regime with animal welfare at its heart, enforced effectively by local authority licensing officers (to ensure accountability and transparency). If this is to be effective then it is important that sufficient resources and training are made available to those officers tasked with enforcement.

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<sup>6</sup> Pet Industry Federation. 2008. State of the Sector Retail Survey.

<sup>7</sup> *One Click Away* (Blue Cross and Born Free Foundation, 2015)

<sup>8</sup> <http://paag.org.uk/> (accessed 14.08.14)

<sup>9</sup> Breeding of Dogs Act 1973 which was updated by the Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Act 1999

<sup>10</sup> The Animal Welfare (Breeding of Dogs) (Wales) Regulations 2014

<sup>11</sup> Licensing of Animal Dealers (Young Cats and Young Dogs) (Scotland) Regulations 2009

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