Why You Should Not Own Exotic or Wild Animals

Introduction
When Americans think of pets, the animals that first come to mind are domestic cats and dogs. Many breeds of dogs and cats have been faithful companions of humans throughout history. Dogs and cats, especially dogs, can provide the psychological support needed to improve people’s daily lives. There is strong evidence that companion dogs can lower blood pressure and decrease feelings of anxiety and stress in humans. The concept of dogs in healthcare facilities has evolved into dog-assisted therapy programs in which trained dogs help patients achieve documentable progress toward therapeutic goals. Similarly, dogs provide comfort, stimulus and joy to residents in long-term care facilities such as hospices and nursing homes. However, when thinking of companion animals, many prospective pet owners think also of the exotic and wild.

Americans are obsessed with owning wild animals such as tigers, lions, cougars, bears, squirrel monkeys, capuchins, chimpanzees, snakes, etc. According to National Geographic, more exotic animals live in American homes than in American zoos. Regardless of the reasons, these animals should not be kept as pets in private residences across America’s rural, urban, and suburban communities. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) have all opposed the idea of keeping select exotic animals as pets.

Reasons to Avoid Owning Exotic or Wild Animals
Exotic or wild animals are inherently dangerous, notorious vectors or reservoirs for zoonotic pathogens, and do not adjust well to captive environments.

Animal Welfare: Big cats, primates, small mammals, birds, and reptiles are available for sale from dealers across the United States (US). This means the illegal wildlife trade (a multibillion-dollar business) makes it easy for people to obtain animals that are unsuitable as pets. The illegal wildlife trade can harm wild populations of animals and cause immense animal suffering and death. Exotic or wild animals privately kept as pets suffer as well. Because these animals are forced to live in unnatural conditions, they often display visible signs of extreme psychological distress (e.g., pacing and self-mutilation). Furthermore, unwanted exotic animals surrendered to institutions that are already at capacity are often euthanized. Others are abandoned or released by their owners to live in harsh conditions they are not accustomed to.

Human Health Risk: People do not seem to fully understand the health risks associated with owning an exotic or wild animal. Wild and exotic animals are notorious vectors or reservoirs for diseases and parasites that can cause serious harm to humans of all ages. Reptiles such as turtles, lizards, and snakes commonly carry and shed Salmonella bacteria in their feces. According to the CDC, between 2015 and 2016, more than 202 people were sickened in several nationwide Salmonella outbreaks linked to contact with small turtles or their environments (water tanks or aquariums). Forty-one percent (41%) of ill people were children 5 years of age or younger. Thus, the CDC recommends that children, people with lowered immune systems, and the elderly avoid all contact with reptiles and not own them as pets. Salmonellosis (small intestinal infection caused by live Salmonella) associated with exotic pets has been described as an important public health issue, affecting more people than any other single disease.

Other zoonotic pathogens carried by exotic or wild animals are Herpes B and Ebola. Macaque monkeys, including rhesus macaques, are natural hosts for herpes B virus. A bite or scratch or mucosal contact with body fluids or tissues from an infected macaque can result in a severe swelling of the brain and death. Since monkeys and apes can become infected with the Ebola virus, a person who comes in close contact with an infected primate can get sick and cause large numbers of people to be affected (outbreak).
Public Safety Risk: The ownership of exotic wildlife as house pets presents a real danger to individuals, families, neighbors, communities, and the public-at-large. Keeping exotic or wild animals isolated in close quarters with no room to roam increases their stress levels and causes some animals to become agitated and aggressive. Exotic animals are inherently dangerous to their owners and any other person coming into contact with them. According to Born Free USA, many children and adults across the US have been bitten by monkeys, mauled by tigers, and strangulated by snakes. Following are notorious examples of exotic animals that have posed harm to people as pets.

Monkeys are one of the most common exotic pets. Often bought as cute and cuddly babies, they become larger and more aggressive as they reach sexual maturity. The male chimpanzee tends to be the most aggressive. Of great notoriety was the mauling of Charla Nash on February 16, 2009, in Stamford, Connecticut. Nash was savagely attacked by a 14-year-old pet chimpanzee named Travis. Travis was owned by her friend and employer, Sandra Herold. The chimp broke most of the bones in Nash’s face and ripped off her nose, lips, eyes, and hands. Travis was eventually shot by local authorities.

Felines such as lions, tigers, and cougars are also common pets. Again, these animals may look cute and cuddly when they are young, but they have the potential to seriously injure or kill people as they mature. The most notorious case was the attack of Roy Horn on October 3, 2003, at the MGM Mirage Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. A 7-year-old trained white tiger named Montecore attacked and carried Roy Horn off stage by the throat during Siegfried & Roy’s long-standing show at the Mirage. Horn suffered massive blood loss and a stroke. Incidents involving large exotic cats often result in fatalities.

Reptiles such as venomous and constrictor snakes pose a real danger to humans. Besides being frequent carriers of Salmonella bacteria, these snakes are aggressive and deadly, especially those that kill by constriction. One of the most shocking attacks was the strangulation of Amanda Black on October 21, 2008, in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Black was strangled to death by her pet python as she was trying to give it some medication. The 13-foot-long reticulated tiger python named Diablo was found, restrained, and taken to the Virginia Beach Animal Control facility. The tiger reticulated python is native to Southeast Asia and can potentially reach over 20 feet in length and over 165 pounds in weight.

Other exotic or wild animals that pose grave dangers to human health and safety include bears, wolves, prairie dogs, hedgehogs, hamsters, alligators, and other reptiles such as iguanas and lizards.

Reasons People Give for Owning Exotic or Wild Animals

The illegal wildlife trade, lax state laws, and the allure of owning an exotic or wild animal has led to an increased number of exotic wildlife privately held as pets. People do not seem to fully understand the magnitude of the risks associated with owning an exotic or wild animal. Exotic animals can potentially kill or critically injure their owners as well as people in the community. On September 1, 2015, an 8-foot king cobra named Elvis escaped from his cage in a home in Orlando, Florida. After about a month on the lam, the king cobra was captured by officers of the Orange County Animal Services. King cobras average about 13 feet in length and can reach up to 20 pounds in weight. They are the longest venomous snakes in the world and are mainly found in the forest regions of India and Southeast Asia.
So why extremely dangerous, and even repulsive, wild animals can elicit a passionate response from some people? Reasons people give for keeping exotic animals as pets range from "learning purposes" to "contributing to the survival of wild species". However, although some people keep exotic pets because they feel a strong affection for their animals, the truth is that many other people own exotic or wild animals to be noticed and to enhance their social status and power. Regardless of the reasons, the obsession of keeping exotic or wild animals as pets has become a menace in the US, especially in urbanized and suburbanized areas. The threat to public safety is high, especially when dangerous animals such as tigers, lions, cougars, bears, wolves, monkeys, snakes, etc. are owned by people with emotional imbalance. On October 18, 2011, Mr. Terry Thompson, the owner of a wild animal preserve near Zanesville, Ohio, released dozens of tigers, lions and other wild animals at his preserve before killing himself. In the aftermath, deputies from the Muskingum County Sheriff Office were forced to kill nearly 50 escaped animals.

Thompson, a Vietnam War veteran, had just been released from federal prison on weapons charges and was heavily in debt.

After the Zanesville, Ohio incident, many states passed legislation restricting the private ownership of exotic or wild animal species. According to Born Free USA, 31 states have partial or total bans on private ownership of exotic animals. However, there are still 14 other states that only require a license or permit to own an exotic animal and 5 states, including Alabama that do not require a license or permit at all. ALA ADMIN CODE r. 220-2-.26 has no requirements governing the private possession of exotic animals such as tigers, lions, monkeys, etc. Therefore, it is incumbent upon county and city government agencies and animal welfare organizations like the HSUS and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) to educate the general public about the health and safety risks associated with owning exotic or wild animals, and the suffering of the animals themselves doomed to live in environments far different from the ones nature intended.

Well-resourced education programs focusing on creating awareness of the huge responsibility people undertake when they acquire exotic or wild animal species is a foremost first step to changing. Establishing and maintaining hotlines for people to enquire about or report exotic animals detected play a critically important role in the prevention of health hazards and ensuring public safety. In addition, professional intervention services to help owners (close friends or family members) give up their exotic pets can be very useful, especially when the danger to themselves, the family, and the community is extremely high.
References


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