



**Choose your pets wisely ...**

**Why WILD ANIMALS Don't Make Good Pets**

ASSOCIATION OF ZOOS & AQUARIUMS

## What is a “wild” animal? How does a wild animal differ from a domestic animal?

Wild or exotic animals are found in nature. Wild animals have lived for thousands and thousands of years without the direct influence of humans. Wild animals have evolved behaviors and adaptations to make them successful in surviving in their own complex environments—they are not well adapted to living in your house. Examples of wild or exotic animals include everything from monkeys, tigers, parrots and crocodiles to bobcats, raccoons and squirrels.

Domestic animals have been selectively bred by humans for many generations. In the domestication process, humans have developed species that thrive in human care. Domestic animals have been selectively bred for particular traits such as “friendliness,” lack of aggression and living in close proximity to others (both human and animal). Additionally, most domestic animals have grown up in close proximity to humans; they are used to humans, and often develop bonds with humans. Pets are domesticated animals, traditionally defined as those kept for pleasure and companionship. Examples of domestic animals include dogs, cats, hamsters, parakeets, horses and domestic ferrets.

## What’s wrong with having a wild or exotic animal as a pet?

For many species, it’s inhumane to keep wild animals as pets because owners cannot meet the behavioral, social, nutritional or psychological needs of the wild animals under their care. Also, having wild animals as pets may contribute to the decline of the species because the animal is collected from a dwindling wild population (or its ancestors were). It’s often dangerous because wild animals typically become aggressive to humans, especially as the animals get older. Wild animals also may carry diseases dangerous to humans. And increasingly it’s against the law to have certain species as pets.

### Safety

Since wild animals are typically much less predictable than domestic animals, they are much more likely to bite, scratch, attack their owners, their owner’s children, and their owner’s guests and neighbors. Although they may not intend to, these animals can inadvertently hurt their owner if a car horn, ambulance siren, fireworks show or other

unexpected, unfamiliar noise startles them. Pet owners are responsible for the actions of their animals. Animal owners are legally liable for any damage, injuries or illnesses incurred by their animals.

Many owners of “pet” wild animals often feel that they are the exception. My cougar, my tiger, my serval, my monkey is different. It loves me and it would never hurt me. This is true until the day it isn’t. There is no escaping the fact that these animals are capable of lethal behaviors. Hundreds of wild “pets” attack their owners every year. Well-publicized examples include the Las Vegas animal trainer who was seriously injured by his tiger, and the former performing chimpanzees that attacked a California man visiting his former “pet”. Such incidents are far from unusual. See [http://cwapc.org/news/IncidentDescription.asp?FileName=incident\\_20050308.html](http://cwapc.org/news/IncidentDescription.asp?FileName=incident_20050308.html) for more information.



### Legal Issues

Due to potential dangers and liabilities, some state, county and city ordinances prohibit the ownership of wild animals as pets. Your local or state governmental web sites will list any laws or restrictions pertaining to the housing of wild animals. Note that most exotic insects (insects that are native to a country other than the United States) are illegal to keep as pets because of the potential for damage to the local environment (they are examples of “invasive species” that can damage crops and out-compete beneficial organisms).

### Conservation

The collection of wild animals for the pet trade has had a significant negative impact on the wild populations of many species. Some species of parrots, primates, turtles, snakes, wild cats and tropical fish are endangered because of

the pet trade. Most die before arriving at their intended destination, so for each individual that enters the pet trade, many others have perished. Some owners eventually release their wild “pets” (accidentally or on purpose) into local natural areas. These released/escaped wild animals often die a painful death because they don’t have the skills to survive on their own. Others find mates and establish themselves in your local environment, becoming invasive species that compete with local wildlife and can cause the extinction of those native species. For example, ex-“pet” iguanas (<http://www.greenigsociety.org/feraligs.htm>) and pythons (<http://www.cnn.com/2004/TECH/science/10/22/predators.in.paradise/>) in Florida are crowding out native species and causing significant threats to ecosystems. See <http://www.invasivespecies.gov/> for more information on invasive species.

## Welfare

It’s very difficult to provide an appropriate environment for wild animals, and failure to do so compromises the welfare of those animals. Most people simply cannot meet the needs of wild animals kept as “pets”. Backyard cages and living rooms cannot provide the complex environments the animals need. Wild animals also have very special nutritional needs. And they need to be with members of their own species. When they’re young, many wild animals may seem cute and cuddly. But as these animals mature, they begin to be aggressive and to show courtship behavior. Since these animals were raised by humans, they haven’t learned behaviors normal to their own species, so they often begin to direct their aggressive and courtship behaviors towards humans. They usually become dangerous to handle and so end up in small cages with limited contact with humans. Human-raised wild animals don’t have the social skills to function with members of their own species. This can lead to a lonely life for the animal. Additionally, owners often have the wild animals’ teeth removed, declaw them and neuter them in an attempt to control aggression, thus crippling the animal physically as well as behaviorally. People often think that they can send their ex-“pet” to a zoo or sanctuary to live with others of its own kind. But because these human-raised animals haven’t learned the social skills of their species, and may have been physically altered, they cannot safely live with members of their own species. Finally, some species are very long-lived. Parrots and some turtles can live for well over 50 years, often outliving their owners.

## Disease

Wild animals can carry many diseases that can be lethal to humans, especially to infants and young children, the elderly, and those with weakened immune systems. We typically cannot vaccinate wild animals against these diseases because vaccines developed for domestic animals have not been proven to be effective on wild animals. Raccoons and other carnivores can carry rabies and feline and canine distemper. Some monkeys can carry herpes viruses that humans can contract; these viruses are not curable in humans and are often fatal. Reptiles can carry salmonella. Wild animals also harbor parasites such as ascarid worms, tape worms, flukes, and protozoa that can cause debilitating and often fatal diseases in humans, while external parasites such as ticks and fleas transmit Rocky Mountain spotted fever, bubonic plague and other serious diseases. Other diseases that are transmissible to humans include polio, tuberculosis, tularemia, leptospirosis, ringworm and hepatitis viruses.

See [http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/browse\\_by\\_diseases.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/browse_by_diseases.htm) and [http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/browse\\_by\\_animal.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/browse_by_animal.htm) for more information.

## What else should I consider when choosing a pet?

First, gather information! Before you acquire a pet, go to the library and read about the animals that you’re interested in getting. Call your local AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium to learn more about caring for animals (see <http://www.aza.org/FindZooAquarium/> to find out how to contact your local zoo or aquarium). Check out the web sites we’ve recommended here, and the many resources available at <http://www.petfinder.org/>. Ask yourself whether you can provide this animal an excellent quality of life, for its entire life, and whether you can commit to safely sharing your home and your life with this animal.



Consider adopting a pet from a shelter. Millions of domestic dogs and cats are destroyed each year because good homes cannot be found. The National Shelter Directory is an excellent place to find adoptable animals near you (<http://www.aspc.org/site/FrameSet?style=Shelter>). Consider adopting a former racing greyhound or “retired” working dog. Check out local rescue groups.

Look carefully into the source of the animal you’re considering—not all dealers and breeders are reputable, so check them out in person to be sure you’re not contributing to inhumane practices. Make sure that the pet you purchase has not been taken from the wild (especially birds, reptiles, and tropical fish\*) and never take a baby animal from the wild! If you find wildlife that appears to be orphaned or injured, contact a local licensed wildlife rehabilitator for advice (visit <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~devo0028/contact.htm> to search for a rehabilitator near you) or call your local AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium for advice.

*\*look for the Marine Aquarium Council certification*



## What types of animals do make good pets?

Many types of animals make great companions for us.

They include:

- Dogs, domestic cats, guinea pigs, domestic rats and mice, domestic gerbils, common hamsters, domestic ferrets, domestic rabbits, domestic chinchillas
- Responsibly captive-bred parakeets, canaries, cockatiels, doves, pigeons, domestic ducks and geese
- Responsibly captive-bred reptiles and amphibians such as turtles [box turtle, wood turtle, red-footed tortoise], lizards [bearded dragons, leopard geckos], snakes [corn snakes, king snakes, ball pythons] and frogs [White’s tree frog, ornate horned frog, fire-bellied toad, red-eyed tree frog (*above*)]
- Tropical fish that are captive-raised or collected from sustainable wild populations make good pets. Look for certification from the Marine Aquarium Council when you buy tropical fish for your home aquarium (<http://www.aquariumcouncil.org>).

## Want to learn more about insects and other animals that live in your own backyard?

Check out <http://www.mwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat/> to learn how to create a wildlife oasis and explore the native species already sharing your space.