

WHY WILD ANIMALS SHOULD NOT BE KEPT AS PETS

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What is a wild animal?

A wild animal is born, raised, and lives in a natural environment. It has certain inborn behaviors and learned behaviors from its parents and peers which are necessary to survive in a competitive natural environment.

Wild animals include indigenous wildlife (animals that live in their natural and historical range; eg, raccoons, robins), introduced wildlife (animals that are not native to an area, but have established a population; eg, armadillos, ring-necked pheasants), and most “exotic” pet wildlife (animals that are not native to an area and are kept in captivity; eg, iguanas, lions).

What are some of the differences between domestic and wild animals?

There are fundamental differences between domesticated species and their wild counterparts, such as their inborn behavior. Domestic species have been bred over many years and selected for their gentle temperament and compatibility with man. They are generally docile and do not fear people. By contrast, wild animals, including those hand-reared, show a degree of aggressiveness, territoriality, and unpredictability. These traits are usually exacerbated when the animal reaches sexual maturity.

Can humans substitute for natural parents?

It is extremely difficult for a wild animal to adapt to traditional household living as a pet. It is virtually impossible for pet owners to change inborn behaviors of wild animals or to make them docile or to predict when wild, destructive behavior will occur. Pet owners usually do not (or cannot) provide a balanced diet and proper environment necessary for good health and a high quality of life.

What are the problems in keeping wild animals as pets?

- **Public safety:** most wild animals are unpredictable and potentially dangerous to man or other animals.
- **Disease potential:** wild animals can carry diseases (such as rabies) or harbor parasites transmissible to man. An owner would not know what diseases the animal had been exposed to in its natural environment. Diseases such as rabies can have lengthy incubation periods, lasting several weeks or even months. Internal parasites such as roundworms, tapeworms, flukes, and protozoa can cause debilitating and often fatal diseases in people, while external parasites such as ticks and fleas may transmit Rocky Mountain spotted fever, bubonic plague, and other serious diseases.
- **Animal welfare and husbandry issues:** in most cases, basic care requirements for captive wildlife are not provided by owners. Owners generally fail to meet the nutritional, husbandry, behavioral, and preventive medicine requirements necessary to maintain healthy wild animals.

Are there legal issues?

Yes. With few exceptions, the taking, keeping, and confining of native animals is illegal or requires a license. Laws vary from state to state on keeping non-native wild animals.

Are there moral issues involved?

Absolutely! It is a fact that most wildlife are not provided with a quality environment and proper care. After the animal is no longer "cute," has become too large or expensive to maintain, or has become destructive or aggressive, many are released to the wild only to eventually die or be killed because they are not adapted for survival. Released animals can also be a nuisance to man (eg, depending on human garbage for survival). Commonly, an owner's interest may be high initially, but as the novelty wears off, the interest fades.

Are there non-traditional animals which make good pets?

A pet is a domesticated animal that is kept for pleasure rather than utility. Domesticated animals make good pets because they have been bred, many for thousands of years, to coexist with humans in a household setting. In fact, behavior patterns which are especially appropriate for the domestic animal's existence in a human household are consciously selected by breeders.

The following non-traditional animals generally make excellent pets: domesticated rabbits; domesticated rodents (guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils, chinchillas, mice, rats); captive-reared psittacines (budgies [parakeets], cockatiels, small parrots); canaries, finches; domesticated doves, pigeons, ducks, and geese; and tropical fish.

In addition, the following animals are also good pets: many captive-bred exotic birds (i.e., large parrots); ferrets (should be supervised if near infants); African hedgehogs; selected species of reptiles (preferably captive-reared), avoiding large constrictors, poisonous species, and members of the crocodilian family; selective captive-reared amphibians; and selected species of invertebrates. Most other wild and exotic species (including primates and exotic cats) should be avoided.

For more information...

For more information on selecting a non-traditional exotic animal as a pet, contact your local veterinarian or zoo.