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The Environmental Impact of Exotic Pets



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

JUN 19, 2023 [exotic_pets](#), [Pets](#), [wild animals](#)



Most people who have pets do so because they love animals. Wild animals can be particularly appealing because of the novelty of having something no one else does; an interest in a [particular species](#) sparked by social media or TV; or craving a deeper connection with the natural world. But there are more reasons to leave them in the wild. Most importantly, it's nearly always in the best interest of the individual animal. But keeping exotic pets can also harm the environment – both the animal's natural habitat and yours.

Exotic Pets

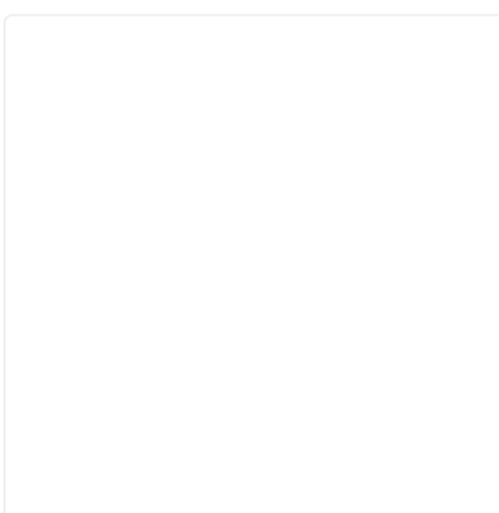
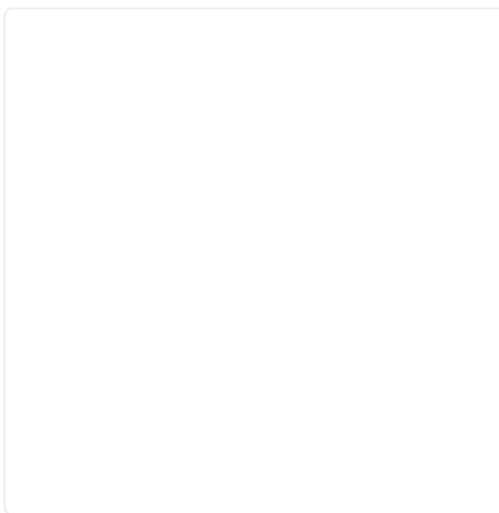
All pets have an environmental footprint – they [eat food](#) and [generate waste](#), just like we do. They can also create [conflict with local wild animals](#) and [kill birds](#). But when your pet is itself a wild animal, things get even trickier. In fact, even defining an exotic pet can be tricky.

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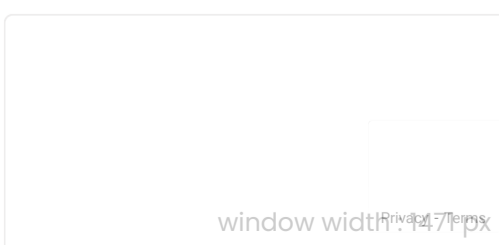
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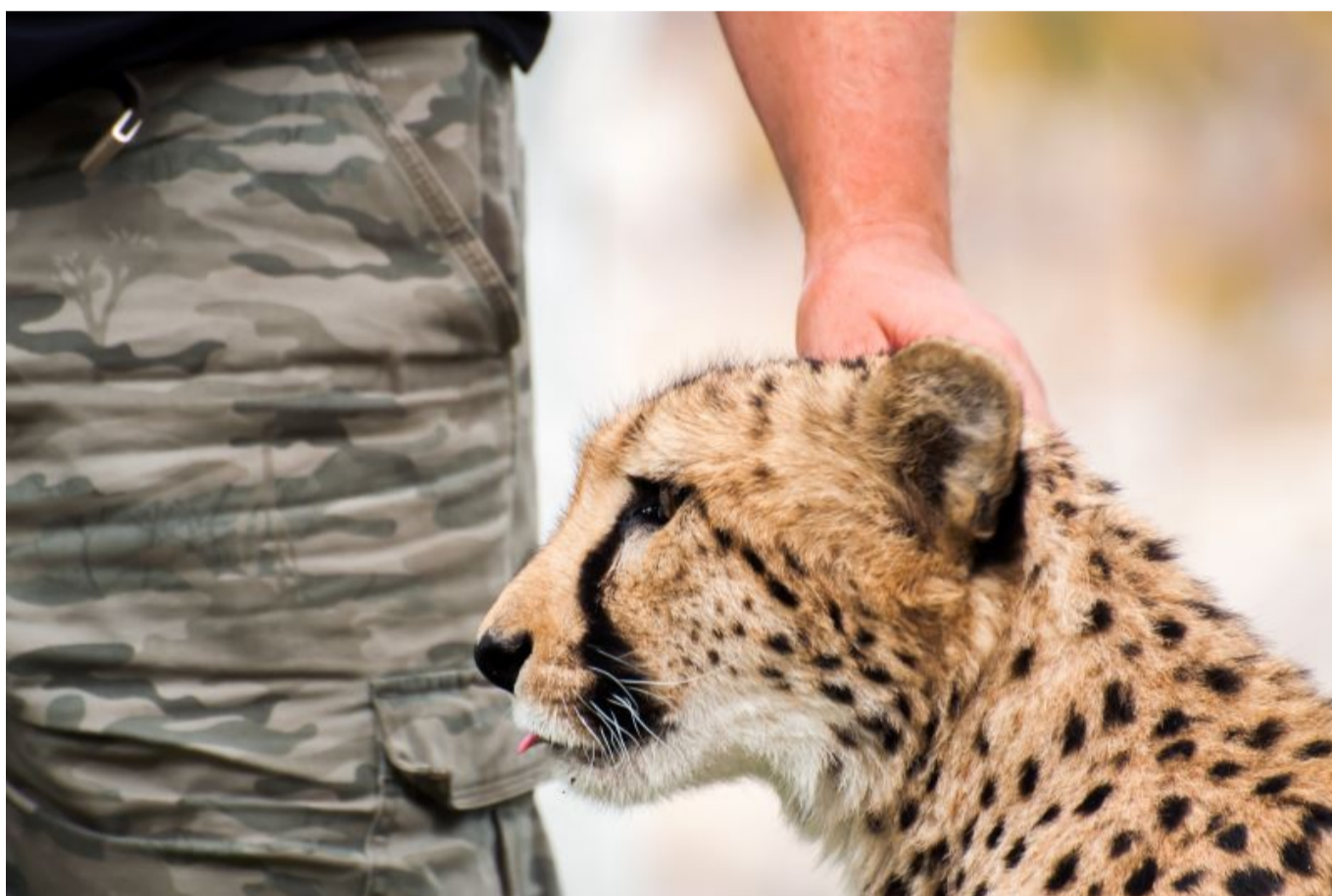
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Domesticated species have lived in close association with humans for thousands of years. The recognized domesticated are dogs, cats, horses, pigs, cows, sheep, and goats. Wild animals are nondomesticated species living in their natural habitat; wild animals kept as pets are referred to as tamed. Exotic animals are nondomesticated species kept outside their natural geographic region. Grizzly bears are exotic animals in India; elephants are exotic in North America. When an exotic animal is kept as a pet, it is called an exotic pet.

According to the American Humane Society, [nontraditional pets](#) are nondomesticated animals for which there is a significant history of petkeeping, regardless of species origin. They are often bred in captivity, their sale and trade are frequently regulated, and information about proper care is widely available. Nontraditional pets include rodents, tropical fish, birds, reptiles, hedgehogs, and ferrets. Keeping nontraditional pets is not quite as fraught with ethical and environmental pitfalls as keeping wild and exotic animals. But some of the same issues will apply. Nontraditional pet owners should do research to ensure that their pet is ethically and sustainably sourced.



Poaching for the illegal pet trade is one of the biggest threats to critically endangered cheetahs.

Legal Petkeeping

Because the wildlife trade is international, any effort to regulate it requires international cooperation. The sale of wildlife specimens for food, pets, souvenirs, and medicine generates billions of dollars each year, involves thousands of species, and is driving some species toward extinction. [CITES](#) is an international agreement to ensure that trade in wild animals does not threaten their survival. That means the rich playboy drinking Hennessy next to his pet tiger that you saw on Instagram is breaking the law – no matter what country he is in.

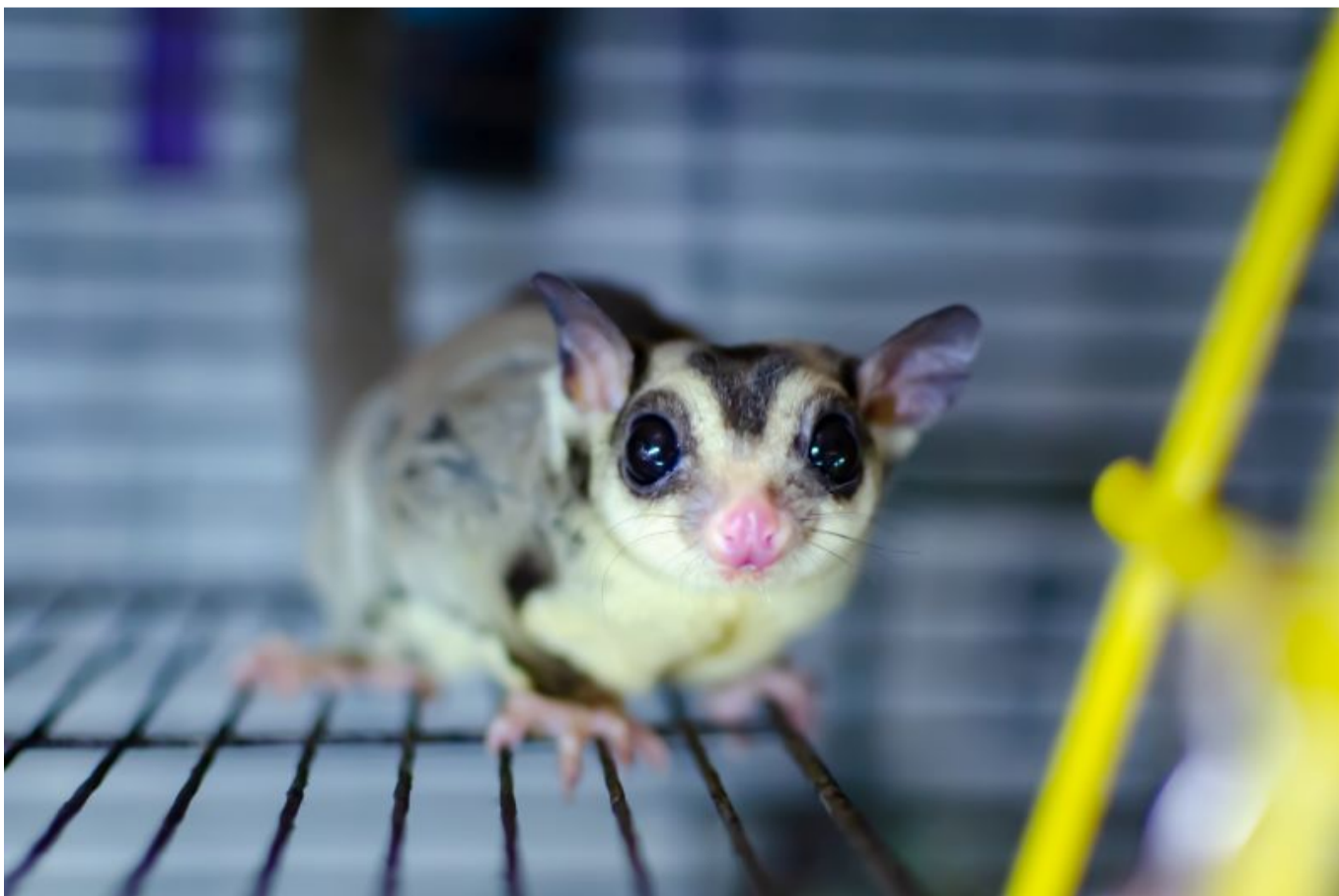
The Animal Welfare Act, or AWA, is the primary piece of federal legislation regulating captive wild animals, but it mostly only protects mammals. [Each U.S. state](#) regulates the keeping of wild and exotic species as pets, although some of these laws are surprisingly lax. Many municipalities ban specific species – even domesticated ones – or limit the number of pets that can be kept on a property. They also may have requirements for animal registration or licensing, vaccination, animal welfare, and nuisance laws that regulate noise or other

potential conflicts. For example, ferrets are a common pet in many places, but are [illegal in New York City](#); the City of Seattle limits domesticated pet owners to [three animals](#) regardless of species.

Wild Harvest

Although many nontraditional pets, like hamsters, are generally bred in captivity, it can be very difficult to discover the origin of a specific individual. Just as there are puppy mills, [breeding facilities](#) for nondomesticated animals are not necessarily healthy, humane environments. And many nontraditional and exotic pets are not the result of captive breeding. Only a handful of people in the world have ever successfully bred [hermit crabs](#) in captivity; while most pet birds are bred in captivity, [wild-caught exotic birds](#) are still illegally imported.

When wild animals are captured for sale as pets, they are subjected to stress at best and ill-treatment is common. They often suffer what is called “cut flower syndrome” dying soon after capture from disease and poor care. Poaching (and even legal collection, as with [sugar gliders](#)) of wild animals can have serious impacts on natural populations. At least one species – the [African gray parrot](#) – has become endangered primarily through capture, and poaching for the illegal pet trade is one of the biggest threats to critically endangered [cheetahs](#).



Wild animals that are captured to sell as pets undergo extreme stress and often die soon after their capture from disease and poor care.

Invasive Species

Quite often, the animal that was so irresistible on social media turns out to be unsuitable for indoor life. Recent Tik-Tok stars capybaras, for example, can weigh up to 200 pounds each. As herd animals, they cannot be kept singly. They [require a pool](#) deep enough to swim in and eat up to [8 pounds of vegetation](#) daily.

When people find themselves in possession of a hard-to-maintain pet, they also discover those pets can be hard to rehome. Often, this results in “[releasing them into the wild](#)” – a euphemism for abandonment. Abandoned animals usually die from predation or starvation. (This is also a [likely outcome](#) for a tamed wild animal released into its own natural habitat.) If the climate is suitable, in the absence of natural predators, released exotics can become invasive. Florida’s problem with [exotic snakes](#) and other reptiles originates with pet abandonment; North American [red eared slider turtles](#) now outnumber native turtle species in Japan; and pet rabbits are becoming established in the wild in vulnerable [Hawaii](#).

Sometimes the pet is not the invader, but the vector. [Rabbit hemorrhagic disease](#), which originated in domesticated European rabbits, now threatens some North American native rabbit species. Native animals aren’t the only ones at risk. The risk of bites – and subsequent infections – is higher than with domesticated animals, as [kinkajou-keeper Paris Hilton](#) learned the hard way. People are already familiar with the risk of contracting [salmonella](#) from pet turtles. But now most [emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic](#). Not only are new diseases dangerous to human life, but [illness has environmental impacts](#) as well.

The decision to take responsibility for the life of any living creature should never be taken lightly. But if that creature does not belong to a domesticated species, think very carefully, and then think again.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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