

A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT ON BEHALF OF THE BVZS WITH REGARD TO THE TRADE IN EXOTIC SPECIES HELD OR KEPT AS PETS

There has been considerable interest recently shown by animal welfare groups and the media, in the importation of exotic animals to be kept as pets. This particularly reflects the perceived high cost to such animals in terms of their general welfare, specifically, mortality rates during collection, transport, sale and initial care in the home.

We make the observation that, the quantity of published (peer reviewed) data is still relatively low. It is important that all available data is critically reviewed for current relevance.

That there is potentially a problem is not in doubt. The increase in availability of exotic animals as pets, as well as their perceived relatively cheap cost, has meant that in recent years there has been a surge of interest in the keeping of these animals. Consequently there has been a proportionate increase in the numbers of cases of poor welfare, neglect and mortality. However, this is a problem regarding all species of pets, not exclusively exotics.

Poor welfare and high mortality is often due to ignorance of the requirements for the care of these animals. BVZS believes that there is a need for greater education of pet keepers, particularly, with regard to the species they wish to keep.

Certain species of exotic animals may be more suitable as pets in the modern (two-person working) family, especially if kept appropriately. Advances in husbandry, knowledge and applied technology indicate that many exotic pets can be successfully kept.

It is estimated that, in many cases, the costs incurred are similar to those of keeping the average dog, but with higher initial expenditure on life-support systems and accessories, followed by relatively lower on-going maintenance costs. The comparative costs for keeping a dog would usually involve higher purchase price, greater feed bills and other items such as vaccinations etc. The higher initial costs may in fact act as an effective deterrent to purchase by those not fully committed to the care of an exotic pet.

Currently in the UK, BVZS understands that 85-90% of all exotic pets sold, are bred in captivity, either by *ex-situ* or *in-situ* breeding programmes, with only 10-15% being wild caught. As previously observed, the extent of any perceived welfare problem is difficult to determine, because of the few research papers on this subject.

Additionally, a more detailed assessment of any impact of the removal of exotic species from the wild is needed, along with consideration of current ethical issues.

There are calls from some sources for an EU wide ban on trade in exotic species.

The BVZS is currently opposed to this option.

The Society considers that a ban is a flawed solution and would prove difficult, if not impossible, to implement effectively. The Society considers that a more appropriate way forward is consideration of greater regulation of wild caught exotic animals for the pet trade, which would permit existing *ex-situ* and *in-situ* breeding programmes, and/or controlled sustainable harvesting of some wild species to continue. (To a degree the current COTES and CITES regulations already effectively do this. It is also worthy of note that some wildlife conservation groups do support the concept of sustainable use of wildlife, as a conservation tool).

A median route between doing nothing (unacceptable) and implementing an outright ban must be developed and adopted to regulate and transparently control the trade.

This could follow the policies already pursued in Australia and Belgium and under consideration in Holland.

Any legislation considered must be proportionate and fair. Too often in the past, hasty response to popular lobbying has produced poor and unworkable legislation. It must be appreciated that many of the species involved are already in public possession and may live for several decades if well cared for; thus, discrimination against existing capable keepers must be avoided.

Consequently, and in summary, we would recommend the following approach:

1. All species potentially to be kept as pets, or traded, should undergo a risk assessment to include welfare, public health and safety, environmental impact, etc. This should identify those

species which can be well maintained in captivity without compromise of the former criteria. Only those species fulfilling such requirements would be approved.

2. The assessment in (1), must include: the degree to which the five freedoms may be fulfilled in captivity; the sustainability of wild/ranch reared populations; risk of bite, sting, envenomation etc.; zoonotic risk; and any local environmental impact.

3. Following steps in (1) & (2), animals could then be categorised by evaluation, taking into account all the above issues, following an evidence-based approach. Where no accurate data exists then a cautionary approach may be recommended. This categorisation could then be used to permit trade to continue at different levels of authorisation.

An example of this categorisation could be along the lines of:

Category 1: High level, approved, academic/research organisations . (NO PUBLIC ACCESS).

Category 2: High level, approved (inspected and licensed) zoological collections (PUBLIC ACCESS PERMITTED).

Category 3: Private ownership to be regulated under DWAA authorisation.

Category 4: Unrestricted ownership of approved exotic species.

Category 5: Application of the Wildlife & Countryside Act to ensure any pest species kept is not released into the wild.

4. Any person purchasing a pet of the listed exotic species must be able to demonstrate an acceptable level of knowledge with regard to the care of the species being purchased. (This might be by completion of a questionnaire, or after following a brief online course etc.).

As a result of, or regardless of the implementation of the former actions, the Society recommends a list of proposed actions to assist improvement in the welfare of the species being considered:

- i) All current data relevant to the trade in exotic pets to be critically reviewed for up to date relevance and accuracy.
- ii) A list of species appropriate for being kept as pets be drawn up (i.e. those which would fall under Category 4).
- iii) Develop and implement an educational programme for delivery to the public, specifically relating to the animals to be kept.
- iv) Increase and expand educational programmes on the listed species, for all parts of the pet trade industry.
- v) BVA & BVZS to co-operate with the RCVS and the EAEVE to evaluate the benefits and encourage the inclusion of, an exotic animal clinical service in all veterinary teaching colleges/universities. This would result in all EU veterinary graduates receiving hands-on training in the husbandry, management, diagnosis and treatment of diseases of exotic animals. This would have the positive outcome that all graduates would be better able to advise traders and/or owners on the husbandry requirements of exotic species and at the same time to offer increasingly competent treatment in this field.
- vi) There are many distinct problems which are independent of each other. We are concerned that a ban would not take in to consideration these independent problems.