

Policy statement on non-traditional companion animals

Background

This statement has been developed by the British Veterinary Association (BVA), British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA), British Veterinary Zoological Society (BVZS) and the Fish Veterinary Society (FVS).

The statement uses the term 'non-traditional companion animal' (NTCA) rather than 'exotic pet'. NTCAs may be considered as those animals which are not traditionally kept as pets in the UK and where the appropriate knowledge and resources in order to be able to care for them and provide for their welfare needs require further development or are not easily accessible at the point of sale. This may include being able to straightforwardly access an appropriate diet or equipment, and veterinary professionals with knowledge and skills to treat the animals.

With the support of FVS, the statement deliberately does not refer to fish as there are considerations relating to the keeping of fish as companion animals which are separate from those relating to other non-traditional companion animals.

Companion animals

We recognise the benefits to individuals and wider society associated with the keeping of companion animals. [Research](#) has shown that keeping companion animals can provide physical and mental health benefits; helping to ease loneliness, reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, promote social interaction, and encourage exercise. In return there are [ethical and legal duties](#) to meet the welfare needs of all companion animals, and this starts with potential owners making responsible and informed choices.

Meeting the five welfare needs

Animal welfare issues are associated with the keeping of all species as companion animals. Companion animal owners must ensure they meet their pets' five welfare needs, as required by UK animal welfare legislation¹.

The five animal welfare needs are:

- i. The need for a suitable environment
- ii. The need for a suitable diet
- iii. The need to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- iv. Any need it has be housed with or apart from other animals
- v. The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Owners of all companion animals should also:

- Consider aspects of their lifestyle and circumstances that are likely to affect whether they will be able to meet the welfare needs of their desired pet
- Obtain animals from reputable sources which safeguard their health and welfare
- Ensure the number and species of animals kept is compatible with the owner's ability to meet the animals' five welfare needs

Veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses play an important role as advocates for animal welfare, helping to educate clients and the public about the importance of high husbandry

¹ [Animal Welfare Act 2006](#) (England and Wales)
[Animal Health and Welfare \(Scotland\) Act 2006](#)
[Welfare of Animals Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#)

standards for companion animals, and can provide well informed pre-purchase advice to potential owners on how to meet their prospective pets' welfare needs.

Non-traditional companion animals

There are some species whose five welfare needs are so specialised they could rarely or never be met in a domestic environment. Other species should only be kept under licence or for defined and authorised conservation purposes. These include, but are not necessarily limited to, those listed in the Schedule of the [Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976](#) (as amended 2007).

We support the keeping of species as companion animals for which there is a reasonable expectation, based on published evidence and professional experience, that their five welfare needs can be met by suitably informed people. However, some NTCAs, such as reptiles, have exacting husbandry requirements, e.g. for humidity, lighting, nutrition and temperature, others such as birds have complex social, cognitive and nutritional needs, all of which must be fully researched and understood before acquisition. Owners should only take on these animals where they are able to meet their welfare needs.

BVA/BSAVA/BVZS/FVS joint position

Protecting the welfare of companion animals, including non-traditional companion animals (NTCAs)

o Enforcement

The effective enforcement of existing animal welfare legislation¹ by central and local government would help to ensure the five welfare needs of companion animals, including NTCAs, are met.

o Pre-purchase advice

- The [five welfare needs](#) are an appropriate framework for assessing the welfare of all species kept as companion animals
- Any person considering taking on a companion animal of any species should establish how they will meet the five welfare needs of the animal before they purchase or take responsibility for the animal
- Before anyone considers acquiring a companion animal of any species they should have access to up to date reputable information on the care that the animal will need, to allow them to make an informed decision as to whether they will be able to meet the welfare needs of the animal
- Veterinary professionals should receive sufficient training and have access to suitable resources to provide guidance on the suitability of different species for prospective pet owners
- Retailers should work with the veterinary profession, to provide prospective owners with well-informed species-specific pre-purchase information about meeting the five animal welfare needs
- Retailers have a duty to work with veterinary and other suitably qualified professionals to ensure that they meet their animals' five welfare needs at point of sale (e.g. through appropriate environmental enrichment, suitable companionship) in order to meet their legal requirements under the Animal Welfare Acts and help to educate owners on how to meet the welfare needs of the animals they are intending to purchase.

- Keepers, retailers, and veterinary professionals should be able to demonstrate they are educated about how to care for companion animals based on existing professional guidance and best practice

- **Breeding**

Captive breeding should be carried out responsibly, sustainably (not importing wild caught animals or creating genetic disorders) and without negatively impacting on animal health. Selective breeding can result in phenotypic variants (morphs), risking genetic disorders which cause welfare harms such as ill health or inability to express normal behaviour. In the interests of animal welfare and to ensure long term viability of NTCA breeding programmes, NTCA morphs with hereditary defects known to be associated with welfare problems should not be bred or made available for sale or exchange.

- **Regulation of the trade in non-traditional companion animals**

The pet trade should be regulated through:

- The introduction of new legislation to include licensing for all commercial importers of captive-bred NTCAs
- A ban on the importation of [wild caught reptiles and amphibians into the EU](#) except for legitimate and defined conservation reasons
- The regulation of all pet fairs, rehoming and rescue centres for all species
- Systems to monitor and limit internet advertising and sales of NTCAs, such as those promoted by the Pet Advertising Advisory Group ([PAAG](#))

Importers and those who trade animals should also be regulated in order to control the trade, increase traceability and improve animal health and welfare.

- **Education**

There is a clear need for more education, to improve the welfare of NTCAs, including for pet keepers, the pet trade including retailers, and the veterinary professions. This should be developed through mutual cooperation and knowledge sharing, and the development of an evidence base by all stakeholders to endorse and promote agreed husbandry practices.

- **More information**

[BVZS position statement on NCTAs as companion animals](#)

[BVZS position on breeding of NCTAs](#)

[BSAVA position statement on the keeping of NCTAs](#)

[BSAVA position statement on responsible pet ownership](#)

[BVA view on the keeping of non-human primates as pets](#)

[BVZS view on the keeping of non- human primates as pets](#)