

## **BVZS FAQs ON EXOTIC ANIMALS**

### **Definition of exotic animals**

Exotic pets are strictly defined as being one of the non domestic animals, i.e. not cat, dog, cow, horse, sheep, pig or commercial chicken. All others are therefore, strictly speaking, exotic. However in practice no-one would still consider the rabbit or guinea pig kept as a pet as an exotic pet. Thus the true definition needs to be redefined.

For practical purposes we consider exotic pets to include all the non domestic and small furry animals, i.e. rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, plus reptiles, amphibians, birds, invertebrates etc. This still encompasses an enormous range of animals.

### **Should exotics no longer be imported?**

A complete ban of all exotic species would be something of a blanket approach. Perhaps easier to divide it into two groups; the pet trade and the zoo / professional trade. With regards to the pet trade, there are many very good breeders in the UK. A ban on importing pet exotics, would drive the price up, thus ensuring that people who wish to keep an exotic are more serious about it. The ultimate aim would be to stop importing them and rely on captive breeding in the UK to supply demand. There are now many excellent breeders of all the exotic animals commonly kept in the UK supplying the pet trade. The importation of 'exotic' animals is closely regulated and apart from the rare rogue who breaks the rules there should be no significant impact on animal welfare.

However it would be wrong to ban exotic species that are part of a world wide breeding program of endangered animals such as Tigers, Turkish spiny mice, or poison arrow frogs! The British zoo fraternity (BIAZA) have a world-wide reputation, and maintain some of the highest standards in the world, and are an important part of the drive towards conservation of rare species, and the reintroduction of many of these animals.

### **Can keeping exotic animals as pets be cruel?**

It is imperative that people keeping exotic animals understand fully the biological and social needs of the exotic pet that they are planning to keep. All animals kept as pets should be allowed the freedom to demonstrate most normal behaviour; have access to appropriate food and water; be kept free from fear and distress; to be provided with a suitable environment, and finally to be provided with adequate levels of veterinary and medical care. Where any one of these five falls down, it leads to welfare issues, with the exotic animal suffering either disease and / or welfare issues. The keeping of animals as “trophies” should be discouraged.

### **Is there mistreatment of more unusual pets?**

Not necessarily. However as access to more unusual pets becomes available, people often obtain them as a status symbol, or a talking point. Often they have little understanding about how to look after them correctly. Having said that there are also many people who look after their exotic pets extremely well. The majority of reptile and bird keepers are highly motivated individuals who provide everything their pets require including veterinary attention as necessary.

### **Is the concern over diseases coming into the UK exaggerated?**

Difficult to say. There is no doubt that we live in a shrinking world, and the spread of disease (whether zoonotic or not) is accelerated by the import of exotic animals. The avian zoonotic diseases would be as likely to enter the UK via a migratory bird rather than through the pet trade and vector-borne diseases are likely to increase with climate change.

Of great concern is not just the spread of disease but the escape and then colonisation of our island by these exotic animals; e.g. American crayfish, wallaby, deer, etc. A ban on import, or stricter quarantine regulations would help control this.

**Is there an issue with the way that animals are transported into the UK - is it cruel or inhumane?**

The legal importation of exotic animals has strict regulations and is OK. Issues arise with the illegal smuggling of exotic animals.

**Who is responsible for providing the right information for people buying exotic animals?**

Responsible ownership is enshrined in the Animal Welfare Act, meaning that the owner or keeper of an animal now has a duty of care to take reasonable steps to ensure its welfare. Ultimately, ideally, it is the legal responsibility of the person buying the exotic animal, to ensure that they have the correct information. The owner is therefore responsible for obtaining the correct information by contacting and liaising with the appropriate organisation dealing with their pet (such as the British Chelonian Group) and with the assistance of a good licensed pet shop or breeder. Organisations such as the BVZS promote the responsible keeping of all exotic animals.

However, in practice this is very difficult to enforce. A moral responsibility falls upon the person selling the pet, and in many cases this is the pet shop or private dealer. The key is to try to get them educated with, for example husbandry leaflets, and ensure that they are providing good information.

However the BVZS and vet profession as a whole plays a major role in educating the public, especially pet shops on good management and husbandry of these animals, thus educating the public as a whole.