



THE KEEPING OF PRIMATES AS PETS

The BVZS does not consider any primate species to be suitable to be kept as a pet (companion to a person). Primates are extremely intelligent and social animals. Primates must not be kept individually, as under these circumstances it is not possible to meet their basic welfare needs under the Animal Welfare Acts (AWA).

The husbandry requirements for primate groups are complex, requiring robustly constructed enclosures large enough to prevent hierarchical stress and maintain safety and security. In addition, most primate species have such specialised UV-B, temperature, humidity, lighting, behavioural and dietary requirements that BVZS consider it extremely difficult to fulfil their basic welfare needs if kept as pets.

Nevertheless, the BVZS recognises that there are individuals in the UK who maintain small, privately-owned collections of primates, not currently subject to inspection under the Zoo Licensing Act but kept to similar standards, meeting the particular requirements of the species and with the provision of specialized veterinary care.

BVZS would therefore propose a mechanism for individuals to only be able to keep species-appropriate groups of primates in conditions where their welfare needs are fully met, in facilities that reach, for example, the minimum standards as set out by the DEFRA Code of practice for the welfare of privately kept non-human primates, and are licensed and inspected. Collections of primates held without a suitable licence should be prohibited.

Background to this Position Statement

Primates are not kept commonly as pets in the UK, although the removal in 2007 of species like the squirrel monkey and tamarins from the schedule of animals requiring a Dangerous Wild Animal licence appears to have led to an increase in popularity in keeping captive primates.

At the Spring BVZS Meeting 2013 in Cambridge, a discussion session was held on the keeping of primates as pets, which included the results of a membership survey (N=100 respondents -1/3 of all BVZS membership at that time). Marmosets in particular are now fairly regular patients at veterinary practices in the UK and the majority of the presenting conditions in all primates are associated with a failure of the owner to meet basic husbandry requirements. Only 20% of the respondents were in favour of the keeping of primates as pets and almost all of these were practitioners with a significant number of clients keeping primates. The session led into a debate to determine what actually constituted a 'pet', in what circumstances it would be acceptable to keep primates as such, which species of primate were most suitable and what our role (as exotic animal practitioners) should be in promoting this message. The debate identified the following areas of concern. Based on these findings, the BVZS position statement was produced.



Key concerns

The definition of a pet is the keeping of an animal in a home environment as a companion to a person. The majority of the delegates agreed that a non-human primate is not suitable as a companion to a human being.

The minimal requirements for the correct keeping of primates are debatable, however everyone agrees that primates cannot be kept on their own, but require

- a) at least one conspecific, and
- b) to be able to express natural behavior.

These are two of the Five Welfare needs as required by the AWA, thus primates require both an indoor and outdoor enclosure to ensure adequate exercise and in addition to natural daylight, require supplementary exposure to UV lighting of the appropriate spectrum, checked and changed at regular intervals.

Each species of primate has specific dietary requirements that should be met, primates can present a physical risk to humans, can carry numerous zoonotic diseases and are susceptible to human diseases (Pellett and Benato 2019). They should therefore be housed securely, in such a way that disease transmission to and from humans is limited.

Primates should have regular specialist preventative veterinary care, as well as access to a specialized veterinary surgeon for unwell primates within a group.

There is general consensus that privately bred/kept primates do not contribute to the European Endangered Species Program (EEP) or the conservation of a species in general.