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The Pet Offensive

A rogue industry out of control, the wild-pet business endangers not only people but entire species by spreading disease, destroying habitat, and fueling hostility toward nature.

By Ted Williams

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The evidence room at a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service facility in Illinois. The mounted tiger was seized in a Michigan trophy room.
Photo by Paul Elledge

Last spring monkeypox, a smallpox relative that in Homo sapiens causes fever, aches, swollen lymph nodes, lesions, and occasional death, made its debut in the Western Hemisphere, having migrated from the rainforests of Africa to Phil's Pocket Pets of Villa Park, Illinois. Although smallpox vaccine offered people moderate protection, at least 73 in six states were sickened. The Centers for Disease Control traced the virus to pet prairie dogs infected by Gambian giant rats shipped from Ghana to Texas, the national septic tank of exotic wildlife. On June 11, 2003, the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned the importation of African rodents and the sale of prairie dogs.

The media went on and on about danger to humans but scarcely mentioned danger to native ecosystems. Black-tailed prairie dogs, sucked out of their tunnels for the pet trade by giant vacuum trucks, have been petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act. What will happen to wild prairie dogs if infected pets were released—as they undoubtedly were, because the alternative was euthanasia? Moreover, black-tailed prairie dogs are a keystone species—they feed and/or provide habitat for a wide range of birds, reptiles, and mammals, including the gravely endangered black-footed ferret.

The monkeypox fiasco illustrates how unregulated is the wild-pet trade, most of which is illegal anyway. Today the legal trade in exotic wildlife is a $20 billion-a-year business. The illegal trade is nearly as profitable as drug trafficking; and it's safer, because if you get caught, it's usually a misdemeanor. You're unlikely to get caught, because the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has but 92 inspectors to handle some 121,000 declared wildlife shipments a year (up from 74,620 in 1992). What's more, current laws are ineffective. For example, the intent of the Endangered Species Act to protect domestic and foreign wildlife from commercial exploitation has been twisted by loopholes that permit listed species to be transferred as "gifts" and sold in state.

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"I call it ecological imperialism—raping third-world countries so first-world people can have cute animals in cages," declares Mark Pokras, who directs the wildlife clinic at the Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine in Grafton, Massachusetts. Recently he visited "wildlife rehabilitation centers" in Brazil, but not the kind that tend Canada geese with broken wings. "Just one center outside Vitória gets 35,000 animals a year—lots of tortoises, snakes, parrots, small cats, most listed under CITES [the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora]. We don't know if that's one percent of the illegal pet trade or ten percent or one-tenth of one percent. We don't know where the animals are coming from. They can't be returned to the wild, because they're malnourished or diseased."

The reasons the public lusts for exotic pets include the desire to appear macho, chic, prosperous, or just shocking. Animal Finders' Guide, the advertising flagship of the wild-pet industry, offers mutations such as five-legged ungulates. When the TV show Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles debuted in Great Britain, one wild-pet dealer reported a 400 percent increase in turtle sales. Some wild pets, especially monkeys and apes, are adopted as surrogate children. They're christened, bottle-fed, diapered, dressed, and wheeled in baby carriages. But as the animals mature, the clothes restrict motion, atrophying muscles. Toilet training fails, and they begin to throw their feces. They masturbate in public, so they are spayed or castrated or confined in cellars and attics. They bite, so their teeth are extracted. They catch human diseases—measles, mumps, TB, shigellosis and hepatitis A—so many die. Survivors are often taken back to the pet dealer, who allows that while he can't give a refund, he'll be glad to find the pet "a happy home," then sells it again.

Anyone with a credit card and an Internet connection can buy wolves for $1,000 each, cougars for $1,500, tigers and lions for $1,800, baboons for $4,500, snow leopards for $12,000, gibbons for $20,000, chimps for $50,000. But few who purchase wild pets have even rudimentary training in animal care. On winning the bidding for four bears at the Noah's Land Wildlife Park auction, near San Antonio, Texas, a woman, shrieking coos of affection, reached into the cage to stroke one of her new pets. Whereupon it bit off half her hand. A search for the severed digits was unfruitful because the bear had eaten them.

Although the industry is thriving and scarcely inconvenienced by regulations, it perceives itself as exploited and abused. "Do people put you down because your pet isn't a socially acceptable cat, dog, or goldfish?" demands the National Alternative Pet Association."Discrimination based on your choice of a pet is still discrimination. . . . Are you tired of extremists making the word 'pet' a dirty word?" And according to Animal Finders' Guide, the "real agenda" of the feds in banning the sale of prairie dogs after last spring's monkeypox outbreak was to test distribution of smallpox vaccine as a counterterrorism measure. "They calmly used our industry as an excuse to test their systems, not worrying even a little about what damaging effects and repercussions this would have on our industry."

After surfing the Web and coming up with the above prices, I attended the wildlife auction at Hall's Double H Ranch in Jackson, South Carolina, last August 22. There were about 300 people in the auction barn. They wore mesh-topped caps and cowboy hats and sleeveless T-shirts, carried heaping plates of French fries and ice cream, and towed loud, dirty children. A lemur, with a diaper taped to its butt, crouched on a woman's shoulder. Another woman cradled an ungulate I couldn't identify. High-gloss totem poles featuring Indians themselves, instead of their gods or wildlife, leaned against the walls.

The auctioneer started with all manner of exotic rats. I asked the guy sitting beside me, who had driven four hours from south Georgia, if he was going to bid on any of them. "Hell, no," he said. "I can catch all I want."

Boxes the size of suet feeders housed three parakeets each. "One of 'em ain't no longer with us," said the auctioneer's assistant, on opening a box. Cockatiels, half a dozen to a tiny cage, went for $12 each, but a yellow-headed parrot brought $720. "He's a good talker," boomed the assistant. "He's talking now." Lots of sugar gliders, most in tiny cages and some with babies in their pouches, fetched about $30 each. A hedgehog was stuffed in a Tupperware vessel barely larger than the animal itself. There were chinchillas, Siberian chipmunks, capybaras, skunks, and African crested porcupines, two of which leaped off the high table. Two sacred ibises, in a cage not quite high enough for them to stand up, sold for $170 each.

Coatis (skinny southwestern cousins of the raccoon), almost all juveniles, sold briskly; and despite frequent accidents, women pressed them to their breasts. The buyers had no idea what they were in for, at least not until the auctioneer offered an adult that was "definitely handleable" because he'd been castrated. Wallabies sold for something like $45 each. One woman, a seller, held them aloft by the tails while they spun frantically and curled up to bite her. Each time their muzzles got near her hand she'd swat them down. Then she'd plunge her hand in their pouches to see if they were carrying joeys. Kangaroos commanded as much as $850.

The young monkeys had probably suffered less than their mothers, which get so desperate that when their offspring are taken from them they sometimes have to be tranquilized. A frightened baby macaque, clutching a surrogate mother in the form of a cloth leopard, went for $2,150. When the bidding started on the cotton-top tamarin, the auctioneer's assistant warned: "It ain't our fault if your state don't let them in. If you bid, you're obligated by law to buy him." A male and a female marmoset—one collared and one common—fetched $1,010 each. "They will cross," proclaimed the assistant. "You'll get an uncommon marmoset."

The stream of dangerous pathogens doesn't run only from humans to primates. For example, most human cases of herpes B—a disease that kills 70 percent of its victims—result from macaque bites or scratches, and 80 percent to 90 percent of adult macaques carry the virus and intermittently shed it in their saliva or genital secretions.

The snakes, many bred sans pigment and stuffed in pillowcases, were popular, too, especially the big boas and pythons. As bidding started on the yellow rat snakes, the guy from south Georgia leaned over to me and offered: "I done killed half a dozen of them."

I wondered if anyone who bought the cute baby iguanas knew that, as adults, they are apt to deliver dangerous bites with bacteria-laden teeth and can knock you down with their tails.

Also on the auction block were fennec foxes, Arctic foxes, and raccoons. There was no mention of the fact that contact with fox or coon feces can infect you with parasitic worms that bore through your intestines, enter your bloodstream, and migrate through your body, tunneling into your eyes, liver, and brain. Most victims are young children, careless about hygiene. Seeing these animals being cuddled by their new owners reminded me of the time a young mother had phoned a large, respected environmental organization in my home state of Massachusetts to ascertain if it would be okay to nurse her pet raccoon along with her own infant. "Why not," she'd been told. "We're all in this together." It also reminded me of the time, in the 1960s, when I kept a raccoon. My parents would summon me to remove Coonie from the linen closet before some unfortunate soul reached unwittingly for a towel. Despite wearing my hockey gloves, I invariably emerged from the task with at least one laceration or blackened fingernail.

Native and exotic turtles were offered at the auction, including many hatchlings under four inches. Captive-bred reptiles are kept in filthy conditions and fed offal from factory chicken farms. As a result, about 90 percent shed salmonella through their feces. According to the CDC, 70,000 Americans contract salmonella from live reptiles each year. Because of the threat to young children, who tend to put hatchling turtles in their mouths, the domestic sale of turtles under four inches was banned by the FDA in 1975.

Offered, too, were yellow-bellied turtles and common snappers, which, according to the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (DNR), cannot legally be sold. Scant attention was paid to species anyway. Holding up one turtle, which went for a dollar, the auctioneer's assistant said: "I don't know what kind he is, but here's what he looks like." The pet trade has wiped out whole populations of some of the longer-lived, slower-breeding turtles in the eastern and central United States. "If someone has a bin of, say, box turtles all fully grown with chips and dings in their shells, you know darned well those aren't captive bred [as required by law]," says herpetologist Jim Harding of Michigan State University's Natural History Museum. 'I've been to shows where some guy's got a bin full of box turtles for sale, and every one of them has swollen eyes and puffy front legs, respiratory distress, and cracked shells."

The DNR also notes that it's unlawful to sell as pets: skunks, raccoons, Arctic foxes, fennec foxes, ring-tailed cats, serval cats, coatis, palm civets, spotted genets, or any other "carnivores which normally are not domesticated." When I informed DNR biologist Steve Bennett that I had seen all these species offered for sale to anyone wishing to bid, he said, "I'm going to pass along this information. It looks like we need to get on these people."

The conditions I encountered at the auction were five star compared with those provided by dealers. When police raided James Bates's Purrfect Parakeet in Poplarville, Mississippi, they found dead and dying snakes crammed like spaghetti into sealed boxes and stewing in their own urine. Many, including the living, were rotting. Most of the rescued animals were infected with salmonella and E. coli. There were heaps of dead savanna monitors and iguanas, some seething with maggots. Bird carcasses that hadn't dried into hard shells were black with ants. There was little food, and water bowls were stained with feces. Some officers fled the building because of the stench. Bates paid a $3,000 fine and $111 in court costs, then was given back the confiscated survivors.

When reptiles get sick, they can take years to die, so there's no incentive for dealers to care for them. About 80 percent of pet reptiles are weakened or diseased when purchased and dead within a year, a fact that keeps the trade in these disposable pets so brisk. "We're seeing countries not signatory to CITES exporting huge quantities of CITES-listed reptiles, and we're seeing signatory countries circumventing CITES," says Joe Ventura, a wildlife inspector at Los Angeles Airport. "They're getting permits for captive-bred reptiles but are shipping wild-caught ones."

Humane and conservation issues are intertwined. Consider pancake tortoises, threatened mainly by the pet trade. The preferred method of capture in their native Africa is to bust up the rock work in which they hide, thereby cracking their carapaces and destroying habitat. When reptiles of any species are kept in filthy, inhumane conditions, they get diseases and are released, because who's going to pay a vet $75 when you can buy a brand-new pet for $15? Two federally threatened species—desert tortoises in the West and gopher tortoises in the Southeast—are being decimated by a respiratory infection to which they have no natural immunity and which they've apparently contracted from released pets. The same disease has damaged already depleted populations of western pond turtles; now it's showing up in box turtles.

Peter Daszak, executive director of the Consortium for Conservation Medicine at Wildlife Trust, calls the alien diseases that come with alien wildlife "pathogen pollution." "I don't know a single example of a chemical causing the extinction of a species," he says. "But we now know there are species that have been driven to extinction by pathogen pollution." He and his colleagues have discovered that the fungal disease chytridiomycosis is wiping out frogs on a global scale. Daszak blames the human reshuffling of the world's frogs for food and pets.

Currently there are about 15,000 large cats—tigers, lions, leopards, and cougars—in basements, backyards, and roadside zoos in the 31 states that permit private ownership. These pets are forever mauling and killing their owners or the neighbors. One Oregon woman had her three lions shot after a mangled corpse, believed to be her husband, turned up in their cage. Particularly popular are white, blue-eyed tiger mutations, the result of inbreeding that leaves animals with hip dysplasia, cataracts, and other physical afflictions. Big cats and other wildlife from the nation's zoos, including those accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, are laundered or otherwise find their way, via wildlife dealers, into the pet trade.

When big cats get expensive to feed and difficult to handle—as they always do—their owners drop them off at roadside zoos, canned hunting preserves, or nonprofit sanctuaries such as Tiger Rescue of Riverside, California. Tiger Rescue even announced plans for a portable classroom "to help better our society." But when police raided the facility on April 22, 2003, they found 88 dead tigers. Surviving cats, including leopards, were in poor shape. In addition to taking in unwanted cats from the burgeoning pet supply, the facility was breeding them. Owners John Weinhart and Marla Smith have been charged with 16 felony counts of animal cruelty.

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Unlike reptiles, most big cats entering the U.S. pet trade are bred in captivity, but this raises the price on the heads of wild cats by stimulating the black market in body parts. Special agent Tim Santel of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service didn't put much stock in the tip he got in August of 1997 that there was a plot afoot to buy tigers and leopards and, in violation of the Endangered Species Act and the Lacey Act, kill them and sell their hides, heads, meat, and entrails. It seemed too fantastic. But then another agent got the same tip from another source, and Santel and his colleagues started snooping. They got word that tigers would be coming from Arkansas to Missouri, where they'd be knocked off by people arriving from Chicago. When they learned that four tigers had been killed, Santel sought and received approval for a class-one covert operation. Agent Dan Burleson, who looks like Grizzly Adams, played the role of driver for a cooperating animal dealer. Agents Leo Suazo and Jim Gale played high-roller trophy hunters. Agent Dede Manera played an interior decorator. "There's lots of talking in the trade," Santel told me. "So we knew whenever something was going down. That allowed us to do surveillances or infiltrate one of our agents. When the killers in Chicago wanted cats from Florida, Oklahoma, Arkansas, or Kansas, we volunteered Danny to haul them. He'd be present to witness money changing hands and the falsifying of documents to make it appear that the illegal sales were legal donations. We had undercover cameras inside the trailers or we videotaped from outside. We watched the guys shoot the cats."

Every body part was hawked. Meat was sold to Czimer's Game and Seafoods Inc., of Lockport, Illinois. Gallbladders and other organs went to the Asian medicine market. Hides and heads went to wealthy hunters for their trophy rooms. At least one member of the Safari Club International paid for the privilege of shooting a tiger in a horse trailer. Suddenly tigers purchased for $1,500 alive were fetching $10,000 as carcasses. According to court documents: On March 25, 1998, Will County corrections officer William Kapp of Tinley Park, Illinois, and Kevin Ramsey of Mason, Wisconsin, shot eight of nine tigers inside a Chicago warehouse, sparing the ninth because it was just a cub. On April 1 Kapp changed his mind and shot the cub, too.

At this point too many cats were dying, and the agents scrambled to devise ways of slowing the slaughter. "Hey, let's not kill these right away," they suggested. "Let's keep them alive and breed them, sell the babies and then kill the parents." They even offered to feed and take care of them. The killers loved the idea.

Seventeen of 17 defendants were convicted. "These guys tapped into the excess of [pet] tigers," says Santel. "They realized that the owners didn't want to care for them anymore. Of the 19 tigers and 8 leopards illegally traded, 17 are believed to have been killed. The black market in body parts made possible by the glut of pet cats in the United States was felt by wild ones in Africa—at least two of the dead leopards were poached in Zimbabwe.

But the wild-pet industry's direct impacts on native ecosystems may be no more severe than the impacts deriving from the warped values it infuses in the public. I could see and hear these values in the actions and words of the people who sold and bought wild animals at the auction in Jackson, South Carolina. Species, behavior, habitat, and country of origin didn't matter and were scarcely mentioned, even if they were known, and usually they weren't. These wild creatures, dazed and bedraggled from tight confinement, weren't beautiful expressions of the planet's biodiversity; they weren't even sentient beings. They were merchandise—gewgaws, like the high-gloss totem poles offered for sale with them.

The wildlife-pet trade instills callousness and brutality toward nature. And when wild animals act like wild animals instead of like dogs and house cats, their owners resent them as well as their species. "They're nasty," I heard a woman say of servals because, once upon a time, her cousin had kept one as a pet.

What You Can Do

Tell your legislators to insist that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service get funding for more agents and wildlife inspectors. Also ask them to support The Captive Wildlife Safety Act of 2003, cosponsored by Senators Jim Jeffords (I-VT) and John Ensign (R-NV) and Representatives Howard McKeon (R-CA) and George Miller (D-CA), to ban commerce in wild cats for pets. Send them a copy of this article, or direct them to the magazine's website: (http://magazine.audubon.org).