



Risky business

The unregulated exotic pet trade in Canada



We were known as **WSPA**
(World Society for the
Protection of Animals)



Foreword

Canadians love animals and many share their homes with a range of pets. But an estimated 1.4 million wild animals, that are entirely unsuitable for domestication, are kept as pets in Canada.¹ These animals often called 'exotic' pets are non-domesticated wild animals. Unlike domesticated animals which have evolved over thousands of years to live with humans, wild animals maintain their complex social, physical and behavioural needs and suffer greatly in captivity.

The desire to own non-traditional 'pets' presents additional risks to Canada. Some of these animals can be extremely dangerous, spread disease and play havoc with local environments if they escape into the outdoors or are abandoned. The proliferation of the exotic pet industry also fuels the international trade of wildlife, threatening the existence of many species. Between 2007 and 2017, over 23 million animals were imported into Canada for

commercial or personal reasons.² With estimations that 25% of the global exotic pet trade is illegal, the demand for these animals by Canadians not only causes harm at a national level but contributes to illegal trade and corruption in source countries.³

While the keeping of animals as pets is centuries old, the commercialization of the trade of wildlife is causing immense and unnecessary suffering to wild animals. Canada is complicit.

The ownership of exotic animals is widespread and Canadian laws are insufficient to deal with the associated risks. World Animal Protection's analysis of exotic pet laws across the country finds that many provinces are failing to properly regulate exotic pet ownership. While some jurisdictions are on the path to improving exotic pet laws, this report highlights the significant risk posed by weak regulations and inconsistent laws across Canada.

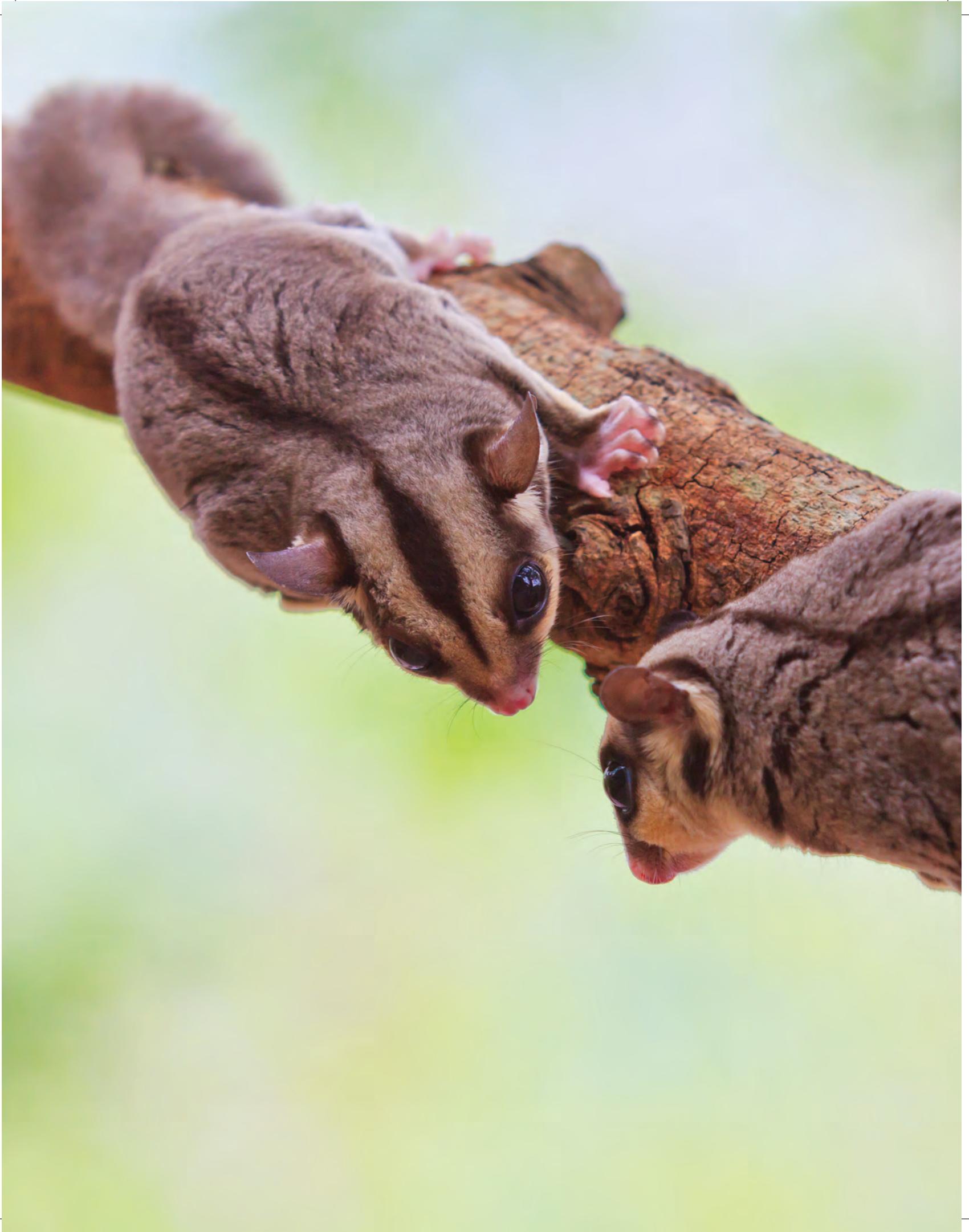


What is an exotic pet?

An animal kept as a pet that is not native to Canada. This report is focused on wild animals kept as pets, for example: ball pythons, boa constrictors, alligators, iguanas, red-eared sliders, parrots, cockatoos, tortoises, sugar gliders, monkeys and servals.

Cover photo: A rescued serval that was destined for the exotic pet trade.
© World Animal Protection

Photo left: An African grey parrot in the wild.
© Robert Hainer / Adobe Stock



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Photo left: Sugar gliders in the wild.
© iStock / Pigphoto

Exotic animals in Canada

Data on wild animals kept as exotic pets in Canada has historically been relatively unknown. To fill these knowledge gaps, World Animal Protection commissioned research to understand the scale of this issue at a national level.⁴ The data paints a sombre picture – millions of wild animals are currently being subjected to a life in captivity in Canada. Over half of Canadians own pets.⁵ Of these, 1.4 million are exotic animals.⁶ Birds are the most popular exotic pet with an estimated 478,648 birds kept as pets in Canada. This is closely followed by 462,893 reptiles and 342,250 wild mammals kept as pets in Canada.⁷

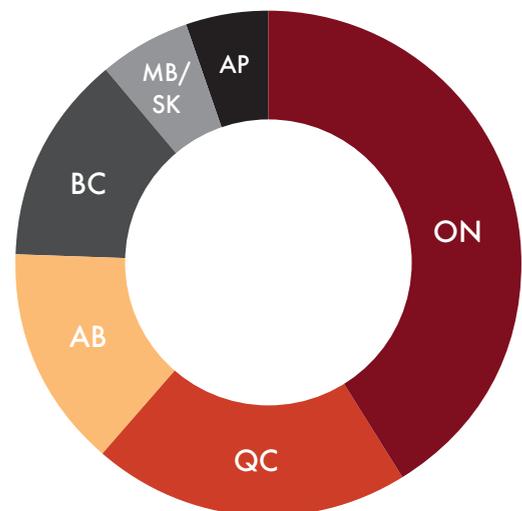
The species of exotic animals that Canadians keep as pets are wide-ranging. Dingoes, fennec foxes, Asian leopard cats, savannah cats, scorpions, king snakes, Burmese pythons, alligators, servals, African bullfrogs, crocodiles, lynxes, leopards, bats, tigers, cougars, monkeys, toucans exist in the thousands.

The number of these animals vary by province and territory. For example, 73% of the pet king snakes in Canada exist in Alberta and 86% of the pet vinegaroons (or whip scorpions) in Canada exist in Quebec. While hot-spots of exotic animals can occur in specific areas, the large variance of species across the country can also be explained by the inconsistent nature of provincial and territorial exotic pet laws. For example, 70% of the servals kept as pets in Canada exist in B.C. and 15% exist in Ontario – provinces that allow ownership of these animals. In comparison, no servals are kept as pets in Quebec and Alberta - provinces that prohibit the ownership of these animals.⁸

There are an estimated **1.4** million exotic pets across Canada

Breakdown of the number of exotic animals in Canada

- Ontario (ON) 588,652
- Québec (QC) 286,693
- Alberta (AB) 202,841
- British Columbia (BC) 191,490
- Manitoba/Saskatchewan (MB/SK) 82,102
- Atlantic Provinces (AP) 73,534



Examples of exotic pets in Canada

This data is a projection based on extrapolating our nationally representative survey data of 21,382 Canadians.



Snakes:

- Corn snakes: 56,206
- Kingsnakes: 33,857
- Ball pythons: 28,364
- Burmese pythons: 27,120
- Boa constrictors: 14,139



Lizards:

- Leopard geckos: 53,900
- Bearded dragons: 40,653
- Iguanas: 19,946
- Chameleons: 16,269
- Day geckos: 14,693



Turtles and tortoises:

- Red-eared sliders: 50,550
- Ornate-box turtles: 27,820
- Painted turtles: 22,169
- Greek tortoises: 13,600
- Hermann tortoises: 9,329



Alligators and crocodiles:

- Alligators: 5,297
- Crocodiles: 4,442



Birds:

- Lovebirds: 79,372
- Cockatiels: 51,836
- Cockatoos: 35,706
- Conures: 31,648
- African grey parrots: 25,091
- Parrotlets: 22,783
- Amazon parrots: 17,767
- Falcons: 13,994
- Macaws: 13,387

342,250

wild mammals are kept as pets in Canada



Wild cats:

- Bengal cats: 58,770
- Caracals: 44,071
- Asian leopard cats: 18,341
- Savannah cat: 13,069
- Servals: 5,150
- Leopards: 3,517
- Tigers: 2,383
- Lions: 1,259



Wild dogs:

- Raccoon dogs: 24,390
- Red foxes: 21,714
- Dingoes: 19,556
- Fennec foxes: 19,395



Other wild animals:

- Sugar gliders: 3,454
- Monkeys: 1,365

Amphibians:



- Toads: 33,298
- Northern leopard frogs: 29,322
- Salamanders: 11,319

Arachnids:



- Tarantulas: 35,231
- Scorpions: 9,199
- Vinegaroons: 6,507

462,893

reptiles are kept as pets in Canada

478,648

birds are kept as pets in Canada



The problem with exotics

The vast number of exotic pets in Canada presents a range of risks; not only to the animals themselves, but to individuals, communities, the local environment and the economy. What was once a niche interest is now a multi-billion dollar industry that has out-paced current laws and regulations.⁹ From animals self-mutilating due to chronic stress, to Canadians falling victim to diseases transferred by wild animals, the issues related to exotic pet ownership are vast and concerning.

Photo above: A fennec fox. © iStock / tzooka

Case studies



This neglected and poorly treated green-cheek conure was one of many seized pet parrots found in an ageing man's home in Alberta. The parrot pictured was found with a severely overgrown beak, poor feather conditions and was severely underweight. It was also suffering from psittacine beak and feather disease – an extremely contagious and deadly disease for which there is no cure. Sadly, this bird had to be euthanized soon after it was rescued.

Picture and case study by Meika's Bird House, November 2018.

Wild animals suffering in captivity

Many exotic animal owners are unaware of the suffering these animals endure. Captivity limits wild animals' natural behaviour and places both their mental and physical well-being at risk. Exotic animals often suffer from chronic stress and poor physical health because captive environments cannot provide what they need to be happy and healthy.

World Animal Protection's investigations into exotic pet ownership has found several specific welfare concerns related to the keeping of wild animals as exotic pets, some of which include:

- **Basic needs not met:** A high number of pet snakes, lizards, tortoises and turtles die within one year of becoming a pet.¹⁰
- **Cruel captive breeding:** Breeding certain traits to produce specific scale patterns or colours can result in neurological conditions and other disorders.¹¹
- **Insufficient nutrition:** Captive green iguanas can suffer from soft bones due to poor diet.¹²
- **Unhealthy human contact:** Physical injury and stress associated with wild capture, handling, and overcrowding usually leads to disease and death of many traded animals.¹³
- **Confined in tiny spaces:** Housing that is too small or overcrowded does not accommodate exotic animals' natural behaviours. African grey parrots fly several miles a day in the wild, but are denied this freedom in captivity.¹⁴

Exotic animals are not suitable as pets and most owners are not equipped to provide these animals with the care necessary to fulfil their intrinsic needs. World Animal Protection research has found that 43% of exotic pet owners buy their animals on impulse.¹⁵ Furthermore, almost half of owners do no research or spend a few hours or less researching which exotic pet to buy or how to care for them.¹⁶ Exotic animals sold so readily in pet shops or online likely adds to the impulsivity of these purchases. This is extremely detrimental to these animals which can often live for decades and have very specific needs and requirements to survive in captivity.



This pet turtle was surrendered to the Montreal SPCA in 2014. The turtle was found to be inadequately cared for over a period of years. It was extremely weak and had large ulcers all over her shell – including one so deep that the animal's lung was visible through it. Due to her severe and painful medical conditions, the turtle unfortunately had to be euthanized.

Picture and case study by Montreal SPCA.



This caiman was seized by authorities when its owner tried to sell it on Kijiji in B.C. It was taken to Dewdney Animal Hospital where the animal refused to eat for two weeks. The vets took an x-ray and found a shower hook lodged in the caiman's intestines. The owner refused to give permission for the operation and the animal died two days later. It is likely the caiman was so poorly cared for that it succumbed to eating any objects it could find.

Picture and case study by Dewdney Animal Hospital, B.C.



This Nile monitor was surrendered by its owner in B.C. The animal was in terrible condition; it had severe metabolic bone disease due to poor care and inadequate feed. It was sent to Dewdney Animal Hospital where the vets there spent 8 weeks trying to recover the Nile monitor. However the condition of the animal was so poor that it had to be euthanized to relieve its suffering.

Picture and case study by Dewdney Animal Hospital, B.C.

The impact of unwanted pets on Canadian shelters

The prevalence of exotic pets in Canada is associated with increasing issues of animal abandonment, escapes and neglect. The result is an unsustainable burden on animal shelters and rescue groups who are having to deal with this problem with insufficient resources and limited capacity.

In 2019, World Animal Protection and Humane Canada surveyed shelters across Canada to understand the impact of exotic pet ownership.¹⁷ The data clearly highlights that shelters are being inundated with exotic animals and are unable to meet the demand for their services. In the past year, for example, the British Columbia SPCA call centre received approximately 700 calls in relation to exotic animals.

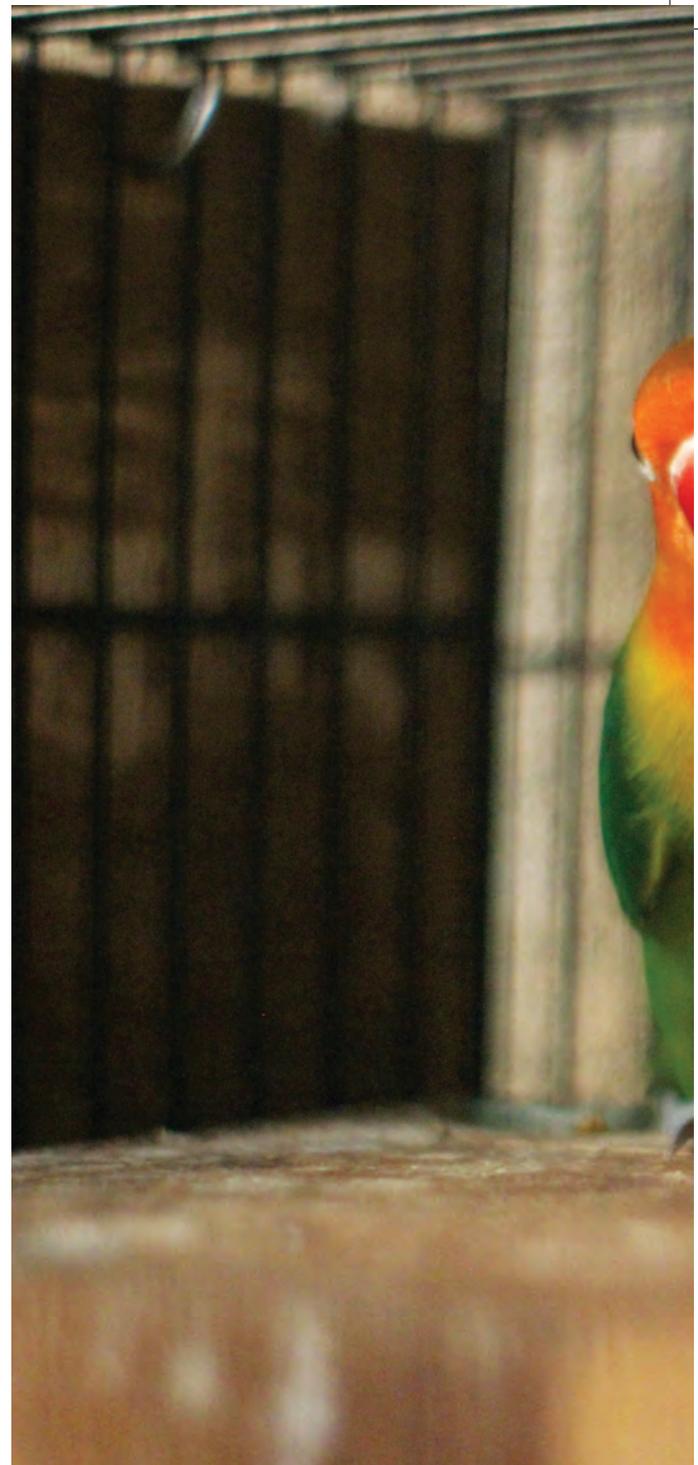
Shelters receive a large range of exotic animals, including mammals, reptiles, invertebrates and birds. A snapshot over the past year shows that shelters most commonly receive sugar gliders, degus, servals, ball pythons, bearded dragons, turtles (such as red eared sliders), geckos, anoles, corn snakes, tree frogs, green iguanas, green cheek conures, macaws, African grey parrots, lovebirds and cockatoos.

While many owners are well-intentioned, the reality of keeping exotic animals is difficult; these animals are expensive to look after and require specific care. Other owners are less well-intentioned with shelters reporting that many people surrender their exotic animal/s due to lack of interest in providing proper care for them. As a result, these animals are often surrendered, seized due to neglect or found as strays by members of the public.

While shelters do their best to rehome exotic animals, they report that it takes them significantly longer to find suitable placements for these animals compared to domesticated cats and dogs. Many of these exotic animals (18%) are therefore euthanized due to a lack of other options.

Shelters are a valuable resource to the community and their ability to deal with a growing amount of unwanted exotic animals is limited. Unless there are better laws and regulations at a provincial level, shelters will continue to bear the burden of Canada's demand for non-traditional 'pets'.

Photo: Two love birds in a cage. © iStock / Arif Wihananto



Top reasons why shelters receive exotic animals

- 36% of shelters surveyed received exotic animals due to owner-surrender (for exotic birds, 45% are owner-surrendered)
- 29% of shelters surveyed received exotic animals that were strays
- 15% of shelters surveyed received exotic animals due to seizures (i.e. animals taken away from their owners due to welfare concerns).



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Unpredictable and dangerous

Exotic animals can pose considerable dangers to their owners and the local community. While some exotic animals can seem harmless, these animals are wild animals and will display wild instincts and unpredictable behaviour, especially as they develop and grow. Maulings, bites, scratches and constriction are not uncommon and can inflict serious harm and even death.

Regrettably, weak exotic pet regulations in Canada have resulted in a number of tragic incidents over the years. While these incidents have sparked improved regulations in some provinces, there are many provinces that have insufficient laws, leaving residents in these jurisdictions open to risk.

Escapes and incidents arising from exotic pet ownership in Canada

- 2003** ◀ A privately owned jaguar escaped from its cage near Niagara Falls and was on the loose for six hours before it died of a heart attack suffered during its recapture.
- 2004** ▶ A 10-year-old boy was mauled by a Siberian tiger when the tiger was led out of its cage on a chain in Southwold, Ontario.
- 2007** ▶ A woman was mauled to death when she was petting a tiger while standing outside its cage in B.C. The incident occurred in front of her two children.
- 2008** ▶ A black jaguar escaped its chain-link fence enclosure in Utterson and mauled a dog on the property. The Ontario Provincial Police were dispatched and shot the jaguar and the dog because of the dog's injuries.
- 2010** ▶ Responding to a noise complaint, police found 5 snakes, including a venomous Gaboon viper in an east-end apartment in Toronto.
- 2010** ▶ An Ontario man was fatally mauled by his 295 kilogram pet tiger in Southwold, Township when he entered the cage to feed it.
- 2013** ▶ Two New Brunswick young boys died by asphyxiation when a 45-kilogram snake escaped from its enclosure in the apartment next to where the boys were sleeping.
- 2015** ▶ A cheetah escaped from a couple's home in B.C., spotted on a highway near Creston B.C.
- 2017** ▶ An 11-year-old girl spotted what was likely an escaped pet alligator besides her pool in Hamilton, Ontario.
- 2018** ▶ A Niagara Falls resident spotted a deadly African Coral Cobra in the back of his truck. The cobra which is native to South Africa, was likely an escaped pet.
- 2019** ▶ A boy's four-foot long python went missing in Toronto. While a python was found a month later in a sewer grate in the city, it was later discovered that it was a different python to the boys'.



This is not an exhaustive list since incidents with exotic animals are not consistently recorded in Canada. As a comparison, data compiled by Born Free USA highlights that almost 2,000 incidents have been recorded since 1990 due to exotic animals being kept as pets in the USA.¹⁸

Without proper regulation, these incidents will continue to occur. It's vital that stronger laws prevent future accidents from happening rather than respond after it is too late.

Photo left: Mexican milksnake.
© iStock / reptiles4all

Canadians at risk of zoonotic diseases

Diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans (zoonotic diseases) pose a significant risk to human health. They cause approximately a billion cases of human illnesses and millions of deaths every year.¹⁹ At a global level, according to one estimate, the economic damage caused by emerging zoonoses over the past 20 years is hundreds of billions of dollars.²⁰

The World Health Organization and most infectious disease experts agree that the origins of future human pandemics are likely to be zoonotic, with wildlife emerging as the primary source.²¹ Wild animals kept as exotic pets are no exception as a source of the risk of infectious disease. From being exposed to wild animals in unsanitary conditions at pet expos, to bringing a wild animal into a home, the risk for Canadian exotic pet owners to contract a zoonotic disease is significant. This risk is even higher for vulnerable Canadians, such as children, seniors and people who are immunocompromised. For example, 27% of cases of Salmonella in children under five years of age in the UK are associated with exposure to pet reptiles.²² It's for this reason that Ontario's Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's guidelines state that children under five should not come into contact with certain exotic species due to their disease-causing pathogens.²³

In 2014, Canada experienced an outbreak of reptile related Salmonellosis. There were 22 illnesses reported in British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec. Three cases were hospitalized.²⁴ However data on this issue is lacking. In Canada, diseases are generally not tracked back to their source which makes it very difficult to understand the scope and scale of animal related infections. Since 1991, there were 167,454 reportable cases of Salmonella in Canada. If you apply the U.S. incidence level of reptile-related Salmonella, it can be estimated that over 11,722 cases of Salmonella have occurred in Canada due to reptile contact during this time.^{25 26} This almost certainly underestimates the issue as reptile related Salmonellosis in the U.S. is responsible for an estimated 74,000 cases each year.²⁷

As more exotic animals are kept as pets, the more at risk individuals and communities are to zoonotic diseases.

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Photo right: A bearded dragon, a common pet in Canada.
© iStock / huettenhoelscher





Local ecosystems under siege

Many exotic animals that are abandoned or escape from confinement, end up in the Canadian environment. While most will die, lacking the skills they need to survive in the wild, some animals are able to adapt and establish themselves, becoming invasive species. When this occurs, it can have serious economic and environmental implications for Canada's native flora and fauna. Invasive species can alter ecosystems, and decrease the genetic diversity of an area.²⁸ Monitoring this threat and removing these species to protect and restore natural environments can require significant resources. While the specific costs to Canada are undocumented, it is estimated that invasive species cost the U.S. over 120 billion dollars in damages every year.²⁹

The situation in British Columbia is one example of the impact of invasive species. B.C. is now home to several introduced invasive pet species including the red-eared

slider turtle, American bullfrog and Brazilian elodea.³⁰ The increased demand for red-eared slider turtles is a worldwide phenomenon, likely associated with the popular television show, *Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtles* in the 1990's.³¹ However these turtles can grow to be 33 centimetres long and can live for more than 25 years in captivity, factors that may contribute to the release of these animals into the local environment.³² When a new species is introduced into an ecosystem, it can quickly take over an area and threaten native species for resources or introduce diseases. In B.C., conservation officers have reported that red-eared sliders are to blame for the disappearance of native turtles in certain parks within the province.³³

With an estimated 50,550 red-eared slider turtles currently kept as pets in Canada, it is likely this is a continued threat for Canada's local ecosystems.³⁴

Threatening the survival of wild species

Demand for exotic pets is a substantial driver of the global wildlife trade. Between 2007 and 2017, over 23 million CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna And Flora) listed animals were imported into Canada for commercial or personal reasons.³⁵ Of these, over 5 million animals came directly from the wild.

Research has shown that the exotic pet trade is now a key threat to many species' survival with large-scale poaching and theft from the wild devastating natural populations and adding to existing threats such as habitat loss. As many as 21% of African grey parrots from the wild, already a species in danger of extinction, are captured for sale into the exotic pet trade each year.³⁶ For the Indian star tortoise, over 55,000 animals were recorded to have been collected from the wild in a single year from just one of many trade hubs across India.³⁷

The methods used to snatch these animals from the wild and the journey to their final destination is inherently cruel. For African grey parrots, the stress of capture can be fatal: although exact data is difficult to obtain, post-capture and pre-export mortality rates for grey parrots have been estimated between 30 - 60% and as high as 70% - 90% in some instances.³⁸ Customs officers in Canada have witnessed other inhumane methods to transport wild animals. For example, officers have found finches stuffed into hair curlers and snakes smuggled in people's socks.³⁹

The survival of many species is also being threatened by animals being taken from the wild illegally. It has been estimated that 25% of the global exotic pet trade is illegal and animals marketed as captive-bred, including species common in trade may actually be wild-caught.⁴⁰

Whether legal or illegal, the trade has a devastating impact on the animals forced to endure a life of captivity – both mentally and physically.

Photo left: Red-eared slider turtle.
© Shutterstock

Photo right: Hair curlers used to smuggle finches into Canada. © World Animal Protection

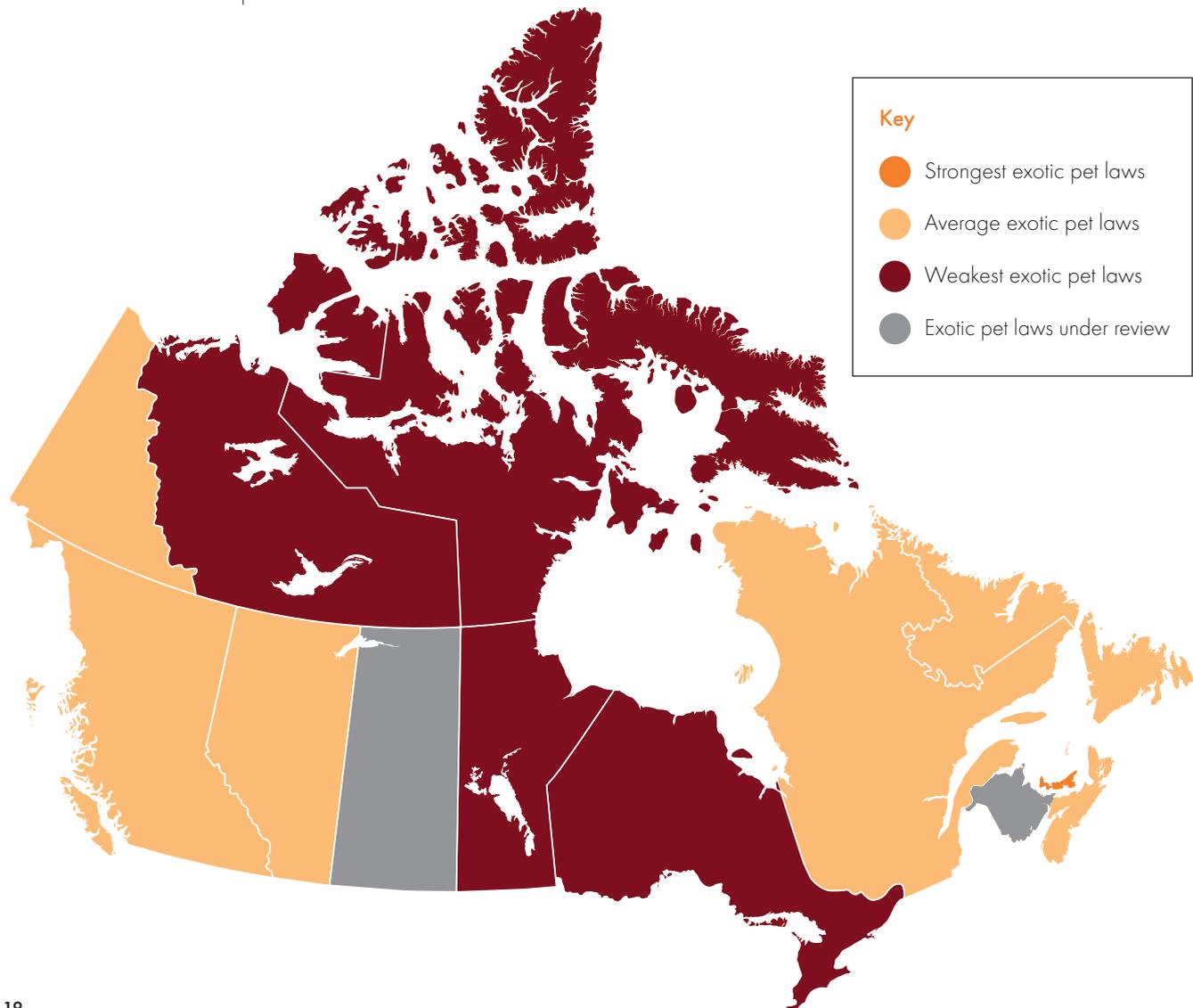
Exotic pet laws in Canada

Many provinces fail to address exotic pet ownership

In Canada, there is a patchwork of federal, provincial, and municipal laws which result in a wide array of wild animals legally able to be owned across the country. At the federal level, permits are required for animal species that are threatened by the wildlife trade and are listed in the appendices of CITES, however exotic pet ownership is not addressed.

World Animal Protection's analysis of Canada's exotic pet laws found that many provinces fail to sufficiently restrict which animals can be owned as pets. Ontario and Northwest

Territories do not regulate this issue at all at a provincial or territorial level. Other provinces have stronger laws, which have largely been developed in response to tragic incidents such as the death of two boys from asphyxiation from an African Rock Python in New Brunswick and the woman who was mauled to death by a tiger in British Columbia. These incidents are tragic and Canada should apply a consistent and evidence-based regulatory approach that prevents issues like this from occurring.



Ranking of exotic pet laws in Canada⁴¹

| Province/ Territory | Overview of laws |
|---------------------------|--|
| Alberta | Alberta prohibits over 500 species of ‘controlled animal species’ as pets. While this list is fairly comprehensive, the province allows far more animals than it prohibits. Additionally, Alberta’s list is driven mainly by animals that pose a public safety and environmental risk. As a result, many wild animals that suffer in captivity, like dingoes and ball pythons, are legally allowed to be owned as pets at a provincial level. |
| British Columbia | Following the death of a woman in 2007 by a caged tiger, B.C. implemented new rules to ban dangerous pets. The province now prohibits 1,256 ‘controlled alien species’. While this list is fairly comprehensive, the province allows far more animals than it prohibits. Additionally, B.C.’s list mainly focuses on animals that are a threat to public safety and doesn’t take into consideration that wild animals are not suitable as pets and suffer in captivity. |
| Manitoba | Manitoba’s laws do not properly regulate wild animal ownership. The province only prohibits some animals as pets such as raccoon dogs, wild boars and non-native deer from the province. This means there are no provincial laws preventing a range of other wild animals, such as chimpanzees or crocodiles, to be owned as pets. |
| New Brunswick | Following the tragic death of two young boys by an African rock python, New Brunswick is currently reviewing their exotic pet laws. The review has been ongoing since 2015 and will examine the large array of animals that are currently allowed to be kept as pets. New Brunswick follows the best-practice approach to managing wild animal ownership through a positive list, but they permit 182 animals, many of which are difficult to keep humanely and are a threat to the local environment. |
| Newfoundland and Labrador | Newfoundland and Labrador follows the best-practice approach to regulating wild animal possession by listing the animals permitted to be kept as pets. However the list of almost 600 animals permitted in the province is driven largely by the need to restrict invasive species rather than consideration for the animals’ welfare or public safety. |
| Northwest Territories | Northwest Territories laws do not specifically address exotic animal ownership. While some animals are prohibited to keep, such as bats, goats, sheep and llamas, there is no specific guidance about what wild animals are banned or allowed. This means animals such as tigers, cobras and alligators are legally allowed to be owned as pets. |
| Nova Scotia | Nova Scotia has a list of animals not allowed as pets and a list of animals permitted to be kept as pets. However many of the animals permitted as pets are wild animals and can suffer in captivity as well as pose environmental issues. |
| Nunavut | Nunavut’s laws don’t specifically regulate exotic animal ownership. While there are laws restricting the importation of wild animals, there are big exceptions with the laws allowing all ‘pet’ reptiles and birds to be imported into the territory. This means that there are no territorial laws preventing a range of dangerous reptiles such as boa constrictors and crocodiles to be owned as pets. |
| Ontario | While Ontario restricts the ownership of native animals, the province’s laws do not address exotic animal ownership. Instead the province delegates this issue to the individual municipalities. This means there are no provincial laws stopping individuals from keeping many wild animals, including tigers, venomous snakes and crocodiles. |
| Prince Edward Island | Prince Edward Island has some of the toughest exotic pet laws in the country. No wildlife (including exotics) can be kept as a pet without a licence. In addition, there is a list of banned animals for which a licence will not be given. Prince Edward Island is also one of the few provinces that considers animal welfare in the development of its exotic pet laws. |
| Quebec | Quebec has recently updated its keeping animals in captivity regulations and has a list of species of animals that are restricted to be kept in captivity. While this list is fairly comprehensive, the province allows far more animals than it prohibits and these updated laws still allow for a range of wild animals to be kept as pets despite the evidence highlighting these animals suffer in captivity. |
| Saskatchewan | Saskatchewan follows the best-practice approach to regulating wild animal ownership by listing the animals permitted to be kept as pets. However the list of permitted animals is broad, including all snakes other than venomous or constrictor snakes and a range of birds and amphibians. Saskatchewan is currently reviewing their laws after releasing a public survey on the issue in 2017. |
| Yukon | Yukon’s laws do not allow any wildlife (including exotics) to be owned as a pet without a license. However it does allow many domestic animals to be owned as pets and many of the ‘domestic’ animals listed are actually wild animals, including sugar gliders and a number of reptiles and birds. |



The way forward – a positive list approach

Traditionally a list of prohibited animals has been relied upon to manage the danger posed by wild animals. However there is now a greater acceptance of the need to restrict a wider range of animals due to animal welfare, human health and environmental reasons. Considering the vast number of wild animal species that exist, listing the ones that are prohibited is extremely onerous for governments to manage and makes it very difficult to enforce.

The good news for governments is that there is a better, more cost-efficient way to regulate wild animal ownership. A positive list approach is the best-practice approach. It involves listing the animals suitable to be kept as pets in a jurisdiction on the basis of scientific risk assessments.

Listing the animals that are permitted to be owned is more concise and manageable for governments. It is a problem-

preventative framework that ensures that species on or added to a permitted list do not pose a risk to the public, the environment or the animal's welfare. For this reason, positive lists have been adopted in a number of countries in Europe and some provinces in Canada.⁴²

A positive list is the best approach to regulating exotic animal ownership, however it is only as effective as the criteria that sits behind it. To provide clear guidance on which animals should be added to or removed from a positive list, governments need to consider a range of criteria that addresses all the risks that exist with exotic pet ownership. We recommend the below criteria should be applied as best practice. This is based on the criteria used in the development of positive lists in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Photo left: A caracal in the wild. © iStock / alessandrocatta

Criteria for including an animal on a positive list



Animal welfare: The animal should be relatively easy to keep by a beginner pet owner and capable of being housed and cared for with respect to their fundamental needs. Animals must be able to express a normal range of natural behaviours.



Available knowledge and care: Each animal's welfare requirements must be known and comprehensively met. There must be sufficient available care by vets, shelters and other individuals in order to assist animals that are ill or injured.



Human health and safety: The animal should not pose a safety threat and must not carry diseases that are transferable to humans.



Environment: The animal should not present a threat to the natural environment through the introduction of diseases or as an invasive species.



Conservation: The animal is not endangered or threatened by legal or illegal trade and has a stable captive-bred population.



Precautionary principle: Where there is a lack of peer-reviewed scientific data or contradictory data to identify whether an animal is suitable according to the above criteria, an animal should be presumed to be unsuitable for private ownership.

Summary and recommendations

Canada is known for its wilderness and wildlife and Canadians care deeply about protecting these animals from cruelty and abuse. Most provinces and territories prohibit the keeping of native wildlife as pets as it is not considered an acceptable practice. But permitting wild animals from other countries to be subjected to lives in captivity reveals a deep hypocrisy in our love of wildlife.

We can no longer ignore the suffering of millions of wild animals that are being kept as pets in this country. Exotic animals in Canada deserve the same protection as native Canadian animals. If a loon or a wolf is an unacceptable pet, then owning a parrot or a dingo should be similarly unacceptable.

There are real and tangible actions that can be taken by governments and individuals to address the issue of wild animals

in captivity and the associated risks. Stronger regulations that are applied consistently across all provinces and territories would address the issue of exotic pet ownership and would place Canada as a world leader in protecting wild animals both within its borders and around the world. Similarly, educating the public on the issues associated with owning an exotic animal will start to turn the tide to ensure these animals aren't demanded as pets by Canadians.

World Animal Protection strongly recommends that;

- 1. Provincial governments adopt a positive list framework with robust criteria to better restrict exotic pet ownership.**
- 2. Individuals pledge not to buy a wild animal as a pet.**

Photo below: Wild otters © CC0 Creative Commons



References

- ¹ World Animal Protection commissioned Northstar Research Partners in 2019 to examine exotic pet ownership in Canada. The survey is based on a nationally representative audience of 21,382 Canadians of which 1,009 are exotic pet owners.
- ² These figures refer to CITES-listed animals. Accessed through the CITES trade database, accessed 25 June 2019, <https://trade.cites.org/>
- ³ Warwick et al, 2018, Exotic pet suitability: Understanding some problems and using a labeling system to aid animal welfare, environment and consumer protection, *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, Vol 26
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- ⁵ Ibid
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