

Wild Obsession

The perilous attraction of owning exotic pets

adapted from an article by Lauren Slater

1 All across the nation, in Americans' backyards and garages and living rooms, in their beds and basements and bathrooms, wild animals kept as pets live side by side with their human owners. It's believed that more exotic animals live in American homes than are cared for in American zoos. The exotic-pet business is a lucrative industry. It has drawn criticism from animal welfare advocates and wildlife conservationists alike. These people say it's not only dangerous to bring captive-bred wildlife into the suburbs, but it's also cruel, which is why it should be forbidden too. Yet the issue is far from black or white.

2 Privately owning exotic animals is currently permitted with essentially no restrictions: You must have a license to own a dog, but you are free to purchase a lion or baboon and keep it as a pet. Even in the states where exotic-pet ownership is banned, "people break the law," says Adam Roberts of *Born Free USA*, who keeps a running database of injuries attributed to exotic-pet ownership: In Connecticut a 55-year-old woman's face permanently disfigured by her friend's lifelong pet chimpanzee, in Ohio an 80-year-old man attacked by a 200-pound kangaroo. And that list does not capture the number of people who become sick from coming into contact with diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans.

3 The term exotic pet has no firm definition; it can refer to any wildlife kept in human

households – or simply to a pet that's more unusual than the standard dog or cat. Lack of oversight and regulation makes it difficult to pin down just how many exotics are out there. "The short answer is, too many," says Patty



Finch of the *Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries*. It's estimated that the number of captive tigers alone is at least 5,000 – most kept not by accredited zoos but by private owners. And while many owners tend to their exotic pets with great care, some keep their pets in cramped cages and poor conditions.

4 Commercially importing endangered species into the United States has been restricted since the early 1970s. Many of the large exotic animals that end up in backyard menageries – lions and tigers, monkeys and bears – are bred in captivity. Today on the Internet you can find

zebras and camels and cougars and capuchins for sale, their adorable faces staring out from your screen. And though such animals are no longer 16, neither are they domesticated – they exist in a netherworld that prompts intriguing questions and dilemmas.

5 From his experience in providing sanctuary for exotic animals in need of new homes, often desperately, Roberts says that exotic-pet owners tend to fall into multiple overlapping categories. Some people treat their animals, especially primates, as surrogate children. They dress them up in baby clothes, diaper them, and train them to use the toilet. Others own exotics as symbols of status and power. They see the exotic animal as the next step up from a Doberman or pitbull. There are impulse buyers who simply could not resist purchasing a cute baby exotic. And then there are wild animal lovers. Often they start out as volunteers at a wildlife sanctuary and end up adopting a rescued animal in need of a home.

6 Many exotic-pet owners and private breeders say they are motivated by a desire to preserve and protect threatened species. “Climate change and human population growth could wipe out a species in record time, so having a backup population is a good idea,” says Lynn Culver, a private breeder of felines and executive director of the *Feline Conservation Federation*, who believes that “those who do it right should have the right to do it.”

7 But advocacy groups such as the *World Wildlife Fund* say that captive breeding of endangered species by private owners – whether for commercial, conservation, or educational reasons – serves only to perpetuate a thriving market for exotic animals. That, in turn, results in a greater danger to animals still living in their natural habitat. Conservation efforts should focus on protecting animals in the wild, they assert, not on preserving what are often inbred animals in private zoos.

8 Adam Roberts of *Born Free USA* says his organization’s mission is to keep wildlife in the wild, where it belongs. When humans choose to keep what are supposed to be wild animals as pets, we turn them into something outside of wild, something for which nature has no place. In the end, what we learn from exotic-pet ownership is that when you take the wild out of the wild, you eradicate its true nature and replace it with fantasy – the fantasy being ours, we humans, the animals at once the most and the least tamed of all.

National Geographic, 2014