

The Trouble with Exotic Pets

A Reading A-Z Level R Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,151

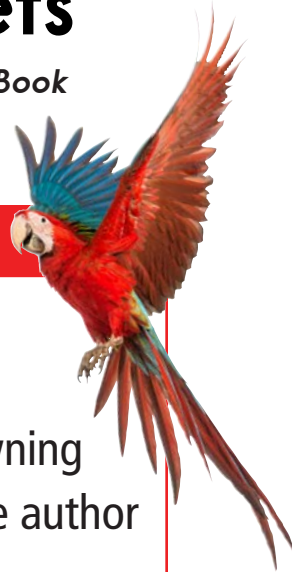
Connections

Writing

Do you agree with the author's point of view on the topic of owning exotic pets? Write a letter to the author to share your opinion.

Science and Art

Research one of the animals from the book to learn more about its natural habitat and what it needs to live. Make a diorama of the animal in its natural habitat. Present the diorama and the facts you learned to your class.

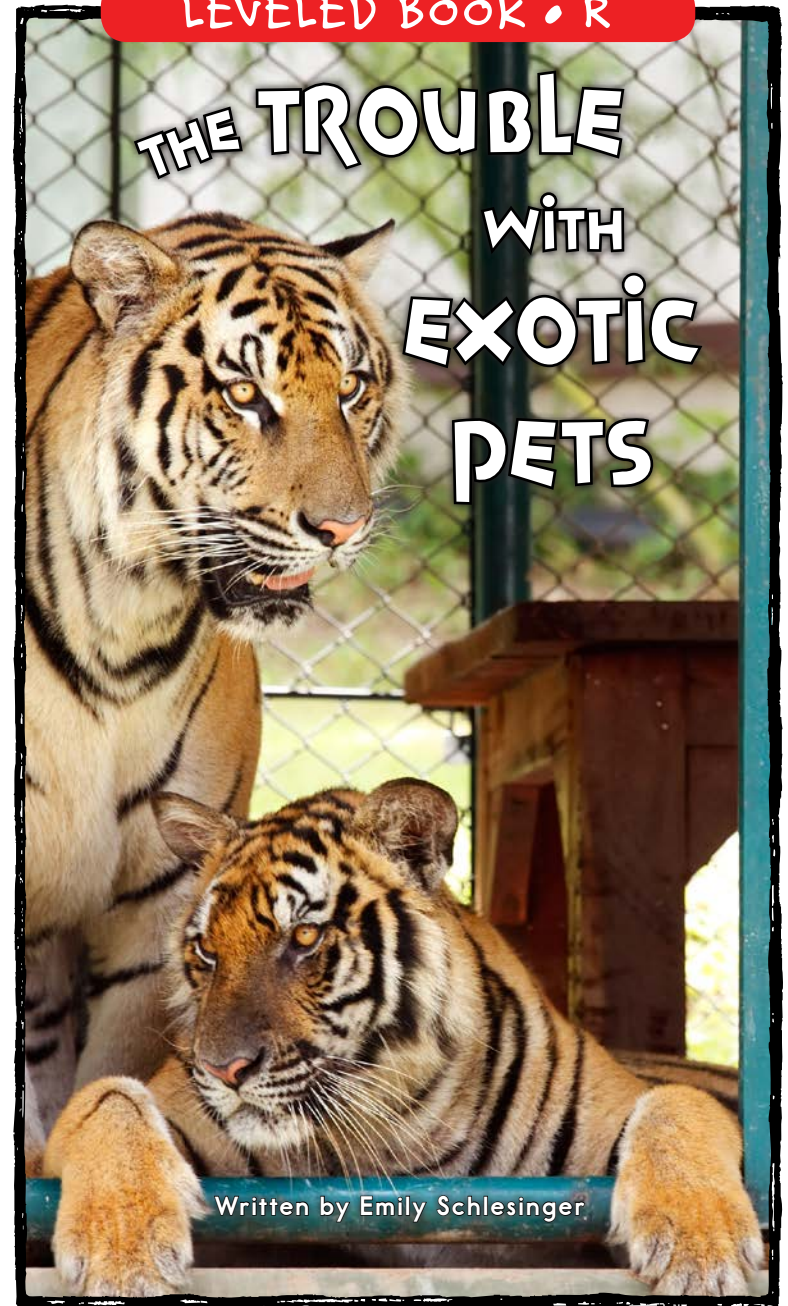


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THE TROUBLE WITH EXOTIC PETS



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Focus Question

What are some people's reasons for owning exotic pets? Why are some people against it?

Words to Know

aggressive	import
domesticated	neglected
exotic	smuggled
extinct	species
illegally	

Title page: A man from Essex, England, takes his pet iguana, Rocky, for a walk.

Page 3: One of three pet foxes belonging to a woman in Whittlebury, England, poses in its home.

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Correlation

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Wild parrots are a common sight in the jungles of Ecuador.

What Is an Exotic Pet?

Think about the wildest, most amazing animals on Earth. What comes to mind? An African lion? A white tiger? An elephant or a big black bear? You may picture these animals running across a savanna or resting on high branches in a jungle. Perhaps you have seen them up close in zoos.

Some people, however, keep wild animals such as tigers, parrots, or pythons as pets in their homes. These types of pets are called **exotic** pets. The American Veterinary Medical Association estimates that one in ten U.S. homes has an exotic pet.

United States law defines exotic animals as those not usually kept as pets or on farms. They often come from other countries. An animal does not have to be huge to be exotic. Animals such as hedgehogs, turtles, gerbils, and lizards are also considered exotic pets.

Exotic animals are usually wild, meaning they have not been **domesticated**. A domestic animal—such as a dog or a horse—has been bred to live easily with humans. Domestic animals have often been bred to be gentle or social. Exotic animals, on the other hand, have traits that help them survive in the wild. As a result, they can be very dangerous when kept as pets.



A wild cheetah chases prey in Kenya, Africa (left). A domestic dog chases a ball (right).



Don't try this at home. Some people who keep exotic animals expose them to everyday activities.

Why Do People Want Exotic Pets?

Many exotic animals make fun, beloved pets. They can be beautiful and interesting to watch, too. However, so can domestic animals. Why choose an exotic pet?

A dog, fish, or cat may not sound that unusual, but a tiger is sure to amaze people. For some people, keeping a wild pet such as a cheetah is a way to show off. Still others have their own personal zoos. They may search the world for the next exotic animal to add to their collection.

Many people simply fall in love with the animals. They may treat them like their own family. Some owners even dress certain animals, such as chimpanzees, in human clothes.

The Popularity of Exotic Pets

Millions of exotic animals are kept as pets across the United States—more than live in zoos. Among the most desired are big cats such as tigers, lions, and cheetahs. The United States is also home to fifteen thousand primate pets, including chimpanzees and monkeys.

Reptiles are the most common type of exotic pet, ranging from tiny lizards to deadly snakes. Exotic birds from around the world are also found in American homes.

Tigers in the United States

Tigers are so popular that more live as pets in the United States than there are in the entire wild. In fact, there are over ten times more tigers living as pets in the United States than in zoos. While only about three thousand tigers roam free around the world, over five thousand live in U.S. homes.

Caring for a pet tiger is not easy. For one thing, it can really add to a family's grocery bill. Just one tiger can eat up to 9 kilograms (20 lb.) of meat per day. That's over 3,175 kilograms (7,000 lb.) of meat per year!



Tigers Noah (left) and Layla (right) live at Stump Hill Farm in Massillon, Ohio.

Although many exotic pets are found in the United States, the biggest customer of the exotic pet trade is China. Owning a pet snake, crocodile, monkey, or shark is popular. In parts of the Middle East, a pet cheetah is considered a status symbol among very wealthy people. Europe **imports** more pet reptiles than any other place.

Nearly half of all traded wildlife comes from Asia. The next biggest source is Africa, followed by South and Central America. Selling wildlife provides much-needed income for many communities. However, taking too many animals out of the wild can threaten the survival of a **species**.



A pet cheetah relaxes on a sofa in an apartment in Kuwait.



The list above shows just a few examples of the many illegally exported exotic animals.

Nearly two hundred countries have signed an agreement about endangered species—animals that are at risk of becoming **extinct**. This agreement sets rules to protect endangered species from being traded.

Buying exotic pets can cost thousands of dollars. Caring for them can be expensive as well. Because of the cost, wealthy people are often the ones who can afford them. However, just because someone can afford an exotic pet doesn't mean that the animal will be treated well.

Dangers of the Exotic Pet Trade

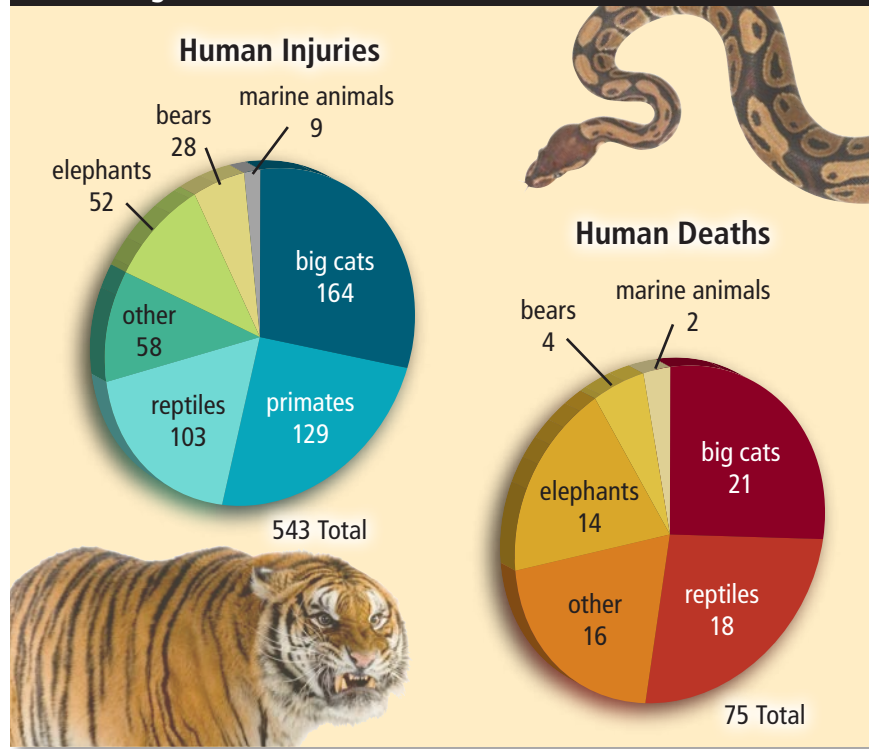
U.S. laws about exotic pets are different from state to state. In some states, it is legal to own any animal. Other states don't allow certain animals or require owners to get a special permit.

While some animals are sold legally through auctions and stores, many others are bought and sold **illegally**. These animals may be **smuggled** across international borders and hidden from authorities. This practice brings in billions of dollars for smugglers, but it's the animals that pay the price. Packed into tight crates, often with little food, up to 90 percent do not survive the journey.



Indonesian authorities seized more than a hundred endangered pangolins during a raid in October 2017.

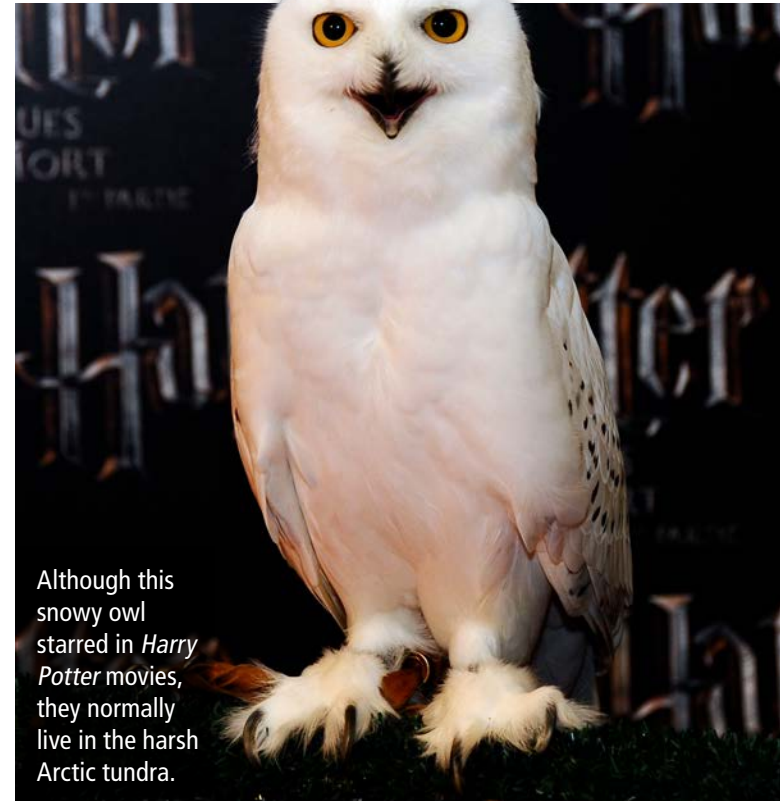
Dangers of Exotic Pets in the United States, 1990–2011



Once these animals are adopted, they can pose a danger to their owners. Each year, dozens of exotic animals attack humans, resulting in injury or even death. Animals are often sold as babies, when they are gentle and sweet. However, many face natural changes as they grow older. These can include a sudden desire to hunt, escape, or find a mate, which can lead to **aggressive** behavior. Many owners are taken by surprise when a once-friendly pet turns vicious.

Television, movies, and social media have helped make exotic pets popular. Many people want the animals they see on-screen. For example, sales of snowy owls grew quickly after the *Harry Potter* movies.

Sadly, many owners who buy exotic animals find them too difficult to care for. In those cases, the pets are often abandoned or **neglected**.



Although this snowy owl starred in *Harry Potter* movies, they normally live in the harsh Arctic tundra.

Another risk from owning an exotic pet is disease. The U.S. government reports that almost 75 percent of new diseases in humans can be traced to animals. In some cases, these illnesses spread through contact with a pet. One example is salmonella, a dangerous disease that spreads from pet reptiles to about seventy thousand humans each year.

Python Invasion

When Burmese pythons hit U.S. pet stores, customers bought them in large numbers. Many did not know that babies could grow as long as 3.7 meters (12 ft.) and weigh 113 kilograms (250 lb.)! Overwhelmed, many owners turned the snakes loose, and some pythons found their way to the swampy Florida Everglades. Over time, their numbers soared. They began to drive out native species such as rabbits, deer, and raccoons. In 2017, the community began paying people to hunt these snake invaders.



Florida biologists hold a giant Burmese python in Everglades National Park near Homestead, Florida.



Lilly the alligator at home in Pennsylvania. Lilly has a tiara and pink dresses and even gets her nails painted.

Humans and Exotic Animals

People disagree about whether humans should own exotic animals. Some believe humans have the right to keep any animal they want as a pet. Others believe that the danger to both the animals and humans is too great a risk to take. Still others believe wild animals have a right to freedom and can never be happy as pets.

Humans will always be interested in exotic animals. However, although owning an exotic pet may seem fun, the harm it causes to the animals can be great. Luckily for us, there are other ways to enjoy exotic animals. We can watch them on television or over the Internet as they roam free in their natural habitat. We can visit them in places where they are provided with everything they need to thrive. After all, it is much more fun to watch animals when we know they are happy and healthy.



Tourists on safari in South Africa are enclosed in cars, while the wild animals roam free.

Glossary

aggressive (<i>adj.</i>)	ready or likely to attack or argue; excessively forceful (p. 11)
domesticated (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to plants or animals that are raised for human use (p. 5)
exotic (<i>adj.</i>)	different because of a mysterious or unusual quality; from another country or a faraway place (p. 4)
extinct (<i>adj.</i>)	no longer in existence; completely wiped out (p. 9)
illegally (<i>adv.</i>)	in a way that is against or forbidden by a law or rule (p. 10)
import (<i>v.</i>)	to bring in goods from another country or state in order to sell them (p. 8)
neglected (<i>adj.</i>)	not properly cared for; ignored (p. 12)
smuggled (<i>v.</i>)	took out of or brought into a place secretly or illegally (p. 10)
species (<i>n.</i>)	a group of living things that are physically similar and can reproduce (p. 8)