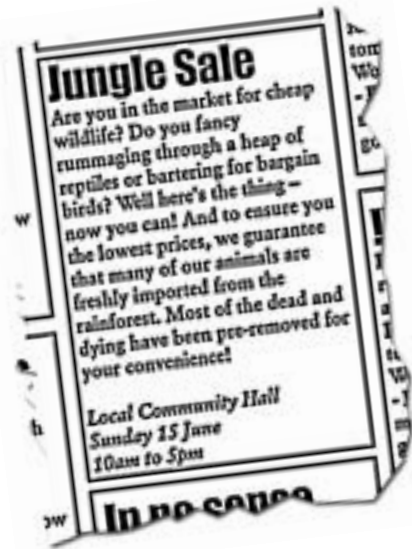


# A LICENCE FOR

# CRUELTY

The implications of  
legalising exotic pet markets





The above advertisement is fictitious. But the prospect of a 'jungle sale' coming soon to a town near you is not so far-fetched. Proposed changes in the law offer a better deal for wildlife dealers and a raw deal for animals, the environment and public health.

### What is an exotic pet market?

Exotic pet markets are typically held in community halls, schools, leisure centres and working mens' clubs. They comprise a collection of stalls – each manned by independent traders. They can also take the form of auctions. Stalls are stacked high with small cages containing birds or tiny plastic tubs containing reptiles. The majority of animals offered for sale at many of these events will have been captured from the wild.

Pet markets provide an opportunity for animal dealers to offload sick and dying animals. The emphasis is on quantity over quality and individual animal welfare seems to be a minor consideration. Many

dealers will try to pass off imported animals as captive-bred.

### The sale of pets and the law

Currently, the commercial sale of pet animals is governed by the Pet Animals Act 1951. This Act requires that animals be kept 'in accommodation suitable as respects size, temperature, lighting, ventilation and cleanliness'.

In 1983, an amendment to the Act outlawed the carrying on of a business of selling pet animals 'in any part of a street or public place, or at a stall or barrow in a market'.

Pet markets are therefore illegal. Numerous legal rulings, local authority decisions and barristers' opinions have concluded that pet animal markets fall outside of the Act and therefore cannot be licensed. Several animal protection groups have argued that conditions that are typical at pet markets do not meet the basic criteria of the Pet Animals Act.

Unfortunately, illegal bird and reptile markets still take place. This is mainly due to failings in local authority



Wild caught toucans for sale



A far cry from the rainforest - around 25,000 birds at a UK bird market

enforcement, often owing to a lack of resources.

### A new deal for animal dealers?

The Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has initiated a process of updating the welfare legislation relating to captive and domesticated animals. The Animal Welfare Bill represents the most comprehensive 'modernisation' of animal welfare laws for a century.

Animal welfare organisations had high hopes that the new Act would strengthen and improve existing legislation and offer more protection for animals. Some areas of the draft Bill appear promising but on the issue of pet animal sales, the suggested changes represent a seriously retrograde step. It is proposed that current restrictions on the sale of pets at these markets are removed and instead that codes of practice and a

licensing system be introduced to facilitate wildlife markets.

Unfortunately, much of the work carried out by DEFRA in preparation of the Animal Welfare Bill involved negotiating with traders and accommodating their interests rather than starting from an animal welfare perspective. Such an approach was doomed to failure and would only perpetuate the problems associated with the wildlife trade whilst generating no benefits to animal welfare.

### All Pets are equal!... But some are more equal than others!

*'there is no question of... approval being given to pet fairs where dogs and cats are offered for sale'. Senior DEFRA Official in correspondence.*

Cats and dogs confined and stacked in small containers would no doubt be highly stressed in a temporary market environment. This would be further



exacerbated by their stressful journey to the market from the storage premises (probably not licensed or regularly inspected). Their distress would be obvious to almost anyone.

We can compare this scenario to the very real problems facing exotic animals at markets. Most animals in the exotic pet trade are wild-caught. The trapping, confinement and transportation process is extremely crude and brutal and many animals die before reaching their destination.

Birds, and particularly parrots, are emotionally complex and highly sociable. Removing them from their social group and partners, with whom they may have paired for life, is in itself an extremely traumatic experience. Added to this is the poor treatment they will encounter before and during the market. The behaviour that wild

birds exhibit at markets is identical to that of birds who have been trapped and fear for their lives. Wild parrots may view humans as predators and so their proximity to a jostling crowd makes for a terrifying ordeal.

Reptiles, unlike birds and mammals, are not parentally educated. They are born expecting a life in the wild for which they have evolved to cope and therefore find many aspects of captivity



stressful and confusing. For instance, for ease of management, snakes and lizards are typically confined in glass tanks. As reptiles would never encounter transparent barriers in the wild, they will not adapt to cope with them. They may react with hyperactive escape behaviour or sustain nasty facial injuries from repeatedly trying to penetrate the glass.

All this means is that in some respects, whether wild-caught or captive-bred, reptiles are arguably more sensitive and vulnerable to the stresses associated with temporary markets and with captivity in general than either birds or mammals.

Recognising important obvious or subtle signs of stress in exotic birds and reptiles, rather than mammals, is rarely in the domain of the average veterinary inspector but requires specialist observation. For instance, there are only a handful of bird and reptile specialists capable of interpreting these signs and it is simply impossible for these experts to conduct general inspections at pet markets.

### Under the counter animal deals

During an initial consultation on the Animal Welfare Bill,

**DEFRA OFFICIALS HAVE OFFERED ANIMAL DEALERS – THE SAME DEALERS WHO HAVE REGULARLY ORGANISED ILLEGAL MARKETS – THE OPPORTUNITY TO DRAFT THEIR OWN CODES OF PRACTICE FOR PET MARKETS**

DEFRA held a series of ‘stakeholder’ meetings. Animal welfare representation was very limited during these meetings. For instance, DEFRA organised a meeting on pet markets without the most experienced welfare groups and their supporting experts in this area being permitted to take part.

More recently in June 2004, DEFRA set up a ‘Working Group on Animal Fairs’ – again experienced welfare groups were not invited to take part. In fact, the working group was set up in such secrecy that feathers were ruffled in sectors of the pet bird industry as they knew nothing of the group until its recommendations had already been made. Three out of seven members of the working group have links with the wildlife trade and unlawful pet markets.



## Leaving the fox in charge of the chickens?

DEFRA officials have offered animal dealers – the same dealers who have regularly organised illegal markets - the opportunity to draft their own codes of practice for pet markets. It is clearly inappropriate for law-breakers to have a hand in writing the law but of course they have welcomed the proposition.

Husbandry standards at pet markets are atrocious and yet the exotic pet industry continues to boast about the high priority it places on animal welfare at these events. Even the pet industry's annual flagship event – the National Cage & Aviary Birds Exhibition in 2003 (licensed to sell 100,000 birds) - failed substantially to meet the legal requirements of the Pet Animals Act and the Council's own licensing conditions.

## Pets that can seriously damage your health

Medical professionals have concluded that the public health threats

associated with pet markets are significant for the following reasons:

- the propensity for animals to harbour and succumb to disease, which is greatly increased due to the stressful conditions in which they are kept;
- animals are derived from sources far and wide – some from tropical regions and pathogenic hot spots;
- generally, animals are freely available for public handling;
- traders and other staff move between one stall and another, and thus provide clear opportunities for transmission of infectious micro-organisms;
- occasionally, animal urine and droppings fall to the floor and are then dispersed by the jostling crowd comprised of people of all ages and differing immune sensitivities;
- specific and enduring risks to vulnerable groups as events often take place in community centres and school halls.

Among the infectious agents carried by exotic pet animals are:-

Salmonella, Cryptosporidium, Giardia, Chlamydia, Campylobacter, Escherichia coli, Listeria, Edwardsiella, Plesiomonas, Mycobacterium, Pseudomonas, Armillifer, Citrobacter, Klebsiella, Morganella, Serratia, Staphylococcus, Streptococcus and Yersinia.

## Conserving nature... in margarine tubs

A common claim made by the exotic pet industry is that hobbyists assist conservation efforts by breeding species that are under threat in the wild. Actually, only a tiny percentage of animals are 'bred' by dealers and these are for profit, not protection - they cannot be returned to the wild.

It is, for example, not possible to completely screen captive animals for all diseases and this is one reason why re-introducing captive-bred animals into the natural environment is fraught with problems.

Also, captive-breeding programmes can lead to a diversity of mutated species and a great number of 'unnatural' hybrids and albinos. Along with the many other problems associated with re-introduction programmes, the release into the environment of animals of questionable genetic integrity is an additional serious concern.

Contrary to the grand claims made by exotic pet hobbyists, they do not contribute usefully to conservation efforts but instead are a great hindrance.

## The blind leading the blind

Conditions for animals at pet markets are invariably poor – setting a bad example to customers. For instance, it is not uncommon to see birds in cages that are illegal –



ie. not large enough to allow them to spread their wings, and snakes in containers not even large enough to allow them to stretch to their full length. Organisers of pet markets however, keen to win official approval for their events, have offered to provide 'care sheets' with each animal sold.

The type of printed advice on exotic animal husbandry techniques circulated amongst trade groups is usually of a very poor standard, unsubstantiated, unqualified and based on hearsay. This advice can be misleading and sometimes even dangerous. Good quality information is available but in the form of scientific publications where



volumes of text are required to convey the information needed even for the basic care of just one species. Asking exotic pet hobbyists to advise the general public on how to care for these delicate and vulnerable species would be a naïve blunder with serious and even tragic consequences.

### Pampered pet traders

Under the current legislation, standards for protecting animal welfare and public health in pet shops are minimal and in dire need of improvement. For instance, pet shops escape restrictions that apply to veterinary practices and zoos. Zoos are formally required to have staff on site day and night and veterinary

practices are legally obliged to provide qualified veterinary supervision for animals hospitalised overnight.

Standards of care in all animal-keeping establishments should be the same and the law should not favour one particular sector over another.

New and more stringent controls in pet shops could bring about real improvements for pet animals and this is where new legislation should be directed. Instead, the Government has proposed to further erode existing animal welfare law by replacing 12-month licences of pet shops with licences that last for 18 months. This money saving measure is a false economy and will invite more problems than it prevents. The estimated cost to local authorities of legalising pet markets is woefully inaccurate. It does not take into account the cost of inevitable prosecutions of animal traders for failing to comply with regulations. In the same week that DEFRA released its draft bill, the treasury announced new restrictions to reduce local government spending. With this proposed bill, local government will need extra spending powers to enforce these measures, not further cuts.

### Final Word

If pet markets are legalised then the burden of responsibility for enforcing the law is likely to rest with local authorities, which already have overstretched resources and also lack the necessary scientific expertise. Leading experts in exotic animal

welfare and biology maintain that it is impossible for standards of husbandry at animal markets to meet even current minimal pet shop standards. Unless conditions set for pet markets were unacceptably low, then local authorities would inevitably be under pressure to prosecute pet market organisers and traders for not providing the adequate care for their animals. Local authorities will not have the legal resources to carry out necessary prosecutions. Legalising pet markets would therefore be both impractical and unfeasible.

Pet markets cause tremendous suffering, environmental destruction, species decline and threaten public

health. Legalising these events would bring about an upsurge in the wildlife trade – both legal and illegal. It would also massively and unworkably increase the enforcement burden on local authorities and the police, lead to more unchallenged instances of cruelty and neglect and more animals being dumped at rescue shelters or released into the environment. Lifting the ban on pet markets would also significantly increase threats to public health through pet-linked human disease.

Confining the commercial sale of animals to pet shops and wholesalers operating under new and more stringent controls would ensure the much needed protection for pet animals.

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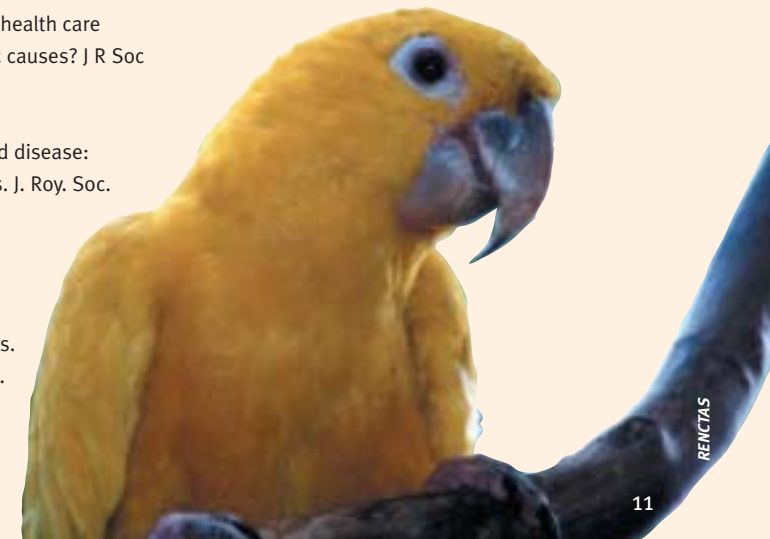
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