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EXPERT ADVICE

## Exotic Animals do not make good pets

By Ann Goody



"How much is that tiger in the window? The one with the great big teeth."

What is it about the unusual that attracts us? Why do we think a monkey or a tiger would be a better pet than a dog or cat? When we buy a cockatoo at the pet store, do we plan for the lifetime of care that it will require? A cockatoo can live 70 years and needs more attention than nearly any human can provide.

Exotics, or "alternative pets" as many call them, are simply nontraditional pets. Dogs and cats are humans' special animal companions, domesticated thousands of years ago and shaped by breeding for traits that make life with humans easy and natural. Indeed, they depend on us.

However, animals that don't fit the usual companion, guardian or domestic livestock definition continue to appeal to millions of Americans — 18.2 million — according to a recent National Pet Owners Survey.

A 1.4 million jump since 2002, this data may well be understated since a good portion of this trade is illegal. But, wild or exotic animals — even those who were captive-born or hand-raised — have not been adjusted to life with humans, which takes generation after generation. So keeping them as pets is usually inhumane — deliberately or not — and comes with threats to human health and safety.

To keep these unusual animals without permits, owners often hide their pets, sometimes in unusual places and without proper care. Many of us recall the recent news story of the man in New York City who was found with a tiger, a wolf and several large snakes, all living in his seventh-floor, one bedroom apartment.

Some exotic animal owners form associations and become experts on the care and housing of their pets. Sadly, though, the majority of the time this is not always the case.

Exotic pets, like many puppies and kittens, are frequently an impulse buy; people buy them for novelty and excitement. Some purchase the animals for status or even as unusual guard animals. If a watchdog is good, a "watch-tiger" must be better. After all, who would burglarize a home with a 600-pound cat loose in the living room?

Legal in Texas, Oklahoma and several other states, big cats pose a serious, real risk. Trendy, sexy and attention grabbing, they are in many ways symbolic. Like homes, cars and clothes, for many the alternative pet serves as a personal style statement.

Got the bucks for a zebra? Four thousand dollars will buy you 700 pounds of a very dangerous animal that, by the way, needs the safety of a herd. The seller probably forgot to mention that.

Go online any day of the week and you can find ads for people buying and selling exotic animals. Many of the sites are scams with out-of-the-country, fraudulent sellers looking to rip off anyone foolish enough to think they can buy a "tame cheetah" for a couple thousand dollars.

Sadly, there are also real ads from those who have "problems" with their exotic pet: For example, a cougar who has outgrown the cute, kitten stage.

Baby animals can be irresistibly adorable until the cuddly baby becomes bigger and stronger than the owner ever imagined. The instinctive behavior of the adult animal replaces the dependent behavior of the juvenile, resulting in biting, scratching and destructive behavior, often without provocation or warning.

Such animals typically become too difficult to manage and are confined to small cages, passed from owner to owner or disposed of in other ways. They can also end up back in the exotic pet trade. There are simply not enough reputable sanctuaries or other facilities to properly care for all these unwanted wild animals. Some may even be released into the wild where, if they survive, they can disrupt the local ecosystem.

There are currently more tigers living in captivity in private hands in the U.S., estimated to be more than 5,000, than living in the wild throughout the world. Most are inbred, poorly housed and will end up, if they are lucky, in a true sanctuary. The reality is that most of them are euthanized or sold to canned hunting facilities through the exotic animal auction market.

Even alternative pet animals that you think might be good pets, since they start out harmless, may not be. Spur thigh tortoises start out as little 50 cent-sized reptiles, but can end up weighing more than 175 pounds. Can your fence hold him when he wants to wander?

Also, all reptiles and amphibians carry salmonella bacteria in their GI tracts (normal for them) and are capable of passing the bacteria on to household members even without direct contact. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 93,000 cases of reptile-associated salmonellosis occur each year in the United States, resulting in severe diarrhea and as many as 10 deaths.

The risk to human safety is not affected by the species, age or size of an exotic pet. Small animals can be as dangerous to people as large ones. Muzzled and declawed exotics still present a danger simply from their strength.

Along with the potential for physical injury comes serious public health concerns that can't be ignored, such as polio, rabies, ringworm and tuberculosis to name a few. The threat of rabies alone should be sobering; no approved vaccine exists to immunize wild and exotic mammals, which we routinely do for our dogs and cats.

Pet guinea pigs can chew every cord in the house and urinate so much that you can't keep up with the mess and they reproduce very quickly. That cockatoo that was so cuddly when you bought him now yells every day and bites your spouse. It gets worse over time as the bird matures and demands more attention.

Sanctuaries across the country already have full cages. Occasionally space becomes available, but only when a sanctuary supporter makes the financial commitment to provide for a new creature.

In the case of the Three Ring Ranch Exotic Animal Sanctuary ([www.threeringranch.org](http://www.threeringranch.org)) in Kona, we accept animals after our board of directors evaluates the creature and decides if it can safely and compassionately be housed at our facility. True sanctuary facilities never breed animals, they only care for those already alive. You can see the full list of accredited sanctuaries at The Association of Sanctuaries Web site. ([www.taosanctuaries.org/index01.htm](http://www.taosanctuaries.org/index01.htm)).

Zoos keep detailed records of animals' pedigrees and will not accept the pet wolf that has outgrown its yard or ate the neighbor's cats one too many times. Most counties now outlaw the private ownership of large carnivores for good reason: they are dangerous and difficult to contain. Even humane societies with trained officers and shelters are unable to care for these animals and nearly all are euthanized on arrival.

Before considering any exotic or alternative pet consider the commitment required for the animal's lifetime. Understand its own unique needs and space requirements — not those you might be able to provide but what the creature actually needs for a full and enriching life.

Discuss the idea with everyone in the family, since they all will have to interact with the new creature. Is it legal in your area? Obtain the permits required for the particular creature before you buy it. Go to a local wildlife rehab facility and learn to handle and care for the species you are thinking about getting so that you become proficient in its care. Remember, it requires space, budget and time. Do you have all of these available?

If, in the end, you do decide to venture into the area of alternative pet ownership, join an association of like-minded individuals and seek qualified advice for housing, vet care, enrichment and supplies before you buy a living creature.

*Ann Goody is the curator at the Three Ring Ranch Exotic Animal Sanctuary in Kona. She was initially trained as an ER nurse but switched to animal rehabilitation and education. For the past seven years she has been responsible for caring for injured native and endangered species and educating a generation of Hawaii's youth.*

*Three Ring Ranch is Hawaii's only accredited animal sanctuary and is now home to over 80 exotic and non-releasable native creatures all living out their lives in large natural enclosures. Many creatures are brought to the sanctuary with injuries requiring rehabilitative care. All native species are returned to the wild as soon as possible. The sanctuary is licensed by the USDA and permitted by the USF&W Service to care for endangered species. Visitors to the website (<http://www.threeringranch.com>) can read the newsletter or view animal release videos. Three Ring Ranch is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization and always welcomes your support.*

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