



HANDLE WITH CARE

A look at the exotic animal pet trade



E A JAMES, MIKE LANE, SUSAN & ALLAN PARKER, CHERYL ERTEL, GEOFF DU FEU/RSPCA PHOTO LIBRARY

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The opinions expressed in this report are those of the RSPCA, and not MORI. MORI has checked the report for the accuracy with which specific statistics are reported, but in no other regard.

The exotic vet who independently assessed the findings gathered in the MORI survey has asked to remain anonymous.

Executive summary

The range of animals kept as pets in the UK has increased dramatically over the past 10 years, and now the variety of exotic species available outnumbers the range of traditional domesticated species kept such as cats and dogs.

While RSPCA centres continue to be full with common species of domestic animals rescued by inspectors, the Society's animal collection officers and inspectors are striving to deal with the growing range of exotic species kept as pets. Due to limited resources, and the need for specialist accommodation that RSPCA centres cannot provide, the Society depends on a network of expert rescue centres and hobbyists to assist in housing and rehoming exotic animals. These animals have complex needs that require a specialist and invariably costly environment.

Sadly the number of people with little or no exotic animal knowledge and who can no longer cope with the challenging animal they have taken on, is greater than the number of people who offer the specialist care and accommodation required for rescued exotic animals that come into the RSPCA's care. This has presented the RSPCA with an on-going battle to temporarily house and rehome unwanted animals with specialist needs.

When evaluating the scale of the exotic pet problem and identifying the key contributing factors, the RSPCA conducted three surveys on: pet-keeping trends; the welfare problems experienced by the veterinary profession; and the knowledge held by those trading in exotic animals being passed on to novice keepers.

As the evidence in this report reveals, a considerable number of exotic animal owners do not possess the experience or knowledge to provide the animals in their care with the required diet or environment resulting in significant welfare problems. Equally alarming, when telephoned and asked for advice many pet shop owners did not have adequate knowledge to prepare novice pet owners for the responsibility they are taking on. And many of the vets who took part in an RSPCA survey say there are few in the profession who are able to provide treatment for exotic animals requiring veterinary care. As with any animal, knowledge of its needs in captivity and the required diet, space, environment and appropriate veterinary care is essential before the animal can be kept as a pet without compromising its welfare.

In the course of this review of exotic animal welfare, the RSPCA found many very knowledgeable exotic animal keepers and pet shop staff. These are the individuals who demonstrate best practice in the care of exotic animals, and although it may be difficult to achieve they demonstrate that it is possible.

This report presents the case for animal welfare law to be reformed in order to see improved standards of care for pets belonging to owners who are poorly informed of their pet's needs.

The RSPCA believes a 'duty of care', meaning pet owners are legally obliged to look after the animal's welfare, should be introduced based on a set of principles known as the Five Freedoms:

- freedom from fear and distress
- freedom from hunger and thirst
- freedom from discomfort
- freedom from pain, injury and disease
- freedom to express normal behaviour.

The 'duty of care' would be explained through codes of practice, which each prospective pet owner should receive when they take on a pet. Under this regime, anyone who has responsibility for an animal would be in no doubt about the minimum care that is required.

This is essential for all animals, but perhaps particularly important for exotic animals that are vulnerable when their owner is unaware of, or unwilling to provide, the necessary specialist care, long-term responsibility and financial commitment that is needed when keeping such animals in captivity.

RSPCA POLICY

The RSPCA believes that those who keep animals must have the facilities, time, financial means and level of interest necessary to ensure a satisfactory standard of care for, and a long-term commitment to, their animals.

The RSPCA is opposed to any degree of confinement which is likely to cause distress or suffering to the animals concerned.

The RSPCA is opposed to the trade in wild animals and to the trading of products derived from wild animals where distress or suffering may be caused.



Introduction

The vast majority of animals kept as pets in the UK today are non-indigenous such as rabbits and hamsters – even one of the UK’s most popular pets, the cat, is not native to Britain. However, many of these species have been selectively bred, have adapted well into family environments and over many years have become known and loved as common household pets. While some pet owners fail to provide the appropriate level of care for commonly recognised household pets, widespread and easily accessible knowledge does exist on how to care for them properly. Many generations of people have grown up with these species and a bond can often be seen indicating that the animal also benefits from the relationship.

In recent years, RSPCA inspectors have been called to growing numbers of rescues and collections of non-domesticated animals kept in the UK, such as exotic birds, snakes, terrapins, caimans, marsupials and primates. In the past exotic animals have been kept by specialist keepers and not traditionally recognised as pets. Their popularity is increasing all the time but species-specific information on how to care for exotic animals properly is often not easily accessible and when it is available may have been written for keeping the animal overseas in a very different climate.

During the course of the RSPCA’s work rescuing animals, the Society has encountered highly knowledgeable keepers including breeders who provide the right environment and care for exotic animals and set an example of best practice. This report highlights some of the knowledge these individuals have gathered before taking on responsibility for an exotic animal – sadly a level of knowledge that is not shared by many keepers or pet shops trading in exotic animals in England and Wales.

Revealed...

Sadly, as the evidence in this report reveals, a considerable number of exotic animal owners do not possess the experience or knowledge to provide the animals in their care with the necessary diet or environment, which can result in significant welfare problems for the pet. Equally alarming is that many pet shop owners do not have adequate knowledge or do not sufficiently inform novice exotic pet owners of the responsibility they are taking on. And according to some vets, there are few in the profession who are able to provide treatment for the range of exotic animals requiring veterinary care. As with any animal, knowledge of its needs in captivity and the required diet, space, environment and appropriate veterinary care are essential before the animal can be kept as a pet without compromising its welfare.

Handle with care examines some of the common problems that can be encountered when caring for unusual animal species that are more recently being kept as pets.

The term ‘exotic’ is difficult to define. Strictly speaking it should relate to any animal kept outside its country of origin. However, this would include rabbits, gerbils and hamsters, even though these animals have been bred and kept in captivity for a considerable time.

The RSPCA uses the word *exotic* to describe any animal:

- that is not well established as a common household pet*
- where limited and variable husbandry literature is available to prospective pet owners
- where veterinary knowledge is not available from the majority of veterinary surgeries.

In order to evaluate the level of care exotic animals receive from pet owners, the quality of husbandry information provided by pet shops and how veterinary surgeons are dealing with exotic animals taken to their practices, the RSPCA carried out three studies. The first study was a survey of exotic animal keepers by The Queen’s University of Belfast; the second, conducted by MORI, was a covert survey of the standard of information given by pet shops to prospective inexperienced pet owners; and the third study surveyed vets to assess which animals are presented, what welfare problems occur in exotic animals and how many vets are able to offer treatment.

* This assessment is based on the Pet Food Manufacturers Association survey of pets kept in the UK. The most popularly kept animals are cats, dogs, goldfish and rabbits.

THIS REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

- the number and range of exotic animals being rescued by the RSPCA having been neglected, abandoned or signed over to the Society
- a worrying variation in the quality of husbandry advice being given to inexperienced prospective pet owners when contacting pet shops for guidance
- concern within the veterinary profession about the growth in exotic animals being presented to them which are suffering welfare problems because of their owner’s lack of knowledge
- the dramatic difference in levels of care provided by exotic pet owners, varying from the highly knowledgeable delivering high standards of care, to the ill-informed who fail to provide for their pets most basic needs.

Scale of the problem

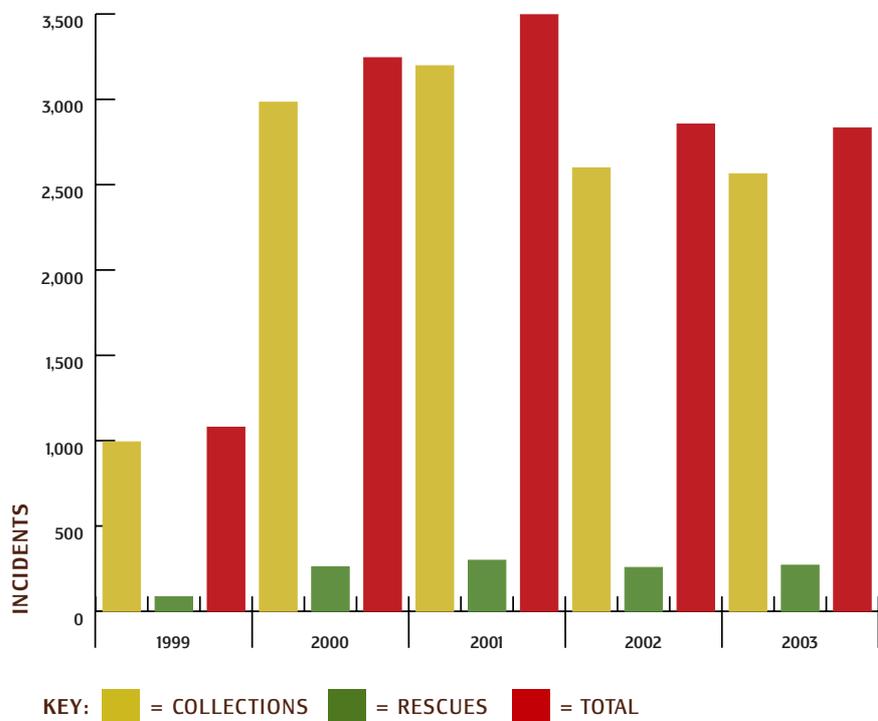
To find out how exotic animals are being traded and kept in England and Wales, the RSPCA conducted three studies.

These studies examined:

- how many of each exotic species were rescued by the RSPCA since 2000
- which animals exotic pet keepers keep and the problems they experience
- which species of animal are being sold in pet shops; what information they are providing new pet owners about the animal; and determining how easily pet shops are selling animals with specialist husbandry needs to the inexperienced
- how many exotic animals are treated by vets and their opinions on the nature of the health and welfare conditions exotic animals encounter.

In addition to the RSPCA's assessment of the findings, they have also been assessed by an independent vet specialising in exotic animals. The findings have been broken down and recorded according to different animal groups in this report.

Exotic animal statistics



Picking up the pieces

As the country's leading animal rescue organisation, the RSPCA has had to respond to the large numbers of unwanted exotic animals that come into our care after they become unmanageable for their often ill-informed owners to handle. Unfortunately, in many instances, the owners are unaware that they are causing any suffering through being so poorly acquainted with the complex needs of the species.

The RSPCA is attempting to keep up with the increasing number of exotic animals being kept in Britain. Inspectors are now volunteering to become the first point of contact within the RSPCA for exotic animal rescues and this means they have to gain specialist knowledge about a raft of different animal species in addition to domestic pets, wildlife and farm animals. While vets admit they struggle to identify and deal with exotic species, the task is especially difficult for RSPCA inspectors who have to deal with all species and then attempt to find them suitable new homes.

Since the end of 1998 when the RSPCA implemented its species-specific data monitoring regime, the figures showed a massive 200 per cent increase in the number of exotic animal collections in 2000 compared with 1999. While the number of collections dropped by 12 per cent from 2001 to 2003, overall there is still a huge increase of 161 per cent since 1999. In order to significantly reduce the number of rescue and welfare problems the RSPCA believes awareness of the challenging nature of exotic animals must be raised.

Keeper survey

Research commissioned and funded by the RSPCA, to investigate the ownership and welfare of exotic pets, was completed by Dr Deborah Wells from The Queen's University of Belfast in 2002. An exotic pet survey was distributed to owners of reptiles, amphibians and spiders asking questions about one of the exotic animals in their care. If the person owned more than one, then s/he was asked to provide information on the animal that had been most recently acquired. Surveys were completed by 1,124 exotic animal owners and formed the basis of the statistical analysis.

The survey was designed to collect information from participants in four main headings:

- exotic pet ownership
- husbandry practices
- health and behaviour
- other information.

More than 40 per cent of exotic pet keepers surveyed said the most common problems they experienced with their exotic pets were due to a lack of information provided by the supplier. Twenty-one per cent reported difficulties in feeding their pets and eight per cent reported their pet was growing too fast.

Inside the pet trade

To obtain a broad insight into which animals are being sold in pet shops, the information they provide on exotic pet care and how knowledgeable pet shop staff are about exotic pet care, the RSPCA researched all 3,000 pet shops advertising on www.yell.com in England and Wales. Three hundred (one in 10) shops confirmed they sold exotic animals and these pet shops were questioned for an RSPCA-commissioned MORI survey of pet shops. The survey was conducted between 29 September and 13 October 2003. The results are based on 300 telephone interviews with pet shops and the data is unweighted.

In order to gather information on which animals are sold in pet shops and the information pet shops were able to give prospective pet owners, MORI initially asked a general question about how to keep the animal offered for sale without any further prompting for specific care information.

MORI then asked specific questions on the husbandry, life-span, diet requirements, health considerations and special needs for specific species in the following animal groups:

- mammals
(including primates, marsupials, carnivores and rodents)
- lizards and crocodylians
- snakes
(including constrictor and colubrid snakes)
- tortoises, turtles and terrapins
- birds
(including parrots, softbills and finches).

In each instance the caller said s/he was enquiring on behalf of a son or partner who was interested in buying an unusual pet, but had no experience of keeping exotic animals.

The RSPCA always makes clear that animals should never be bought on behalf of other people.

BEST PRACTICE

Fortunately, there are pet shops in England and Wales that operate responsibly and provide adequate information about caring for exotic animals. Some pet shops ask rigorous questions about the prospective pet owner's experience before selling the individual a pet. One example is Hertfordshire-based Amey Zoo, where the staff insist that anyone taking on an animal demonstrates that they can provide for the animal's needs. Manager Mark Amey said: "We conduct competency tests to assess knowledge before we are happy somebody is knowledgeable enough to leave our shop with an animal. We ask about how big they think the animal gets, its behaviour, the captive environment it will need, temperatures, lighting, humidity and nutrition. If they don't get the answers right we will either coach them until they have the knowledge or suggest further reading until we are satisfied they are properly aware of the animal's requirements."

Amey Zoo also has animal care sheets detailing welfare requirements, which are available to anyone free of charge.



ANDREW FORSYTH/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY

▲ A veiled chameleon.

WORST PRACTICE

Twenty-seven exotic animals including snapping turtles, four caimans and an albino anaconda were removed from conditions so squalid that salmonella and a pure, heavy growth of *E. coli* were found in the enclosures.

Thirteen snakes, three lizards, three terrapins, three turtles, an alligator and four caimans were discovered in enclosures lacking essential welfare requirements – there was little heat and no ultraviolet light. The enclosures were filthy and many had newspapers on the floor that had become so soiled they were stiff and putrid.

The only heating the caimans had was from two boilers that were switched off during the evening. Daytime heating from unprotected radiators caused burns to the reptiles' skin. Snapping turtles and red-eared terrapins were kept in a filthy enclosure together. Both breeds are very aggressive and two terrapins had forelimbs missing.

A reticulated python, a large anaconda and two Nile monitor lizards had been completely deprived of adequate heat and light and were all suffering from illnesses relating to poor welfare such as anaemia and pneumonia. Unshed skin had become slimy and hung from their bodies. The vet attending the property said: "The smell was appalling and foul and persisted following the snakes removal from the enclosure."

The owner of the animals was found guilty of neglect and unsuitable living conditions. He was fined £250 and ordered to pay £250 costs. All of the animals were taken to specialist rescue organisations.

Veterinary view

It is clear from the RSPCA survey of vets in England and Wales that not all vets are able to treat exotic animals, and many had serious concerns that a large proportion of the conditions they treated were due to neglect by uninformed pet owners. A survey was sent to all 3,000 vets in England and Wales requesting a range of information from them including the types of animals treated, which conditions were treated, if they had recently treated more exotic animals than in previous years and if they had to refer animals to a specialist vet.

A total of 190 vets responded to the survey and less than half treated exotic animals. Thirty-three per cent referred cases to other vets and 20 per cent did not treat exotics at all and did not refer them elsewhere. Written responses were also provided from many of the vets highlighting their concerns about the cases they were treating due to the owner's lack of knowledge about the animal's needs.

Anorexia was the most frequently suffered condition found in exotic animals according to information given in the veterinary survey.

One vet, who responded to the survey and treats exotic animals commented: "It is, it would seem, generally considered that vets know or can do little for reptiles, which as a whole is true."

Another vet, said: "Our main concern, apart from the lack of information readily available at point of purchase and the proper husbandry of these animals, is the lack of available finance once things have gone 'pear shaped'. Most are kept by low-income holders as they are often seen as cheap pets to keep. They are very rarely insured and considering the long recovery times, specifically for reptiles, as well as the diagnostic cost, these patients are often difficult to help."



RSPCA

▲ A caiman found in squalid conditions.



Our survey says...

Snake synopsis

Our survey says...

Reptile trade

There has been a marked increase in the popularity of keeping reptiles in captivity. Of the reptile species protected under conservation regulations, 1.7 million were imported into the EU between 1990 and 1999 – increasing from about 50,000 reptiles imported in 1990 to about 200,000 in 1999. In the 1990s, the UK alone imported more than 226,000 reptiles and was the third largest importer in the EU after Germany and Spain. Many more species that are not protected on conservation grounds or monitored by international regulations were imported, but no figures exist for these species.

In recent years, the Animal Reception Centre at Heathrow has also reported a 49 per cent increase in the trade of reptiles with 67,000 imported in 2001 compared with 100,000 in 2002. The majority of reptiles imported into Heathrow Airport for the pet trade have come from countries in South America, Africa and Indonesia. A similar increase in reptile keeping has been seen in North America with an estimated 44 per cent rise from 1998 to 2000 in the number of households keeping one or more reptile*.

Capture of wild animals is still the main source of imported animals – in some cases wild capture is the only source when new species come into the trade. Many species are also now being bred in captivity, with several species such as leopard geckos and corn snakes being bred in large numbers to supply the demand in the UK.

Snake survey

Snakes have been reported as being the most popular group of reptiles in private husbandry**, representing about 50 per cent of all reptiles kept. A number of snake species are kept in captivity – from the colubrid (back-fanged) snakes like the garter snake that is often found near water in the wild and the corn snake which rarely grows to more than two metres long, to the large constrictors. Constrictor snakes are usually nocturnal, grow to more than four metres long and live for 20 years plus in captivity.

Between 1990 and 1999, as many as 290,000 constrictor snakes were imported into the EU, with royal pythons being the most common species.

Snakes are one of the exotic animal groups that RSPCA inspectors are regularly called to rescue after the animals have escaped or been released into the wild by their owners, or when they have become too big to handle. From 2000–2003, 5,202 non-indigenous snakes were rescued by the RSPCA.

RSPCA research into exotic animals kept by keepers, conducted by The Queen's University of Belfast, revealed that snakes are the second most popular pet after lizards. Twenty-seven per cent of the 1,124 people surveyed keep snakes compared with 28.9 per cent keeping lizards.

Snake sales

The telephone survey of pet shops conducted by MORI revealed that all of the 73 pet shops contacted about snakes were able to offer one or more species for sale. The callers were given a list of snakes to enquire about.

Of the total number of pet shops asked, nearly 50 per cent offered constrictor snakes rather than the smaller more manageable, and usually less challenging to keep, colubrid species.

While 34 per cent of pet shops offered a corn snake, which is one of the smaller more manageable snakes from the group, boa constrictors were the second most commonly available snake with a massive 22 out of 73 outlets stating one could be obtained from their shop.

Species enquired about	Number of shops with animal available
Reticulated python	1
Boa constrictor	22
Burmese python	1
Emerald tree boa	2
Royal python	9
Milk snake	2
King snake	7
Rat snake	2
Common garter snake	1
Corn snake	25
Other	1

* HSUS report. Franke and Telecky

** The German Society for Herpetology and Terrarium Care

Boa constrictors can grow to four metres and require plenty of space and specialist care, so are not the obvious choice for someone intending to keep their first snake. Any large constrictor is certainly not the most suitable pet for a young child or a novice keeper without any experience of keeping snakes. However, many pet shops suggested boa constrictors were easy to keep and none discouraged keeping this large constrictor snake when asked about buying a pet for a child without any snake keeping experience.

Two of the 21 shops that were called about acquiring a boa constrictor for the caller's son, stated that the snake needs an ultraviolet bulb or lighting to bask under – despite the snake being nocturnal and not active during the day. Only snakes, and other reptiles, that are active during the day in the wild, need access to ultraviolet light and hot spots to allow the animal to bask under broad spectrum lighting in captivity to mimic how it would bask under the sun in the wild.

Only one shop responsibly warned about the potential size a boa constrictor can grow to and the difficulties of handling them. They advised that a corn snake would be a more suitable alternative.

Some pet shops gave good advice on keeping an emerald tree snake and milk snakes and one pet shop in particular gave good advice on keeping royal pythons and discouraged a novice keeper from taking one on.

Veterinary view

The results of the RSPCA veterinary survey reveals that the 190 vets who responded dealt with 84 boa constrictors, 55 Burmese pythons and 106 reticulated pythons in one year.

According to one vet who responded: “Most reptile and bird cases can be associated with poor husbandry. As to serious cases, a large percentage of animals will die if untreated and many die anyway... deliberate cruelty is rare but negligence and particularly bad advice from pet shops is common.”

Independent expert's opinion

An exotic vet, who runs his own exotic veterinary practice, has independently analysed the general findings. While stressing that the findings can only be based on a telephone enquiry and not on an actual visit to the pet shop, the vet highlighted several areas of key concern.

The vet developed the mechanism shown in the table below to independently grade the quality of information given.

Grading	Comment
GOOD	The right thing to mention here, and correct.
ADEQUATE	Reasonable (correct) comment, although not necessarily what I would consider the most important point or doesn't go far enough.
OVERSIMPLIFIED	Focuses on a significant point(s) but doesn't really deal with it/them adequately (note <i>deficiency may be corrected elsewhere either in questionnaire or at shop</i>).
INADEQUATE	Misdirected from main point, with omissions and/or oversimplifications (note <i>deficiency may be corrected elsewhere either in questionnaire or at shop</i>).
DANGEROUSLY INADEQUATE	As above but the omissions/oversimplifications are very significant, and should definitely have been covered at this stage.
UNACCEPTABLY IGNORANT	This vendor should not be allowed to sell animals.
ABSOLUTE RUBBISH	This vendor should not be allowed to have anything to do with captive animals.

These categories were used to assess the quality of the information given by the pet shops after the caller had clearly stated their son/partner had no experience of keeping the animal.

BEST PRACTICE

Tonic Reptile Rescue centre in Lincolnshire is a model example of how to house and care for exotic species. One visit to the centre will educate prospective exotic pet owners about the cost, specialist care and considerable commitment required.

Tonic Reptile Rescue frequently assists the RSPCA by providing accommodation and specialist care for rescue animals. The centre also takes in other unwanted exotic animals – many of them have suffered appalling neglect through their owner's lack of knowledge.

One example is Mrs Burns, the royal python. She was rescued from Nottinghamshire after being kept under a light bulb. This was her only heat source and owner of Tonic Rescue, Tony Bryan believes the bulb must have been switched off causing her to wrap around it for warmth as the bulb cooled down. She suffered severe burns and has significant scars. The scars indicate this happened on more than one occasion. Snakes like these need the appropriate range of temperatures and humidity. ▼ **A royal python**



GEOFF DU FEURS/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY

WORST PRACTICE

An eight-foot boa constrictor kept in an unheated building on a scrapyard was left to suffer a burn from a naked light bulb for 18 months. It was also blinded by several layers of skin it was unable to shed covering its eyes, when an RSPCA inspector found it.

The owner said he was unable to remove the snake from the vivarium at the scrapyard in Cornwall as he was frightened to handle it. The burn had remained untreated and it had not healed. The snake was also living in filthy conditions.

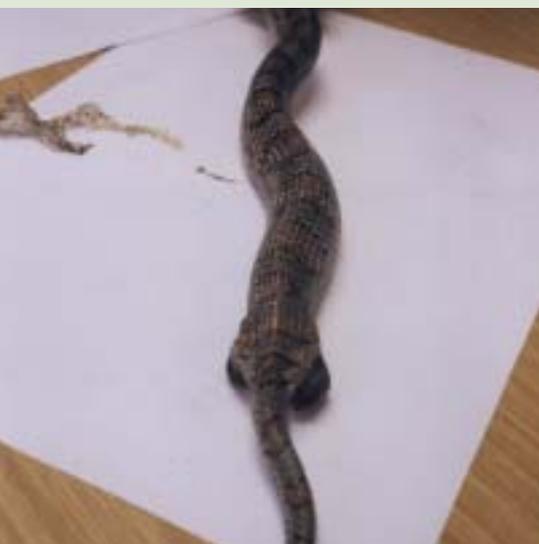
The owner was prosecuted in October 2003 and banned from keeping any animals for 10 years. The snake was re-homed at Newquay Zoo where the specialist care it receives has aided its recovery.

A woman who noticed a lump on her pet corn snake's body said she could not afford to seek veterinary care and went on holiday.

The person looking after the snake while she was away decided to take it to a vet who contacted the RSPCA. The lump had become infected in the time the owner was away and the snake subsequently died during veterinary treatment. Tests revealed that the lump was carcinogenic.

The owner said that she had noticed a lump growing for several months but could not afford veterinary treatment and her local exotic vet had moved away and she did not know where to take it. She said although she had noticed the lump she had not seen the swelling.

In the absence of evidence over the stage of the growth and whether it was infected before the owner went on holiday, an adult written caution was issued.



RSPCA

Applying the criteria on page 11, the independent vet came to the following conclusions:

Species	Number of pet shops	Grading
Reticulated python	1	GOOD Generally very good; only a couple of the illness comments were oversimplified.
Boa constrictor	22	INADEQUATE Considerable under-quoting of adult tank size requirements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ "They will need a tank of about six foot" ■ "When they get bigger you will need a vivarium of about four to five feet wide" ■ "Fully-grown they need a tank of five feet by three feet by three feet". Usual problems of quoting single temperatures rather than a range, and humidity ignorance. Age was also underestimated at around 20 years by several shops (record is 40 years+). Only one shop discouraged this snake, which should really be the advice for a beginner.
Burmese python	1	OVERSIMPLIFIED Generally not unreasonable, but a few over simplified, even inadequate answers, and showed worrying lack of awareness that no zoo is going to take a Burmese python.
Emerald tree boa	1	GOOD Answers generally good; did well to discourage purchaser.
Milk snake	2	Generally ADEQUATE to INADEQUATE advice.
King snake	6	Generally ADEQUATE to INADEQUATE advice.
Rat snake	1	GOOD.
Corn snake	24	OVERSIMPLIFIED/INADEQUATE Overall most answers here fell into the category of oversimplified or inadequate. One of the shops did well to insist on the purchaser coming into the shop, but this means that their knowledge was untested.
Common garter snake	1	Generally OVERSIMPLIFIED to INADEQUATE answers.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT...

In captivity, snakes are completely reliant on their keeper to provide an environment that gives them access to a range of temperatures to choose from, so that when the animal needs to heat up or cool down to maintain optimal body temperature and function normally, it can do so. Only when the enclosure is large enough to give the snake access to its preferred climate and habitat such as branches, humidity levels and/or hides within both the hot and cooler areas, can the snake choose the environment it needs at that time to digest its food and to stay active, healthy and alive.

Some species of constrictor snake can grow several metres within their first year. The small boas stay less than a metre, but the larger species, such as the Burmese python or the boa constrictor, can grow larger than four metres long, with the giants like the reticulated python reaching more than 10 metres.

MAKE SURE YOU KNOW YOUR STUFF!



Alligator and
lizard low-down

Alligator and lizard low-down

Of the species protected on conservation grounds, the green iguana was the most commonly imported into the EU between 1990 and 1999. More than 677,000 green iguanas were imported over the nine-year period, with the UK being the third largest importer after Germany and Spain. Since 1977 the trade in green iguanas has been regulated by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), however tens of thousands are still allowed to be taken from the wild under export quotas.

There is no doubt that lizards need very specialist care and sadly, most rescued by the RSPCA show signs of suffering as a direct result of being kept in the wrong environment. The wrong diet, lighting and heating can have devastating effects on a lizard's state of health, which can decline rapidly.

Research conducted by The Queen's University of Belfast for the RSPCA revealed that lizards are the most popular species of exotic animal accounting for 28.9 per cent of all exotic animals kept. And the Pet Food Manufacturers Association's survey of pet ownership in 2001 reported 140,000 reptiles kept – which includes snakes. Since 2000, the RSPCA has rescued 3,135 lizards and 42 crocodiles and alligators.

Lizard sales

Lizard questions accounted for the largest number of enquiries conducted by MORI. A total of 77 pet shops were asked if they sold lizards. An alarming 20 said they could sell a spectacled caiman (small alligator). In response to the enquiries made on behalf of a partner, only one pet shop actively discouraged keeping a caiman on the grounds that it was difficult to get a Dangerous Wild Animal Act (DWA) licence. Almost all pet shops mentioned that a DWA licence would be needed.

One outlet had a two-year-old spectacled caiman available in the store. The caller was enquiring on behalf of their son and, while they were warned that a DWA licence would have to be obtained and that caimans can't be handled, the caller was not actively discouraged from buying the animal.

Shockingly, another pet shop said caimans have to be handled regularly when they are young as they can be nasty and have sharp teeth. The same pet shop said they can grow to one metre – less than a third of their actual size at maturity. The member of staff then said that getting a DWA licence from the local authority is difficult and advised it is best to baffle the local authority with words to get one. When told there was a baby in the house, the pet shop responded suggesting that the only precaution to be taken is not to let the baby go in the caiman's tank.

Most pet shops did not discourage those enquiring for their partner, from keeping a caiman as a pet. Only three out of 10 raised concerns about a novice keeper having such an animal or thought the partner would not get a licence.

A shop offering a green iguana did not discourage the sale of a one- to two-metre iguana for the caller's son who had no experience of keeping reptiles. No mention was made of green iguanas needing ultraviolet light and the pet shops stated that these reptiles are rarely ill and are quite hardy. Green iguanas are particularly vulnerable in captivity and have recently been referred to within the exotic trade as an unsuitable beginner's pet.

Species enquired about	Number of shops with animal available
Caiman	20
Bosc's monitor	2
Nile monitor	1
Chameleon species	5
Spiny-tailed lizard	1
Green iguana	1
Chinese water dragon	4
Bearded dragon	9
Leopard gecko	27
Tokay gecko	2
Blue-tongued skink	4
Other	1



ANDREA OAKES/RSPCA

▲ Twenty pet shops said they could sell a caiman (small alligator).

Veterinary view

Of the 190 vets who responded to the RSPCA's veterinary survey, they reported treating 1,350 lizards in the last year. The most common lizard presented for treatment was the bearded dragon accounting for 34 per cent of all lizard cases. Chinese water dragons, chameleons and monitors are the next most popular lizard species being seen by vets.

One vet reported that he had treated a green iguana fed on Weetabix and milk, kept with no ultraviolet light loose in a bedroom. He added that the most common exotic problem is poor husbandry.

Another vet, who treated a three-year-old green iguana in a state of complete collapse and with a massively swollen jaw, limbs and collapsed rib cage from calcium deficiency, said: "The cause of the problem is common enough – inappropriate diet. The owner had no idea of how ill the animal was. What worried me most is the fact that the owner sought treatment so late. This is quite common amongst all my reptile clients making treatment longer and a cure harder to achieve".

Independent expert's opinion

Species	Number of pet shops	Grading
Caiman	10	Advice was generally OVERSIMPLIFIED to INADEQUATE , but the fact that most didn't strongly discourage the caller from keeping a caiman is not really acceptable.
Bosc's monitor	1	Generally OVERSIMPLIFIED to INADEQUATE .
Nile monitor	1	DANGEROUSLY INADEQUATE Shop did suggest something smaller but in my opinion the prospective purchaser should have been much more strongly discouraged from considering such a large and powerful lizard. And to consider it "similar to any pet" with regard to a baby is completely irresponsible, given that an adult Nile monitor could very easily and quickly severely wound or kill a baby.
Chameleon species	5	INADEQUATE Somewhat optimistic life spans were quoted (five years is rarely reached for a chameleon, as opposed to the "many", "seven or eight years" and "10 years" quoted).
Chinese water dragon	1	INADEQUATE Shop did well to encourage/insist purchaser did research, but gave the impression (admittedly possibly misleading) of not knowing very much.
Bearded dragon	5	Generally ADEQUATE to INADEQUATE advice.
Leopard gecko	17	Generally very variable advice, much straying into INADEQUATE to DANGEROUSLY INADEQUATE .
Tokay gecko	1	ADEQUATE Generally reasonable advice, although apparently omitted to mention that tokay geckos are almost universally vicious.
Blue-tongued skink	2	Generally ADEQUATE to OVERSIMPLIFIED advice.

See page 11 for an explanation of grading categories.

BEST PRACTICE

Tonic Reptile Rescue centre in Lincolnshire is a good example of how exotic animals should be cared for. The centre has taken in many rescue animals suffering serious welfare problems through neglect and nursed them back to health.

Tony Bryan, owner of Tonic says: "All reptiles demand their own individual environment, some of which are reasonably inexpensive and easy to create given the right advice. On the other hand some species can be very expensive to set up and maintain, and a higher level of knowledge is needed by the prospective owner. A pair of leopard geckos in the perfect environment could cost less than £100 while, at the other end of the scale, a baby iguana with a price tag of £30-£50 could then cost in excess of £1,000 to set up properly. Some reptiles kept in the wrong conditions merely survive rather than thrive, while others can be seen to suffer immensely"



ANDREW FORSYTH/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY

▲ The most common lizard presented for veterinary treatment was the bearded dragon.

WORST PRACTICE

A 17-year-old man who bought two green iguanas from an advert in his local newspaper and kept them in the corner of his bedsit behind chicken wire was disqualified from keeping all animals for three years.

The animals had no ultraviolet light and inadequate heat and the owner admitted he had not kept green iguanas before and did not know how to care for them.

Despite removing the animal promptly to seek treatment, one green iguana was so emaciated it died at the veterinary surgery.

The other green iguana soon doubled in weight with the correct care. After a long process of appealing for a new home in local newspapers an experienced owner was finally found.



PICS: RSPCA

▲ Two green iguanas were kept without ultraviolet light and adequate heat.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT...

In the wild, green iguanas primarily live in trees. They are brought into the UK and sold when they are about half a metre long; they can live for ten to fifteen years and can reach five metres in length. As these lizards grow, it becomes increasingly difficult for their keepers to provide them with the space, specialist captive environment and care they need. For example, these lizards are hindgut fermenters that are reliant on being kept in a warm environment to be able to digest their food. Many of these animals are passed on to the RSPCA and some exotic keeping organisations now recognise that this species is not a suitable animal to be kept by a novice reptile keeper.

Chameleons and day geckos are known to suffer when humidity is too low or too high. It is widely known that these lizards live in a range of microclimates, but usually the environment is of a moderate or high humidity. A novice reptile keeper, who knows something about how these animals live in the wild, may think that once in captivity, maintaining an appropriate humidity is desirable but not essential. If the humidity is too low, these lizards can have difficulty shedding their skin. Reptiles need to shed their skin to allow them to grow; any retained skin around the limbs, toes or tip of the tail can dry and shrivel up, restricting blood flow and in serious cases, leading to the loss of the extremities. Excessive humidity and poor ventilation can result in mouth rot and pneumonia.

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PICS: ANDREW FORSYTH/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY

SUSAN & ALLAN PARKER/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY



Chelonian check

Chelonian check

The most common tortoise to be imported into the EU in the 1990s was the Horsfield's tortoise with more than 56,000 throughout the decade, making it the fourth most common CITES-listed reptile coming into the EU. This is despite the trade in the Horsfield's tortoise and other Mediterranean tortoise species being controlled since 1975, suspended for three Mediterranean species in 1984 and then completely suspended for those and a further 20 species of chelonians in December 1997. All these species were prohibited from import on the grounds that they were unlikely to survive in captivity for a large part of their potential lifespan. A further two species of tortoise were added to the trade suspension list in November 1998.

Tortoises, turtles and terrapins may seem like relatively easy pets to keep. But the reality is that many terrapins are abandoned into lakes and ponds when they grow too big – they can grow to the size of a dinner plate. Tortoises can also become a burden to many owners who do not realise these animals can live for about 100 years.

Terrapins can be a health risk to humans. As with many reptiles, and chelonians, they can carry salmonella, which can be passed to humans unless care is taken to wash hands after handling. This health risk makes them less suitable for children unless handling is supervised at all times. Since 2000, the RSPCA has rescued 2,044 terrapins, many from the wild after they have been abandoned by their owners.

Chelonian sales

Of the 61 pet shops asked about chelonians, less than half actively encouraged the caller to visit the shop to discuss the species in more detail.

One pet shop offered a snapping turtle to the caller looking for a chelonian on behalf of a partner. The shop did not discourage the caller and admitted they did not have much knowledge about the species. They did not warn about the dangers when told there was a baby in the house; did not know what size a snapping turtle could grow to; did not mention anything about the access to water the animal needs; and said they could order one from their suppliers. The pet shop warned the caller that a DWA licence would be needed to keep a snapping turtle and that they can be aggressive. However, keeping a snapping turtle does not require a DWA licence. Snapping turtles are highly aggressive animals and can cause serious injury. Unlike other species of chelonian kept in captivity, snapping turtles are very dangerous to handle due to their powerful ability to bite with swift movement.

Alarmingly, 16 pet shops offered African spurred (sulcata) tortoises, which can grow to one metre in length and can reach more than 100kg in weight. Nine did not discourage keeping them at all, three actively discouraged keeping them due to their size and specialist needs, while the others offered other species but did not actively discourage. Recommendations for housing varied dramatically. Some advised a vivarium, and others suggested an outdoor shed with heating and a cat flap to allow outdoor access. Pet shop responses about the age and size an African spurred (sulcata) tortoise can grow to also differed hugely. Lifespans varied from 50 to 100 years and maximum size varied from 30cm to 76cm. When asked if it would be problematic to find it a new home if it did not adapt or grew too big, none said the caller would have a problem rehoming it. One pointed out that it could be sold through *Exchange & Mart* and that a profit could probably be made. More responsibly, another pet shop discouraged an African spurred (sulcata) tortoise be kept as a pet by the caller's son due to its potential size and strength. The pet shop stated that a tortoise of this size belongs in a zoo.

Veterinary view

According to the study conducted by The Queen's University of Belfast, tortoises account for 7.7 per cent of the animals kept by the 1,024 exotic survey respondents.

A massive 1,510 tortoises, terrapins and turtles were treated by the 190 vets who responded to the RSPCA's veterinary survey last year. Commenting on the type of cases they treat, one vet said: "Tortoises are on the increase due to pet shops stocking various tortoises. Pet shops don't seem to have the correct knowledge to pass to clients."

Species enquired about	Number of shops with animal available
Snapping turtle	1
African spurred (sulcata) tortoise	16
American box turtle	0
Hinge-back tortoise	0
African pancake tortoise	0
Red-eared terrapin	3
Mediterranean tortoise	31
Leopard tortoise	2
Other	8

Independent expert's opinion

Species	Number of pet shops	Grading
Snapping turtle	5	ABSOLUTE RUBBISH Anything other than flat-out discouragement for a first-time purchaser is in my opinion unacceptable. Lack of much information at all here. The only one we have answers for demonstrates fairly complete ignorance (saying all turtles and tortoises need a licence, didn't know size, didn't discourage them) although at least admitted it.
African spurred (sulcata) tortoise	7	ABSOLUTE RUBBISH As they grow so big, strong discouragement is the only acceptable policy here in my opinion. They need a large, heated, indoor shed (approx. 3m x 3m bare minimum) and large, outdoor area (approx. 6m x 4m bare minimum) when adult, both all year round, which very few people can adequately supply. Most failed to discourage at all, which is not acceptable. One of the shops should definitely be shut down – both for saying they don't get ill, and for saying they grow to about 20–30cm. As should one other shop for saying they only grow to 30cm. With the most charitable view in the world, that is absolutely irresponsible underestimation of the size they grow to.
Red-eared terrapin	2	UNACCEPTABLY IGNORANT Both shops are giving unacceptably poor husbandry advice. One says “tropical conditions” (they are a temperate species), advises feeding “anything” (unacceptable), tank size one metre long (far too small for adult). The other shop says “don't need lighting” (unacceptably ignorant) and “blood worms and frozen fish” is not an adequate diet.
Horsfield's tortoise	1	UNACCEPTABLY IGNORANT Dried food was recommended but not acceptable, other than on an occasional basis, for terrestrial tortoises, particularly for Horsfield's tortoises, as it will almost certainly lead to vastly excessive growth.
Leopard tortoise	2	INADEQUATE Describing leopard tortoises as only growing to 25cm or the size of a dinner plate is unacceptably ignorant. Again these should definitely have been discouraged to a new buyer in my opinion.
Mediterranean tortoise	14	What was given was generally ADEQUATE to INADEQUATE , but few mentioned that a garden area is really a necessity. Also very disappointing to see that only one shop acknowledged that an open-topped enclosure is, in general far more suitable for terrestrial chelonia than an enclosed vivarium.
Map terrapin	1	UNACCEPTABLY IGNORANT Unacceptable to say that they only need a small bowl of water – they are mainly aquatic, needing a relatively small area of land.

See page 11 for an explanation of grading categories.

BEST PRACTICE

Tortoise Garden in Cornwall provides a specialist standard of care for nearly 200 tortoises – many of them rescued suffering from deformities due to inadequate care.

Joy Bloom, owner of Tortoise Garden, has accommodated many RSPCA rescue tortoises and has nursed them back to health. Many however, suffer long-term health problems as a result of how they have been kept in the past.

Joy said: “Most people think that tortoises are easy to keep and can be left in the back garden but they require such a specialist environment and diet. We have taken in rescue tortoises that have been fed appalling diets such as cat and dog food. They must have a balanced diet of leaves and fruit for them to be healthy. Tortoises need special heating and light, which can be expensive to set up.”



PICS: SAM MORGAN MOORE

▲ Joy Bloom, owner of Tortoise Garden in Cornwall, rescues tortoises and nurses them back to health.

WORST PRACTICE

A couple crammed the carcasses of dozens of dead animals in their freezers and left nearly 60 more in squalid conditions – many dead and dying.

Among the animal remains found in the couple's home, were those of three caimans, 63 tortoises and terrapins and two polecats. Snakes and tortoises were discovered in tanks without any evidence of food or water and some of the remaining 40 live animals were sharing tanks with dead animals.

In the living room and kitchen areas of the house, RSPCA inspectors found two eagle owls and a kestrel – all living in squalid conditions with droppings covering the cluttered rooms.

Despite struggling to cope with the number of exotic animals in their care, the couple continued to take on more animals, some of which were in poor bodily condition. The carcasses of the dead animals had been transported from their previous home and stored in their freezers. RSPCA inspectors also discovered the carcasses of decomposing turtles in tanks and enclosures housing snakes that were holding up a makeshift ceiling in the garage preventing easy access to the animals to provide food or water.

The couple admitted causing unnecessary suffering and were sentenced to 35 days imprisonment and banned from keeping animals for life.



RSPCA

▲ Sixty-three tortoises and terrapins were discovered – many dead and dying.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT...

Tortoises regulate their body temperature by selecting different locations in the wild – either burrowing in cool earth or bathing in water to cool down, basking in the sun, or lying on warm rocks to heat up. In extreme climates, tortoises may hibernate in burrows or rock crevices to survive the winter months, while some of the more tropical species, such as the African spurred (sulcata) tortoise, seek shelter during the hottest days of the year.

Some tortoise species coming into the exotic pet trade today can grow considerably larger than the traditionally kept Mediterranean species. The African spurred (sulcata) tortoise, found in the wild in Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Mali, south Mauritania and Senegal, is the largest continental tortoise and can grow to almost one metre in length and live more than 50 years. This desert-loving species does not hibernate, burrows in the wild and relies on the succulent plants it eats for water. When kept in this country, a large inside enclosure is needed to maintain a daytime temperature of 26–30°C and 21–24°C at night. They also need UVB lighting for 10–12 hours each day to maintain the production of vitamin D3 to aid calcium metabolism and to reduce the risk of metabolic bone disease. During warmer months these tortoises can be given access to a large, secure outdoor enclosure.

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A C HIGHFIELD/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY, ANDREW FORSYTH/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY

MIKE LANER/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY



Mammals matter

Mammals matter

The majority of mammal species kept in captivity as companion animals are not protected to control their trade. Mammals kept as companion animals were originally domesticated, such as dogs and cats, but today the number of mammal species kept as pets has increased. Initially rabbits and guinea pigs became popular, then the demand for the more exotic small mammals led to the keeping of Mongolian gerbils and chinchillas in the UK since the 1960s. Since then, a huge range of species has been imported including chipmunks, degus, spiny mice, multimammate mice and prairie dogs. And more recently carnivores such as racoons, skunks, meerkats and fennec foxes; insectivores such as African pygmy hedgehogs; primates, ranging from the common marmoset to cappucins; and marsupials, including wallabies, sugar gliders and possums, have been imported and are now kept as pets. The majority of these species have specialist diets, complex behaviour and specialist needs.

The most recent trend in keeping ‘unusual’ animals appear to be species of mammal. RSPCA statistics reveal that 670 chipmunks, 430 primates and 17 racoons have been rescued in the last three years. During the pet shop survey, many of these species were not readily available through pet shop outlets which prompts the question “where do people get them from?” The RSPCA has long had concerns about the availability of exotic pets from unscrupulous breeders via the internet, a medium which is considerably more difficult to monitor.

In one year, the 190 vets who responded to the RSPCA’s survey treated 2,021 exotic mammals. The most commonly treated species was the multimammate rat with 898 receiving veterinary care. A total of 71 primates were taken to the vets’ surgeries, and 155 degus.

Species enquired about	Number of shops with animal available
Primates	0
Sugar glider	6
Possum	1
Meerkat	0
Fennec fox	0
Coati mundi	0
Racoon	1
Prairie dog	1
Multimammate rat/mice	0
Chipmunk	8
Degu	16
Jird	2



COLIN SEDDON/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY

▲ Vets treated 155 degus in one year.



▲ In three years the RSPCA rescued 430 primates, such as this common marmoset.

Mammal market

The study conducted by MORI for the RSPCA into the availability of exotic mammals and the standard of information provided by pet shops revealed dramatic variations in basic factual information supplied.

During the course of enquiries about degus, one pet shop advised looking on the internet for information yet another said degus have not been in the pet trade that long therefore there is not much information available. They did however, offer a care sheet and gave advice on common illnesses while recommending further research before buying a degu.

Another variation in advice was the average lifespan of a degu. Each pet shop gave a different reply and the average duration of a degu's life ranged from two-and-a-half to 10 years old.

One pet shop recommended a caiman (alligator) instead of a possum. Their advice was that possums would probably have to be caught from the wild and they did not know when they could obtain one. The caller was discouraged from taking on a possum or any large pet without thoroughly researching it first, but the pet shop did say that caimans had become quite popular despite their size and offered it as an alternative.

Two pet shops did discourage the caller from taking on a chipmunk. One responsibly pointed out that the caller did not know enough about unusual animals and the other advised that a chipmunk is not an animal that can be handled easily.

None of the six pet shops offering a sugar glider asked if the caller's partner or son had any prior experience of keeping this kind of pet. Only one out of eight offering chipmunks asked about previous experience and of the 16 selling degus only four enquired about experience held.

One pet shop, which was approached about a degu, recommended getting a halter to take it for a walk.

Independent expert's opinion

As with keeping birds, there are less precisely-defined conditions for these species, so the advice was less problematic. Most comments were again 'adequate' or 'oversimplified'.

In general the shops seemed to know more about mammals and were more willing to discourage and/or suggest suitable alternatives.

BEST PRACTICE

The manager of Hertfordshire pet shop, Amey Zoo, will not let anyone buy a sugar glider unless he is satisfied that they are capable of caring for it properly. To assess their suitability as a sugar glider owner, Mark conducts a competency test and will provide coaching if the prospective owner is not knowledgeable. "Sugar gliders are extremely difficult animals to keep in captivity," said Mark. "I have detailed care sheets on caring for them, but as I stress to everyone, if you follow it to the letter you will be alright, but stray from these guidelines at all and you will have problems. It takes a lot of time and commitment to care for a sugar glider properly."



▲ In the wild a sugar glider will glide 45 metres between trees.

WORST PRACTICE

More than 100 exotic animals found suffering in cramped and dirty conditions at a former zoo keeper's home have been returned to the man by order of magistrates.

RSPCA inspectors and the police raided the man's home and seized 102 animals including 17 flying squirrels, 12 bushbabies, 25 sugar gliders and 48 different types of turtle, tortoise and terrapin.

The owner was found guilty of ten offences of causing unnecessary suffering and was cleared of a further two offences by magistrates. The court heard that the animals were being kept in an upstairs bedroom and attached garage.

He was given a two-year conditional discharge and ordered to pay £12,000 costs. But magistrates did not disqualify the man and ordered the animals to be returned to him.

RSPCA Chief Inspector Neil Thomas told magistrates there was a stench of urine when he reached the garage. Inside he discovered animals stacked in crates and boxes, covered in faeces and kept on filthy urine-soaked newspaper.

During the raid a badly decomposed body of a tortoise was found lying in the bedroom. There was also more than a dozen boxes strewn across the floor – all contained live tortoises.

The owner said the raid happened before he had a chance to clean the animals' containers. He said they were confined temporarily because prospective buyers needed to look around the house.

After the case Chief Inspector Thomas said: "It is extremely disappointing that the court has ruled the animals are going back to this man, but I hope he has learnt his lesson and will look after them properly in future."



RSPCA

▲ Twelve bushbabies were among more than 100 exotic animals seized by RSPCA inspectors.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT...

Gliders by name, gliders by nature. The sugar glider, an exotic marsupial from Australasia, is one of the tree-living species that has in recent years been taken into captivity and bred for the pet trade. Unlike many other small mammals found for sale, these animals are nocturnal, live completely in trees and in the wild rarely if ever come down to the ground from the tree canopy. Gliders live in small groups and glide for as far as 45 metres between trees in search of the sap and gum of certain trees, pollen and insects, as well as sometimes eating birds, flowers, fruits, small rodents and seeds. Some websites suggest keeping gliders in a wire cage of 0.5m² x 0.66m high and feeding them dog food. Even if a larger enclosure is provided with a nest box, branches and a varied diet reflective of the food taken in the wild, the provision of an adequate tree canopy for gliding is difficult. Sugar gliders also require heating of 21–32°C in captivity to prevent them from going into a state of dormancy and torpor just like a mini-hibernation.

Rodents can also require specialist care. In the wild degus live on the slopes of the Andes in Chile at altitudes up to 1,200m. They feed on the ground but will also climb into the branches of shrubs and small trees. These rodents construct an elaborate, communal burrow system and live together in small colonies. It is fair to say that these animals are relatively easy to keep with their housing and dietary requirements in captivity not being very difficult. However, they do not respond well to being handled and are not recommended for small children or anybody else who wants a particularly friendly pet.

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ANDREW FORSYTH/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY

E A JAMES/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY



Bird watch

Bird watch

Birds have been kept in captivity as companion animals for thousands of years. The majority of birds imported into Heathrow Airport for the pet trade come from countries in South America and Africa as well as the Czech Republic and Singapore. The range of species kept is large – estimated to approach 1,000 species – including macaws, lovebirds, finches, barbets, toucans, birds of prey and waterfowl. Many species of birds now kept in the UK are bred in captivity, however, the majority of CITES-listed bird species imported into the UK are still captured from the wild. In 2002, 10,158 parrots were imported into the UK – an increase of more than 50 per cent on the previous year.

Increasing numbers of bird species are being kept nationwide. From 2000–2003, the RSPCA rescued 16,249 exotic birds.

Health check

The survey of vets throughout England and Wales revealed 5,240 exotic birds had been seen by the 190 vets who responded. Cockatiels accounted for the largest proportion of these cases with 1,593 presented for treatment. Parrots seen included 472 macaws, 451 lovebirds, 231 conures, 222 ring-necked parakeets and 964 other species. Twenty-one kookaburras were seen as well as 63 touracos.

Commenting on the cases treated, one vet said: “Most reptile and bird cases can be associated with poor husbandry. As to serious cases, a large percentage of animals will die if untreated and many die anyway...deliberate cruelty is rare but negligence and particularly bad advice from pet shops is common.”

Information provided by pet shops relating to birds was more substantial than almost any other exotic group. Only two callers were advised against taking on even the most challenging birds, such as the macaws, despite buying it for a partner or son.

Once again the advice on the lifespan and potential health problems varied. While one pet shop said the life expectancy of a ring-necked parakeet was 10 years another stated it was likely to live to 30 years or more. Some provided very basic information on how to tell whether the bird was ill such as being puffed-up or being quiet.

Few offered specific guidance on the proper size of the enclosure with advice ranging from “a small to medium cage” to “allow the bird enough room to spread its wings”. The pet shop offering red-eyed finches for sale for the caller’s partner recommended they would be happy as long as they had plenty of food and water and could be kept in a budgie cage. However, another pet shop offering finches advised a 1m x 0.6m shed and a run with an aviary heater.

Independent expert's view

Generally the advice is not significantly deficient, partly because there is much less requirement for specific temperatures and specialist requirements than with reptiles. Most comments fall into the ‘adequate’ or ‘oversimplified’ categories, although some stray into ‘inadequate’.

One common failing was not emphasising the amount of time that must be spent devoted to psittacines (parrots). Many larger species can be roughly equated to the intelligence level of a toddler and leaving them on their own for more than eight hours a day is not really acceptable, especially when young. They also need training, similar in principle to that of a dog. This should be discussed with any prospective owner. However, this deficiency could well have been corrected later in the purchasing process.

Species enquired about	Number of shops with animal available
Grey-headed lovebird	1
Nanday conure	3
Macaw	3
Black-caped lory	1
Ring-necked parakeet	4
Peach-faced lovebird	3
Touraco	0
Hummingbird	0
Toucan	0
Kookaburra	0
Finches (green-singing, zebra)	11
Cockatiel	6
African grey parrot	6
Maroon/red-bellied conure	2
Budgerigar	4
Canary	2
Other	8

Best practice

Vet Neil Forbes not only treats exotic animals, but he also keeps an African grey parrot of his own.

He is well aware of the challenging nature of keeping exotic animals, and says:

“African grey parrots are highly intelligent, sociable creatures. With respect to the birds’ mental ability they can be compared to a typical four-year-old child, who not only doesn’t grow up, but also may live to be 35–45 years old. You would not consider leaving a four-year-old child alone all day in a cot in an empty room and expect it to grow up as a well-adjusted normal human being, and you can’t expect to leave a parrot alone all day in a cage while you go out to work.

“Because of the long life expectancy of these birds, a potential keeper must be certain their lifestyle at the time of taking on a parrot, and planning for the future, ensures the bird is not left unattended for prolonged periods of time. If you cannot be certain of this, don’t get one.

“Parrots should not be confined to their cages all the time, but should spend as much time as possible out of the cage in the house, or in an outside flight area. Parrots are gregarious birds and typically benefit from the company of others.

“Parrots are noisy and destructive and will chew furniture and other household items. As a parrot owner you cannot be too house-proud, and the house must provide a safe environment in which the bird cannot come to any harm.

“Some humans can become allergic to feather dust (allergic alveolitis), which is a very serious, even life-threatening respiratory disease. In such situations the only option is to re-home all the birds.

“Feather plucking is a very common and difficult problem to deal with, which often occurs when parrots are not provided with the correct environmental conditions. A failure to properly provide for your parrot will often result in feather plucking which once established may then be difficult or impossible to control.

“As all birds are used to being ‘preyed upon’ in the wild, they have developed the ability to hide the signs of illness. Birds have a high metabolic rate, so once they are ill they get sicker and die quicker. Early recognition of illness in birds and promptly seeking appropriate expert veterinary care is essential. Veterinary costs can be high in view of the nature of care parrots require so insurance to cover such costs is recommended.

“Parrots must be provided with environmental and foraging enrichment and must also receive dominance training. Suitable nutrition of parrots tends not to be advised in most pet shops (i.e. sun flower or peanut based diets). An experienced avian vet will assist with all of these husbandry aspects.

“Owning and keeping a parrot should not be entered into light-heartedly. It is a serious matter although very rewarding for both bird and owner if fulfilled properly.”



E A JANES/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY

▲ African grey parrots can live for more than 40 years, and are highly intelligent and sociable creatures.

WORST PRACTICE

Dead birds found in the bottom of a cage they shared with a boa constrictor in a pet shop would have died from panic through trying to escape from the snake, concluded a vet.

The pet shop owner kept a number of exotic animals – many of them were injured and suffering from worm infestation, malnutrition and dehydration.

RSPCA inspectors found approximately 80 finches sharing the enclosure with a boa constrictor. Two zebra finches and a bronze-winged mannikin had died which a veterinary report concludes is the probable result of head traumas after attempting to escape the snake. The snake was in the water bowl and none of the finches could drink.

In a separate tank were nine Burmese pythons. Two had lesions and burns and were in poor bodily condition. Three collared lizards were in appalling condition. One was described by a vet as being close to death and had to be put to sleep. The others were very dehydrated and in very poor condition. A leopard gecko was also near death.

During the inspection, budgerigars were found to be in poor bodily condition, many suffering from skin complaints due to mite infestation.

The pet shop owner pleaded guilty to four charges of causing unnecessary suffering. He was ordered to pay £2,494 in fines and costs and disqualified from keeping or having control of exotic animals for five years.



RSPCA

▲ One of the budgerigars found to be in poor condition and suffering from skin complaints.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT...

In the wild, parrots form permanent pair bonds and many live in large flocks. Most of their time is spent either preening their partner or foraging in flocks for food. Without these activities intense boredom can set in. Even when captive-bred birds are reared in captivity, they will still need plenty of space to allow flight and social interaction. Without adequate attention, parrots are capable of becoming bored and frustrated which can cause the bird to pluck out its own feathers until it is bare from the neck down. All birds fare best in aviaries, indoor or outdoor, with the companionship of their own kind and space to fly and climb. So before deciding to keep these birds, the keeper needs to be prepared to provide the specialist care the birds need, as well as the long-term financial commitment for the bird's life span – with some birds living for more than 50 years.

Feeding birds is more complex than providing a bowl of mixed seed. Birds that are available to buy from pet shops come from a wide range of bird families, with very different dietary needs. Providing a diet of one food item, such as sunflower seeds, can quickly lead to dietary deficiencies, obesity and even damage to internal organs. Whereas many species are omnivorous or frugivorous and will take a wide variety of foods, other birds are specialist feeders with specially-adapted beaks and guts to enable them to take and digest certain foods.

In the wild many birds rely on additional 'chemicals' or abrasive stones or grit to aid digestion. For example, many parrots need to neutralise toxins in their seed diet, so regularly congregate in large flocks on clay banks where they lick the rock to aid digestion. Grit is important when keeping seed-eating birds, such as many parrots including cockatiels and budgerigars in captivity, as it aids the grinding of seeds in the bird's gizzard. Without grit, hard items of food can pass straight through the bird undigested. Toucans are susceptible to a diet too high in iron when kept in captivity. A build up of iron in the toucan's body is thought to be reduced in the wild by the bird drinking the water that collects in the rotting leaves of bromeliad plants high up in the trees. This naturally-occurring water contains tannin, a substance which binds to the iron in the bird's body and removes it from their system.

MAKE SURE YOU KNOW YOUR STUFF!



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General findings

General findings

Buying for somebody else

All of the 300 pet shops surveyed were contacted on behalf of a son or partner and only 32 per cent asked if the person receiving the animal had any experience of caring for a species of its kind. Eighty-one per cent did not ask if the caller had, or knew anyone who keeps/has the species.

The RSPCA says: The RSPCA always vigorously opposes the buying of pets on behalf of somebody else. Taking on any pet is a commitment that requires careful consideration. Thorough research has to be done to determine the level of care, cost and commitment involved.

Trouble settling in

When asked what would happen if the animal gets too big, the pet isn't liked or it does not settle, 33 per cent of pet shops offered to take the animal back, 18 per cent offered to help with rehoming, six per cent recommended an animal home, charity or the RSPCA, four per cent gave a guarantee for a settling-in period and 11 per cent did not know.

The RSPCA says: Animal rescue establishments, including RSPCA centres, struggle to accommodate the number of commonly kept domestic animals that are unwanted and abandoned. It is even more difficult to accommodate exotic species due to the specialist facilities they require, and the RSPCA has to look for support from specialist exotic rescue centres, knowledgeable hobbyists and enthusiasts who deliver a high standard of care. This type of accommodation is limited and therefore the RSPCA recommends prospective exotic animal keepers approach specialists for guidance on caring and handling exotic animals before deciding to keep one, in an attempt to limit the number of animals that become unwanted and abandoned.

Sound advice?

Fifty-four per cent of the 300 pet shops contacted encouraged the caller to visit the pet shop to discuss the species. Chain stores were more likely to invite the caller to the store than independent pet shops with 52 per cent of independents advising a visit compared to 63 per cent of chain stores.

Only five per cent of the pet shops asked recommended further reading before taking on the animal enquired about. Four per cent discouraged taking on the species, four per cent advised they could not be handled easily and four per cent also said they are difficult to keep. But 78 per cent did not recommend another animal as an alternative.

The RSPCA says: It is always advisable to seek expert guidance on caring for an animal and see the animal first. Reputable breeders and rescue centres will give advice on how to handle, feed and house the animal and will be reluctant to sell the animal without asking questions about experience first. Obtaining an animal from a pet shop that is prepared to order an animal, but has no knowledge of its welfare needs should be avoided.

Health tips

When asked about how to tell if the animal is ill, 16 per cent said they did not get ill. One pet shop recommended that they would administer antibiotics if the pet became ill.

The RSPCA says: All animals can become ill. No animal is immune to illness and disease. It is advisable to contact a specialist organisation or an animal welfare organisation for guidance to know what signs to look for when assessing an animal's health. If an animal is displaying signs of illness, veterinary attention should be sought. It is illegal for anyone to prescribe antibiotics unless they are a qualified vet.

RSPCA welfare analysis

To rate the general quality of information given by all 300 pet shops questioned in the survey, RSPCA scientists have awarded the following ratings:

✓ = Good result

✗ = Poor result

General

- ✓ More than 80 per cent of pet shops said they sold enclosures, equipment and food at their shops.
- ✗ Only 24 per cent of pet shops recommended a local vet when asked what would happen if the animal becomes ill.
- ✗ Eighty-seven per cent of shops did not ask the caller about family background, such as whether there were children in the house, whether the person acquiring the animal had access to a garden and how much space they had for the animal.
- ✗ Ninety-seven per cent of pet shops did not ask whether the caller had other pets.
- ✗ Sixty-eight per cent of pet shops did not ask whether the person the caller was buying the animal for had experience of this kind of animal.
- ✗ Sixty per cent of pet shops did not spontaneously give the caller further information on care/husbandry etc.
- ✗ Less than one per cent of pet shops spontaneously advised callers on the contact details of support groups, such as exotic keeping organisations or breeders, for further information on care and husbandry.
- ✓ Fifty-four per cent of pet shops encouraged the caller to visit the shop to discuss the species in more detail.

Independent expert's opinion

An exotic vet, who runs his own exotic veterinary practice, has independently analysed the general findings. While stressing that the findings can only be based on a telephone enquiry and not on an actual visit to the pet shop, the vet highlighted several areas of key concern.

The vet developed the following mechanism to independently grade the quality of information given.

Grading	Comment
GOOD	The right thing to mention here, and correct.
ADEQUATE	Reasonable (correct) comment, although not necessarily what I would consider the most important point or doesn't go far enough.
OVERSIMPLIFIED	Focuses on a significant point(s) but doesn't really deal with it/them adequately (note <i>deficiency may be corrected elsewhere either in questionnaire or at shop</i>).
INADEQUATE	Misdirected from main point, with omissions and/or oversimplifications (note <i>deficiency may be corrected elsewhere either in questionnaire or at shop</i>).
DANGEROUSLY INADEQUATE	As above but the omissions/oversimplifications are very significant, and should definitely have been covered at this stage.
UNACCEPTABLY IGNORANT	This vendor should not be allowed to sell animals.
ABSOLUTE RUBBISH	This vendor should not be allowed to have anything to do with captive animals.

Applying the grading, the vet came to the following conclusions:

In general, there were a couple of areas of major concern in my opinion. I have many specific disagreements with quoted husbandry advice/sizes/figures. However, there is some degree of reasonable latitude in acceptable enclosures and conditions, and in many figures given for lifespans, maximum sizes, etc., so there were only a few comments I felt were really unacceptable here.

I would say that the main points of concern regarding the findings of this survey are centred on the ignorance of shop staff about illnesses animals might get and the hygiene risks. I would consider very few of the responses in these categories were even 'adequate', the best tending to rate no more than 'oversimplified' and very many falling into 'inadequate', 'dangerously inadequate' or even 'absolute rubbish' categories.

That any pet shop could be ignorant of, or unwilling to admit, the fact that any animal can get ill with a variety of possible conditions, is in my opinion absolutely unacceptable.

Similarly, it is in my opinion completely unacceptable for a pet shop to be unaware that any animal can carry pathogens such as viruses and bacteria (or to advise someone that none exist) which can be transmitted to humans, and any shop giving such advice should be shut down.

Again in a similar vein, partly on hygiene grounds but also on physical damage grounds in many cases, the number of shops saying that there was no need to be careful when there is a baby in the house is incredible. These shops again are 'unacceptably ignorant'/irresponsible.

The exotic vet also evaluated answers given to specific questions posed by MORI in the survey.

Are they easy to keep?

Strictly speaking, 'easy to keep' should always be qualified to some extent, even if only by the word relatively, and I would feel that this point should always be made. All animals require some care. I would rate most of the comments 'adequate' or 'oversimplified', although some are 'inadequate' and a few 'dangerously inadequate'.

What illnesses might it get?

If the comment is not qualified, then a statement that any animal species "doesn't get ill" is such blatant rubbish that the person giving it should in my opinion never have anything to do with animal care. Several shops seem to think that being captive bred makes an animal immune to getting ill, for example, one shop giving advice on a degu and another on a boa constrictor.

Many shops only specify one illness (sometimes not always the most common one), which I would rate an 'oversimplified' answer unless it is specified that it is the only illness they get, in which case I would consider it 'inadequate'. Many seem to suggest that they don't know of any other illness that the animal could get, which is simply not acceptable for supposedly professional workers with animals.

A few specific demonstrations of ignorance stand out. One shop claims that all birds get mites in summer months, which is 'unacceptably ignorant'. Mites can only come from contact with other birds. The same shop says "take it to a vet or try vitamin drops" if the bird is ill, which is incompetently idiotic. Either the bird needs vitamin drops, in which case they should be used routinely, or it doesn't, in which case they are pointless.

Another shop says that nanday conures only get colds, which is 'unacceptably ignorant', and also offers to supply an antibiotic, which is illegal if not done by a veterinary surgeon.

How would I be able to tell if it's ill?

The only fully reasonable answer to this question, without giving a long list of possibilities, is along the lines of: "You need to learn how the animal is normally (appearance, behaviour, feeding, defaecation etc.), and any deviation from normal could indicate

illness". Anything short of that is unacceptable, and only one shop responding to an enquiry on corn snakes came up with a fully acceptable answer here.

There are some classically self-contradictory responses such as: "They don't get ill, but if they did..."

Can these diseases be passed on?

Answering "not at all" to this question, as 36 per cent did, is again a sign of someone that should not have any position of responsibility with regard to animals. It does obviously depend on the illness to some extent, but most pathogenic bacteria and fungi at least can infect almost any animal under the right conditions. To blatantly state, as one shop asked about chameleons, "no, you can't catch anything from them..." demonstrates breathtaking irresponsibility as handling reptiles without washing your hands afterwards can carry a risk of contracting salmonella.

The "not at all" answers are rated 'absolute rubbish' – these shops should be closed down; most others I would rate 'oversimplified' to 'dangerously inadequate'.

There is a baby in the house. Is there any risk?

Again, an unqualified "no problems", as in 30 per cent of respondents, demonstrates breathtaking irresponsibility. At the very least some hygiene care is necessary with any animal around any person, let alone a baby, to minimise the risk of transmission of disease organisms, which may often be carried by healthy animals. Also in many of the animals discussed a baby could easily stress or damage the animal, and/or the animal could injure or even kill the baby. I would consider it absolutely unacceptable for the shop to answer "no problems" to this.

Again, unqualified "no problems" is 'absolute rubbish', and again I would suggest that such shops should be closed down; most other answers are 'adequate' to 'oversimplified'.

Shops queried about reptiles seemed to have significantly more awareness of potential hygiene risks than bird shops, few of which appeared to even be aware that basic hygiene is advisable.

What if it gets too big/don't like it/doesn't settle in?

To a certain extent, this is not really the pet shop's problem, it's a sign of stupidity on the part of the prospective purchaser.

"What if it gets too big?" and "what if I don't like it?" are really indications that the caller shouldn't have the animal. Taking on an animal means for life, and these are completely unacceptable (if depressingly common) reasons for rehoming an animal. Animals aren't toys to be discarded if you don't like them.

Having said that, in answer to such a question the only reasonable reply in my opinion is along the lines of "you shouldn't even think about getting a pet if you have any doubts about being able to look after it yourself for its natural life", or "you shouldn't even think of having pets if you could consider getting something *knowing* you won't be able to cope with it in the future". The pet shops should definitely (as a few, but far too few, do) strongly discourage the questioner from getting the animal at all.

Some shops do seem to be unacceptably ignorant of, or blind to, the problems of rehoming many species, implying that animals like the Nile monitor, Burmese python or African spurred (sulcata) tortoise might be rehomeable. In my opinion this should not even be implied, let alone described as easy, or even money-making, as two shops did.

What if it gets ill?

Any shop that doesn't recommend taking the animal to a vet, or at least offering to look at it or discuss the symptoms on the 'phone with a view to recommending taking it to a vet if it's not a simple husbandry problem, is basically negligent. Not offering a specific course of action, as a significant number did, is completely unacceptable.



A pet owner's duty

A pet owner's duty

The RSPCA believes that pet owners have a responsibility to the animals in their care to have knowledge about their needs and provide the correct food and environment that will safeguard their welfare.

While the vast majority of pet owners are responsible and ensure they have the correct knowledge before they take an animal into their care, there are sadly a large number of people who inflict suffering on their pets due to their basic ignorance of the animal's needs.

The government is in the process of reviewing the laws relating to animal welfare – some of which date back nearly 100 years. These laws allow action to be taken when an animal has suffered, but the RSPCA believes that this is too late. Pet owners should be required by law to provide adequate care and law should protect animals from suffering.

The RSPCA is proposing a 'duty of care' be imposed on pet owners to ensure they realise their responsibility. This new legislation would put the onus on those pet owners who keep their animals in poor conditions, to improve the level of care required before the animal suffers. This legislation would apply to all animals kept as pets, but it is perhaps most important for exotic animals with specialist needs.

The RSPCA believes the new 'duty of care' should be supported by codes of practice. All those in charge of or in control of an animal should owe a 'duty of care' to it – no matter whether that animal is a dog, rabbit, macaw or constrictor snake. The RSPCA advocates that codes of practice should be prepared for each family of animals to provide further detail on the specialist care each type of animal needs in captivity and the 'duty of care' owed to those animals when kept by the public.

A code of practice based on the provision of the following Five Freedoms can be written and used for the welfare of any family of animals kept in captivity.

■ **Freedom from fear and distress**

By providing conditions and care that avoid unnecessary fear and distress.

Everyone that plays a part in managing and handling animals must understand basic animal behaviour.

■ **Freedom from hunger and thirst**

By providing a satisfying, appropriate and safe diet as well as consistent access to adequate fresh water. Allowing generous feeding and drinking spaces helps minimise bullying and competition.

■ **Freedom from discomfort**

By providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area. A clean dry bedded area for mammalian species, and plenty of space to move around must be provided.

■ **Freedom from pain, injury and disease**

By prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment using good veterinary care when required. The environment must be well maintained to provide good health.

■ **Freedom to express normal behaviour**

By providing enough space, appropriate environmental enrichment and company of the animals own kind.

The principle of the Five Freedoms has been recognised for all animals, for example, they are expressed as required provisions in the Secretary of State's Standards of Modern Zoo Practice.



CODES OF PRACTICE KEY



= Constrictor snake



= Rabbit

To demonstrate how the same format can be applied when preparing family codes of practice for very different animals, the RSPCA has applied the same Five Freedoms to draft the familial code for constrictor snakes and another for the rabbit family. The codes have been developed to help pet owners and keepers of these animals ensure their welfare.

Some of the rules in the code would be legal requirements which, if breached, would amount to a criminal offence. These rules are identified by the use of the words:

MUST/MUST NOT.

For example, the keeper **MUST** ensure the animal has ready access to an adequate supply of fresh water and a wholesome diet appropriate to its age and species, and which is fed to it in sufficient quantity to maintain it in full health and vigour.

Nutrition



Two methods of feeding constrictor snakes are available: either proprietary, commercially prepared foods, such as 'snake sausages'; or humanely killed prey animals. Proprietary foods **SHOULD** be offered according to the manufacturer's recommendations to provide for the animals' dietary needs. The portions and number of the appropriate defrosted or fresh, humanely killed prey animals **SHOULD** be offered to the snake, depending on the snake species and size, according to the frequency specified in the code.



Food **SHOULD** be presented in such a way as to take full consideration of the animals' natural behaviour, to include feeding during the night cycle for nocturnal animals and in a suitable location to mimic how the prey item would be caught in the wild.



Rabbits are hindgut fermenters, adapted to digest a low-quality high-fibre diet comprising mostly grass. They **SHOULD** be fed grass and good-quality grass hay with a small amount of a good-quality high fibre (18-24 per cent) commercial diet with protein levels of around 15 per cent. Fresh vegetables may be used as a supplement. Commercial diets **SHOULD NOT** be fed ad libitum as this leads to selective feeding and obesity.

Uneaten food **SHOULD** be removed as appropriate, before it rots, to maintain hygiene.

Drinking water



Fresh, clean drinking water of sufficient quantity **SHOULD** be available at all times in a container that will allow access to all animals. The drinking water **SHOULD** be provided in a clean drinking bowl that is heavy enough to prevent water spillage.

The keeper **MUST** provide the animal with an environment, to include shelter, accommodation and living conditions, which is appropriate and safe for the animal.

Enclosure space



The keeper **SHOULD** provide an enclosure for each snake that is equal or larger than the sizes stipulated in the code. For example, the height of the vivarium is important for arboreal constrictor snakes and for those species (the emerald tree boa – *Corallus caninus*, Amazon tree boa – *Corallus enhydris*, Pacific tree boa – *Candoia bibronii*, Haitian and rainbow boas – *Epicrates spp.*, Madagascan tree boa – *Sanzinia madagascariensis*, carpet python – *Morelia spilates* and green tree python – *Chondropython viridis*) the enclosure height **SHOULD** be sufficient to allow the provision of a branch that is long enough to support the full length of the snake.



The keeper **SHOULD** provide an enclosure that has a minimum floor area that is equal or larger than 2.75m² when keeping a single rabbit and 5.5m² for paired rabbits. The minimum height of the enclosure **SHOULD** be 76cm. The enclosure **SHOULD** contain a sleeping area of approximately 20 per cent of the whole and adequate bedding in the form of hay or straw **MUST** be provided.

Enclosure construction



The enclosure for the rabbit **SHOULD** be made using smooth, solid, sturdy materials, to prevent the risk of splinters, holes, rough surfaces or sharp edges causing injury to the animal. The enclosure **SHOULD** be of a suitable design to provide secure, transparent doors to allow easy access (such as for cleaning) and monitoring of the rabbit.

Enclosure environment



Constrictor snakes, like other reptiles, are cold-blooded. They are dependent on their surroundings to regulate their body temperature within a preferred temperature zone at which the body's biological processes will function optimally and maintain the animal in good health. For example, the snake needs access to heat to aid digestion and when sloughing its skin.



Since the reptile keeper has difficulty knowing what temperature is preferred at any given moment, s/he **SHOULD** provide the necessary range of temperatures that allows the snake to choose between moving to either the warmer or cooler areas. For this reason, a temperature gradient suitable for the species **SHOULD** be maintained to provide a range of temperatures from a 'hot' spot at one end to a cooler shaded area at the other end of the enclosure. A table of temperature ranges are provided for different species of constrictor snake in the code.

The keeper MUST provide the animal with adequate protection from, and rapid diagnosis and treatment of, any disease, injury or pain.

Veterinary care



It is advisable to find out the location of a suitable veterinary practice and to register with a vet who is experienced in the treatment of constrictor snakes or uses a referral service. A keeper of a constrictor snake **MUST** obtain veterinary assistance if the animal is injured or sick and **MUST NOT** cause suffering to the snake in their care.

Good hygiene



A good level of hygiene within the enclosure **SHOULD** be maintained.

The keeper MUST provide the animal with reasonable opportunity to express normal behaviour, including the provision of sufficient space, proper facilities and appropriate social grouping.

Enclosure enrichment



Accommodation **SHOULD** take account of the natural habitat of the species and seek to meet the physiological and psychological needs of the animal. Enclosures **SHOULD** therefore be equipped in accordance with the needs of the animals with branches, deep substrate to allow digging, rocks, hides of the appropriate size and humidity, pools, vegetation and other enrichment materials designed to aid and encourage normal behaviour patterns and minimise any abnormal behaviour. Facilities must take into account growth in the snakes and must be capable of adequately providing for their needs at all stages of their growth and development.



Escaping to a safe refuge is a natural response behaviour when an animal comes into contact with the unfamiliar, or to stay away from any potential hazards, such as predators or unfavourable temperature, light or humidity levels. Locating suitable hides within the captive environment will provide the snake with refuges. The hides **SHOULD** be of a suitable size to allow the whole snake to coil up under the hide whilst touching the edges of it.

Social grouping



Rabbits are social animals that **SHOULD** be kept as single sex and/or neutered pairs or groups wherever possible.

Records



The condition, health and behaviour of all the rabbits in the keeper's care **SHOULD** be checked at least twice daily by the keeper or person in direct charge of the rabbit's care at that time. A daily record **SHOULD** be kept by the keeper, or person in direct charge of their care, indicating changes in usual behaviour or activity or other problems, and remedial actions taken.

The keeper **MUST**, whenever possible, provide the animal with conditions which avoid mental suffering, including protection from fear and distress.

Enclosure location



The location of the enclosure **SHOULD** be selected to ensure the snake does not feel threatened, so sites where noise or light levels are high, or where there is a lot of activity **SHOULD** be avoided. The provision of adequate refuges within a range of locations will also allow the snake to still take shelter in hides to thermoregulate by selecting certain temperature and humidity levels, or locations within the enclosure, such as a high hide above ground level. The provision of plants can also provide natural shade and shelter for the animal to feel less exposed and threatened.

Catching and transportation



Any techniques used **SHOULD** take account of the animal's temperament and escape behaviour in order to minimise injury, damage or distress. Any snakes that are transported **MUST** be kept securely at all times, to prevent escape and injury during transit. It is an offence under Section 14 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) to release, or allow to escape into the wild, any animal that is not ordinarily resident in, or a regular visitor to, the UK in a wild state. An escaped snake is also unlikely to find adequate sources of heat to stay warm and adequate food to survive in the wild for very long.

'Free keeping'



Allowing a rabbit to 'roam' over a larger area within the household boundaries may be acceptable but only if the keeper can provide the rabbit with all the earlier mentioned environmental conditions, protect the rabbit from access to any hazards and ensure there is no risk of the animal escaping.



The rabbit **SHOULD** be kept away from other animals – such as dogs and cats – to minimise the risk of the rabbit being attacked by another animal and being injured, and vice versa. Where outside runs are used protection **SHOULD** include a net roof to prevent predator access. All such enclosures **SHOULD** be escape proof.

Finally the codes of practice will advise on other sources of further information, such as exotic keeping organisations, on the husbandry of the animals which **SHOULD** also be read and used for reference to ensure the keeper is informed in the keeping of the animals in their care.

The RSPCA believes that a recognised 'duty of care' would lead to a reduction in the number of prosecutions for animal cruelty through informed pet ownership that the RSPCA can refer people to when they are failing to provide the correct level of care.

Conclusions

There is ample evidence that exotic pet care knowledge is not shared by everyone responsible for exotic animals' care. There are many people with a wealth of knowledge, but possibly more people without. The difference in levels of care given by the average exotic pet owner compared to the dedicated hobbyist who has devoted considerable effort to researching their animal's needs are poles apart.

The RSPCA and exotic animal rescue sanctuaries are often left to pick up the pieces when people realise they cannot care for the exotic animal they have taken on. And of the vets who can provide veterinary care, many are seeing conditions such as anorexia, which are a direct result of poor pet care.

Many vets will agree that the problem starts at source. A worrying number of pet shops are not questioning what knowledge the prospective pet owner has. And the information given by many pet shops is often poor, limited and/or incorrect. Animals with specialist needs are frequently being bought by uninformed people and housed in conditions that will ultimately lead to their suffering. Veterinary treatment for the animal can then be hard to find. In many cases, it can and has led to the animal being abandoned or given to the RSPCA.

The RSPCA has seen the suffering that can be inflicted on pets when owners fail to research an animal's needs. By failing to give a lizard the proper range of heating and humidity levels, the lizard's health will deteriorate fast. Not providing a snake with the proper diet can have devastating effects on its welfare. And keeping a sugar glider in a small cage is confining an animal that glides in the wild to a fraction of the space it needs, which can even lead to injury such as damage to the membrane that extends from the fore to the hind limb and acts like a wing for gliding.

Recommendations

- Legislation imposing on pet owners a 'duty of care', meaning that anyone who owns an animal will be legally obliged to look after its welfare, would provide a legal framework for the prevention of suffering. The RSPCA believes the Animal Welfare Bill currently being considered by government is essential to improve the lives of the increasingly popular and growing range of animals being kept as pets. Under current law, animals have to physically suffer before any action can be taken – regardless of whether it is apparent that poor husbandry could lead to suffering if it is not improved.
- Importation of wild caught animals must also stop to end the cruel trade in animals captured and brought to Britain for the pet trade. Many will die en route or when confined to a domestic environment which is nothing like their natural habitat. By acquiring the animal from a UK breeder where the animal was captive-bred, the purchaser is also given the opportunity to get details about the animal and its needs in this country from someone who has direct experience of dealing with the animal in UK conditions.
- The RSPCA believes strongly that the supplier has a fundamental duty to objectively contribute to this decision to buy an animal. They should provide the right information so that the purchaser is in a position to make an informed choice whether they can provide the necessary care for the exotic animal for its lifetime in captivity.
- The information about exotic pet care has to be more widely available and the complex information about their needs must be made clear to any prospective pet owner enquiring about a pet. The RSPCA has seen many cases of pet owners providing ideal conditions for their exotic animals. These cases should be seen as the standard all pet owners should aim for.

The following system would help to ensure pet owners are informed.

▼ 'Duty of care' becomes law

▼ Codes of practice introduced

▼ Codes of practice provided at point of sale with animal

▼ Pet owner has code of practice as constant reference and as a guide to minimum standards required

▼ Animal welfare authorities can refer pet owners to codes of practice if welfare needs are not being provided.



E A JAMES, MIKE LANE, SUSAN & ALLAN PARKER, CHERYL ERTELT, GEOFF DU FEEU/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY

Wilberforce Way, Southwater, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 9RS

Tel: 0870 010 1181 www.rspca.org.uk

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