

# THE MOTIVATIONS BEHIND OBTAINING EXOTIC PETS: A DISCUSSION PAPER

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## **Abstract**

The keeping of exotic pets is a growing practise recorded in many developed countries worldwide. With an increased focus on this activity by animal welfare organizations and conservation groups within the last decade, new research has emerged to provide tangible data into exotic pet ownership. Such research serves as the basis of this paper which focuses on an important yet seemingly overlooked part of this practice, i.e. pet owners themselves. This paper aims to uncover and understand the incentives behind obtaining exotic species in Canada and their underlying causes.

Analysis of the previous literature reveals that the motivations for owning exotic species are similar and as varied to those of domesticated pet owners, deriving from an affection and desire to be close to animals and wildlife. Cultural and social factors play a part however and are underlying factors that influence what kinds of 'pets' people obtain. Ultimately, how exotic species are portrayed within Canada, with its parallels to our modern representation of domestic pets, has caused an increase in people obtaining them.

## **Introduction**

Pets are a growing consumer trend in western societies with exotic pets becoming more prominent (Jyrinki 2010, p. 119). In 2013 it was estimated that 19.4 million U.S. households owned exotics species, while in the UK the exotic pet population in 2012 was estimated around 42 million (Micheli 2014; BVA 2014). In Canada, illegal smuggling of exotic animals for the pet trade makes accurate tallying an impossible task. The illegal trade of wildlife is valued around \$19 billion USD dollars a year and is a prominent and growing problem worldwide (TRAFFIC 2012). A significant portion of this

involves the international trade of live animals for the pet industry (WWF 2016). Species of birds, amphibians and reptiles are the most prized in the pet trade, with the most commonly exported live animal being freshwater turtles (WWF 2016). Not surprising then, consumer trends for pet food in Canada estimate a ten percent growth in reptile food sales from 2011 to 2016 (AGR 2012).

Despite the vast amount of resources by organisations and governmental bodies to address some of the issues associated with the sale and ownership of exotic pets, little attention is paid to *why* this practise is occurring in the first place. Past research on exotic pets has primarily focused on conservationist concerns, welfare issues, or the health risks of owning these animals, and has somehow failed to consider owner's incentives and characteristics (Bride 1998; Cekavicius 2012). How can agencies expect to implement solutions to any of the above matters without first asking why people are increasingly obtaining undomesticated animals as pets? The aim of this paper is to uncover the motivations behind owning exotic species, and discuss where these motivations derive. It is hoped that this will provide some useful insights for animal welfare law enforcement personnel and policy makers regarding this practise.

## **Exotic Pets**

Today, over half the households in developed nations include pets (Varner 2002, p. 451) According to environmental ethicist Gary Varner, for something to be a pet it must meet four criteria; live in an area under someones control, be the subject of affection, lead a dramatically different life than a human, and be dependent on an owner (2002, p.462). But do exotic pets fit these criteria? In Canada there are a range of definitions of exotic pets used by various associations. The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association defines an exotic pet as any animal that is neither a cat nor a dog, while the British Columbia SPCA defines exotic pets as non-domesticated, non-indigenous wild animals either captured or captive-bred (BCSPCA 2007; CVMA 2012). Although the subsequent definition is more comprehensive, it fails to recognize local wild animals that are kept as pets in Canada such as foxes and turtles. This paper therefore uses the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals definition of an exotic pet which refers to any undomesticated animal; including all undomesticated birds, snakes, terrapins, caimans, marsupials, and primates (RSPCA 2014).

So what role do exotic pets play in Canada? Unfortunately this is still largely a mystery. The lack of research on exotic pet owners specifically has led to unfounded theories as to why these animals are obtained (Podberscek *et al.* 2005, p.108). Many scholars have suggested status as the reason people

own exotic pets (Gunter 1999; Shepard 1997). This idea stems way back to 12<sup>th</sup> century England where wild animals were the legal property of the king and could be used to represent ones power and wealth (Serpell 1996, p.51). Yet both past and current research has negated this claim due to the reality that people's views of animals have dramatically changed in the last century (Cekavicius & Pajarskaite 2012; Manfredo *et al.* 2003). Nowadays pets are obtained mainly for emotional reasons, and people's affection for animals in modern societies has become not only more intense but diverse (Franklin & White 2001, p. 224; Leslie 1994). Wild animals became embodied in stuffed animals and toys and are "simply those portable pets who do not happen to live with us" (Shepard1997, p. 144). The increased presence of exotic animals in western societies and modern cultures over the last hundred years has enabled them to become part of our everyday lives, our homes and even now our families. What needs to be noted though regarding contemporary society's relationship with exotic pets is that it is culturally responsive (WWF 2016, p.74). For that reason, it becomes necessary to look at the cause of people's actions and desires in addition to the underlying cultural factors impacting them.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Literature search**

The literature search employed the following databases or indices: Sage Publishing, Canadian Research Information System, PLOS ONE, Google Scholar and Scopus. Text word searches were conducted for article titles and abstracts using the search terms: pets, pet owners, exotic, domestication, wild animals, and ownership. Combinations of these primary keywords were combined with words including Canada, North America, Developed nations, Western Culture, Species, reptiles, birds, mammals, amphibians, values, motivations, incentives, concerns, prevalence, and culture. Additionally, existing reports from leading organizations including the World Wildlife Fund, TRAFFIC, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association were accessed to identify relevant data and research.

All articles and papers identified in this search were screened for significance by their abstract and research objectives and were restricted to only those written in English. With the aim of the paper hoping to provide insight for enforcement personal and policy workers in Canada, the intention was to analyse secondary data from solely Canadian and North American studies. However, due to the limited nature of this topic and the lack of in-depth qualitative data into exotic pet owners specifically, studies

from other western societies, such as the United Kingdom, Nordic Europe and Australia were also assessed.

## **Analysis of Findings**

For the study, inductive data analysis in the form of grounded theory was used to code, organise and interpret secondary data (Strauss & Corbin 1990). This means that all findings are induced from the data itself (Charmaz 2006). Grounded theory allows themes and relevant factors to emerge from pre-existing data so that new theories can be generated and brought into the limelight (Strauss & Corbin 1990). It is also a method well suited for exploring unknown domains, uncovering variable relationships, and exploring the mechanisms and processes behind the practise of exotic pet ownership (Charmaz 2006, p. 8).

## **RESULTS**

### **Pet Owners and their Affinity for Animals**

What seems to be overlooked regarding those who own exotic pets is that first and foremost, they are pet owners. This becomes important due to the fact that there are similarities shared between pet owners regardless of the kinds of pets they own (Wood 2015). Studies comparing the characteristics of pet owners to non-pet owners showed that those who have pets possess a greater affinity for animals and consequently other pet owners as well (Newby 1997). One study looking at social identification with animals found that solidarity, defined as the sense of belonging, psychological attachment, and closeness felt toward other animals, corresponded significantly to owning a pet and the number of pets obtained (Amiot 2017). These results were not tied to contact or preference for a particular species, nor associated with owner's age, socioeconomic status, or religion (Amiot 2017). There is also no difference in the perceived life satisfaction between those seeking a pet and those not, leading to the conclusion that pets are not obtained to merely fill a void (Podberscek *et al.* 2005; Johnson 2009). Thus, affection for animals appears to be one of the main drivers for obtaining a pet. This is supported by the high commitment owners have to their pets along with the vast resources (time, money, energy) they spend on them (Henderson 2013). It also helps explain why 70-92 percent of owners consider their pets family and why they are anthropomorphized as so (Jyrinki 2010, p. 122-127).

But how far does such affinity for animals go and how does it relate to obtaining exotic species specifically? Looking back at the study done by Amiot, solidarity with animals did not just correlate with owning a pet but also with concern for nature and animal related matters (2017). It seems as if pets may act as ambassadors for other animals and lead to people making connections with a more diverse range of taxon like snakes and birds (Podberscek 2005). The theory is backed by the results of a different study on exotic pet owners which found that most owners reported having a strong interest in wildlife as far back as childhood (Smith 2008, p. 50). They were also noted to commonly enjoy watching wildlife television programs with many developing emotional connections with the animals on screen (Smith 2008). Some exotic pet owners are even keen to participate in conservation initiatives despite the findings that private ownership of these species has little constructive educational impact (Beetz 2005, p. 23). Such interest and involvement of pet owners should not be surprising since solidarity with animals was also positively correlated with attachment anxiety and a need to be close to animals rather than apart (Amiot 2017). This finding is a concern however when the majority of urban dwellers who possess a high affection for animals also appear to have the lowest knowledge scores of them (Kellert 1984, p. 212). Stephen Kellert who is one of the most notable figures in the study of perceptions of animals, found that there is a large discrepancy in terms of people's affection and emotional value of animals, and their understanding of the natural world (Kellert 1980, 1984). This may explain why half the captive tiger-attacks each year in the United States involve visitors who underestimate the dangers posed by contact with these animals (Nyhus 2003, pg. 579).

If pet-seekers bond with animals and feel an anxious need to bring them closer, is it such a surprise they might obtain an accessible exotic pet if they do not fully understand what makes it exotic in the first place (Mehta 2016)? If the motivations for acquiring pets are the same regardless of their status as exotic or not, it is necessary to examine the sociocultural factors behind why these species are obtained over domestic ones.

### **Sociocultural Selectivity**

If owners of both exotic and domestic pets are motivated by their affection and desire to be close to animals, what determines the kind of pets people acquire? It appears that these differences exist due to social and cultural factors. Culture is the process of shared knowledge, belief and norms which can create consistencies in how people relate and interact with animals (Maclin 2013). According to the World Wildlife Crime Report on trafficked species, cultural and societal preferences play a large

role in what species of animals are kept as pets: *“Italian households are about 14 times as likely as British households to host a pet bird, while French households are almost 10 times more likely to host a pet reptile than Finnish ones”* (UNODC 2016). This may explain why growing up with animals greatly influences how people choose pets in their adult lives, and why they are more likely to own species they previously had contact with (Johnson 2009, p. 59-60). It might also explain the impact of socio-demographic measures on pet ownership. Having a cat or child for example was positively correlated with owning a dog while the opposite was true for those living in apartments and duplexes (Downes 2009). This was the case even after adjusting for household compensation and social class (Downes 2009). There are even findings that have linked certain personality types with people’s pet relationships (Bagley & Gonsman 2005). Since personality factors coincide with cultural values, this may lend support to the notion that people’s choices concerning animals are socially constructed (Hofstede & McCrae 2004).

Unlike domesticated pets however, most exotic species don’t have long histories of study and science or keeping that can provide owners with a realistic portrayal of their nature. The inconsistencies in public knowledge and interactions with these species may make choices concerning them more difficult, and public representations of them more influential. It is not uncommon in Canada to see exotic animals closely interacted with on-screen, or hear about celebrities who own them as pets (Morgan 2015). These cultural representations, communicated through digital and social media, have a strong impact on people’s conceptions of wildlife (Bouse 2003, p. 125; Kellert 2002). They depict a fabricated intimacy between exotic species and people that is comparable to domesticated pets (Bouse 2003, p. 125). And since labelling something a ‘pet’ constructs animals in a particular way and makes given relations with them permissible, it’s vital to look at the extent this label is portrayed (Hollander 1999, p. 45; Chou 2012).

### **The Portrayal of Exotic Species as ‘Pets’**

Exotic animals in Canada and other western societies are often depicted as or akin to pets in a variety of contexts. Zoos, pet stores and exotic pet expos often include a hands-on component that, similarly to television media, creates a fabricated intimacy between people and wildlife that mirrors how they interact with domesticated pets (Bouse 2003, p. 125). This, ‘contact syndrome’ as Chilla Bukbeck calls it, turns animals into friends and promotes the wrong attitude towards them (Bulbeck 2004, p. 32). In fact, survey results of eco-tourists found that most people don’t consider they have had an

'interaction' with an animal unless they are actively engaged with them physically, such as through petting, hand holding etc. (Bulbeck 2004, p. 7). The growing number of exhibitions and pet stores in Canada selling exotic animals also adds to the representation of these species as pet appropriate. They are removed from their ecologically complex environments and placed in simplified settings that ignore their environmentally interdependent nature (Shepard 1997, p.144). Some pet stores in the United States even give away turtles for free with the purchase of a small aquatic kit (Kikillus 2010). Such transactions communicate that reptiles are easy to care for and make 'wonderful' pets for kids (Beetz 2005). Children especially are susceptible to these kinds of messages due to their classification of animals into categories like that of 'pet', as a way to make sense of their environments (Shepard 1997, p. 54). This may explain the rise in kids and teens obtaining exotic reptiles, and as a result their greater probability of contacting salmonellosis from a pet (Mermin 2004). These kinds of portrayals of exotic species may also help explain the observed knowledge gaps of exotic pet owners and distributors adding to why these animals are being obtained (Kikillus 2010).

### **Knowledge Gaps of Exotic Pet Owners**

The growth of the pet trade has caused widespread availability of exotic species online and in pet stores across Canada and the United States. Red-eared slider turtles for example can be obtained for a mere \$20-30 dollars and are unsurprisingly the most abundant and wild-released exotic reptile in the United States (Kikillus 2010). The affordability of these animals, established as a key driver of the reptile trade, allows for people to impulsively buy these species without a proper knowledge of their long-term commitment (Kikillus 2010). Researchers looking at the keeping of reptiles as pets, proposed education campaigns as the most effective method to change the reputation of turtles as being 'disposable pets', and consequently released (Kikillus 2010). Such a suggestion is backed by studies indicating that education may dispel people from obtaining exotic species. A study by Moorhouse and Balaskas, engaged prospective exotic pet purchasers via an online website that matched them with an ideal exotic animal (2017). Once engaged participants were informed of the disease, welfare, legality and conservation concerns associated with a specific species; ranging from mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, amphibians and invertebrates (Moorhouse *et al* 2017). The results of the study revealed that by informing prospective exotic pet purchasers about either the zoonotic disease risks or legality issues associated with buying a certain species, you could reduce consumer demand by up to 40% (Moorhouse *et al* 2017). Pre-emptive education could then be used as a way to cut the number of exotics released

into the wild each year as well as those that end up in shelters across Canada. Currently, there is no comprehensive tracking of how many exotics are surrendered annually, but it is likely they fall within the 14,000 'Other' (undefined) intakes for 2015 as outlined in the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies *Animal Shelter Statistics 2015* report (CFHS 2016). More information is needed on the exact species this category entails in order to better understand the number of exotics surrendered and the educational gaps concerning them.

The lack of knowledge some exotic pet owners have regarding undomesticated animals supports the theory that they are viewed similarly to domesticated pets; that is that they can be owned, closely interacted with, and easily cared for. This, in addition to their easy availability, may lead pet seekers to obtain them as they would conventional domesticated species. But it is only a matter of time before owner's misconceptions about exotic species are broken down and they become aware of the risk, commitment, and resources these species require; resulting in animals being released into the wild or surrendered.

## **CONCLUSION**

The results of these findings reveal that the main motivation for people obtaining exotic pets is because of their high affection and desire to be close to animals. It is the same reason behind owning domesticated species such as cats and dogs. The difference between these groups in terms of what kinds of pets they acquire however derives from underlying cultural factors that impact the availability, representation and knowledge of exotic animals. In Canada, as in some other modern western societies, exotic species are pets; they are defined as so, portrayed as so, and obtained as so. Their increased availability in pet stores and online, combined with people's misconceptions about their nature due to public representations and a lack of education, lead people to attain them. By simply informing pet-seekers about the realities of owning exotic species, their conceptions of these animals may change along with it their decision to acquire one. These reconfigured beliefs and norms about exotic species can then be shared through cultural transmission.

The impact of this paper and its results is twofold. First of all, the finding that exotic pet owners share the same characteristics of those of domesticated pet owners should help dispel any negative views towards them. Most exotic pet owners are emotionally attached and devoted to their pets and feel affection for animals as a whole. This is a must know for enforcement officers and policy makers



when it comes to interacting and educating these owners on welfare or legality issues associated with exotic species.

Secondly, through identifying the underlying cultural factors behind exotic pet ownership, changes can now be made in how these species are culturally portrayed. Governmental agencies in Canada need to do a better job in filtering messages about exotic species, communicated in pet stores and through various media, so that they are accurately represented. This is vital in order for pet-seekers to understand and recognise the natural identity and agency of exotic species and avoid attaining them based on misconceived notions.

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