

The Exotic Pet Trade in the United States

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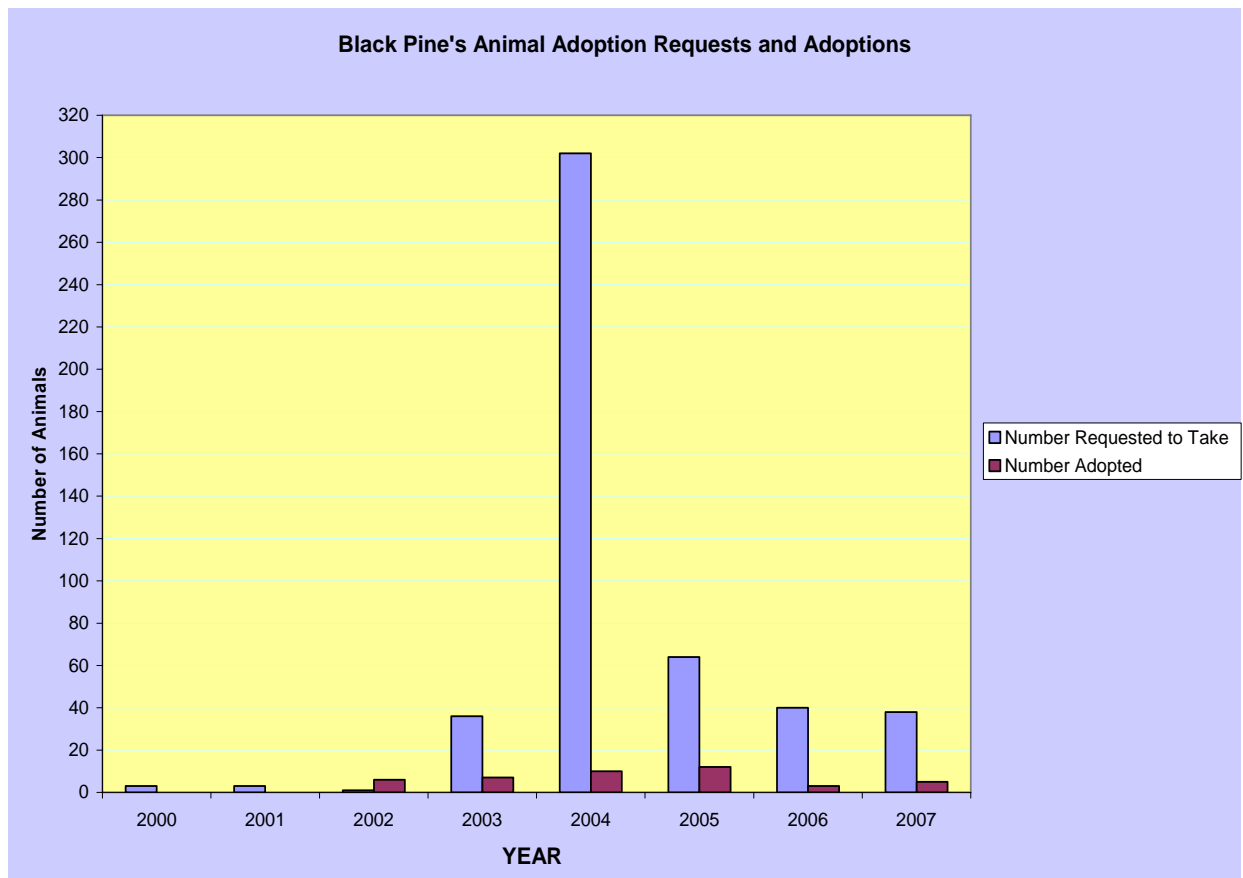
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I have become familiar with the exotic pet trade and its victims during my internship at Black Pine Animal Park, an exotic animal rescue and retirement sanctuary. Black Pine exists to give these animals a comfortable environment and to educate guests on ways their own actions can affect wild animal populations and how to make responsible decisions about pet ownership.



In the last eight years Black Pine was asked to take in 487 animals unfortunately they were only able to adopt in 43 of those requests.

Pets that belong in a tropical, jungle, or forest like environment can be considered an exotic pet. The exotic pet trade is widespread across the United States. The exotic pet trade is the 2nd largest trade in the United States landing right behind the illegal drug trade (Oldenburg 2003). There are no state or national statistics on the trafficking of restricted animals (Wagner, et al. 2007). It has been estimated by the Humane Society of the U.S. that there are around 15,000 tigers living in captivity in the U.S. and only about 2000 left in the wild. Of the 15,000 living in the U.S. only 10% are in professionally regulated zoos and sanctuaries (Preiss 2005). Those numbers have increased due to the internet. Tiger cubs have been purchased for as little as \$350, but when full grown they can cost over a thousand dollars a month to feed (Brook 2002). In addition to tigers being sold via the internet, availability has increased on a wide range of animals including kinkajous, kangaroos, big cats, and even primates (Ebrahim, et al. 2006). Primates can be very dangerous as pets; they have temper tantrums, and are very intelligent and can easily escape from homemade enclosures.

Laws on Exotic Pets

The majority of these issues could be resolved by the introduction of more laws regulating the exotic pet trade in the United States. Indiana's Division of Fish and Wildlife regulates the laws on keeping exotic pets in this state. Indiana issues wild animal possession permits. According to the Indiana Division of Fish and Wildlife permits are

issued for one year, and must be renewed annually. I retrieved the chart below from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources website,

<http://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/7058.htm> on May 9th 2008.

Wild Animal Possession Permits

A wild animal possession permit is required for the possession of the wild animals listed below and for the possession of a state endangered species.

Class I

Eastern Cottontail Rabbit
Gray Squirrel
Fox Squirrel
Southern Flying Squirrel

Class II

Beaver
Coyote
Gray Fox
Red Fox
Mink
Muskrat
Opossum
Raccoon
Skunk
Weasel

Class III

Wolves (Purebred)
Bears (All Species)
Wild Cats (All Species, excluding feral cats)
Venomous Reptiles
Crocodilians (At least 5 feet long)

Bobcats are native endangered species, but may be legally possessed with proof of captive birth paperwork. Owners must provide a health certificate for animal, an escape and recapture plan, pay \$10 fee, and have cages annually inspected by a conservation officer. The caging requirements include concrete floors covered with natural substrate, loafing platforms, and 14 foot tall walls with 45 degree incline can be used if no roof provided. Persons licensed by the USDA as commercial exhibitors, zoos or dealers are exempted from this state permit and its requirements.

However Indiana's permits are only required for animals classified as level III such as lions, tigers, wolves, bears, alligators at least 5 feet long, and venomous snakes. On September 4, 2006 a Lanesville, IN man was killed by his pet python. Following this event the Humane Society of the United States asked Governor Mitch Daniels to direct

the Department of National Resources to add pythons and boa constrictors to the state's list of dangerous wild animals also known as Class III animals and to stop issuing permits to individuals who acquire those animals as pets. (HSUS 2006). As of 2006 Indiana had issued 71 permits for Class III animals: 16 for venomous snakes, 21 for exotic cats, 17 for bears, 14 for wolves, and 3 for alligators over five feet in length. Selling venomous snakes is not allowed in this state (HSUS 2006).

2 Million Exotic animals arrive in the U.S. each year and with no quarantine and minimal disease screening. One reason is that the government only employs 120 full time inspectors to record and inspect arriving wildlife (Ebrahim, et al. 2006). Furthermore, once these animals arrive many owners only have to keep up with the USDA requirements. The USDA requirements are extremely broad and seem to be left open for much interpretation. For example under subpart F it lists Specifications for the humane handling, care, treatment, and transportation of warmblooded animals other than dogs, cats, rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs, nonhuman primates, and marine mammals that water "must be provided as often as necessary for the health and comfort of the animal". These are the rules that commercial exhibitors, unaccredited zoos or dealers have to follow.

In addition to USDA requirements, there are accreditations that Zoos and Sanctuaries can strive for. For example some of them are American Zoo and Aquarium (AZA) accreditation which zoos can strive for and Sanctuaries can get The Association of Sanctuaries (TAOS) accreditation. With these accreditations come inspections that allow for animal care to be more closely regulated than the USDA demands. However, accreditation guidelines vary from year to year, making it difficult for smaller zoos and

sanctuaries to keep up. In addition, smaller zoos run on low budgets, and sanctuaries run primarily on donations, which makes it difficult to keep up with accreditation costs. For example one of the mandatory guidelines from the TAOS accreditation manual states that animals are not on exhibit and the sanctuary is not open to the public. However, many Sanctuaries rely on much of their funding from donations and when the public can't view the animals they are less likely to donate to help the animals. Limited funding can result in inadequate supplies needed to care for the animals, and unable to maintain the guidelines for the accreditation. Black Pine's annual budget is approximately 240,000 that is without counting the donated food, and vet care. That figure will continue to rise with the rising costs of gas, electricity, and with each new animal that they adopt. The cost limits the amount of animals they have ability to rescue.

Problems with the pet trade

Some of the worst parts of the trade are the animal victims and the cruelty they receive. Many people assume that exotic animals that are for sale were born in captivity. In 2005 a survey was conducted at Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, IL asking participants to select which of three great apes pictured (chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans) were considered endangered in the wild. Of those choices, 95% of respondents thought gorillas were endangered, 91% thought orangutans were endangered, but only 66% believed chimpanzees to be endangered. Of those who did not believe chimpanzees were endangered, 30% justified their response by noting how often they see chimpanzees in

the media and as pets (Ross et al.2008). It seems to shock people when they are told that more than 650 million animals were brought into this country from 2003 to 2006. That's more than two for every American (Ebrahim et al. 2006). Part of this misconception is due to how the media portrays these animals in advertising. Animals that are used in commercials appear to be plentiful in the environment and not endangered. Many animals that are caught in the wild are subject to harsh capture techniques and poor shipping methods. Many will die during or soon after the trip. For example, 90% of the reptiles captured will die within their first year of captivity (Oldenburg 2003). Once they arrive the people who purchase them are often ill equipped to care for them, big cats are often mutilated and crippled by owners who try to declaw them in inhumane ways for example with garden shears. When individuals purchase these animals they don't realize the true cost of the animal as a result these animals often have poor diets, are vitamin deficient, and lack vet care. A common problem is a lack of vitamin D in the animals system this is often caused by a severe lack of sunlight.



Kovu during his 1st week at the park.

Kovu a lion rescued by Black Pine suffered from this condition. Pet owners do not purchase these wild animals with the intent of doing them harm, they see a unique pet that they plan to love the problem is they have unrealistic expectations. The dealers and

breeders selling exotics are focused on selling the “product” for a price, and typically do not explain to buyers the actual annual cost of caring for these animals. Another issue is that owners sometimes try to “tame” their exotic pet by beating them into submission.

Human Risk

Many leading experts agree that animals are transmitting viruses, bacteria and parasites to humans more rapidly than ever before, spawning ailments known as zoonotic diseases (Stein 2003). "Influenza is a zoonotic disease. HIV is a zoonotic disease. Monkeypox. SARS," said Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases "(Stein 2003). Avian influenza, imported thru the bird and falcon trade, and the reported monkeypox affected more than 50 people living in the Midwest (Woodward 2002). Monkeypox came from African rodents then was transmitted to prairie dogs and then on to humans. Monkeys are known to transmit Ebola and herpes B virus, which can be deadly to humans. The respiratory epidemic SARS is thought to have come from civet cats in China (Oldenburg 2003). Another danger to the public is attacks by these wild animals. According to the HSUS in the last five years 9 people have been killed by pet tigers and several more mauled. Another threat to the public, salmonella infections contracted from pet reptiles. More than 210 thousand Americans were sickened from 2000 to 2004 and treated for salmonella infections transmitted from pet reptiles (Ebrahim et al. 2006).

Conclusion

During my internship at Black Pine Animal Park I completed over 200 hours of service between December 2007 and March 2008. My responsibilities as an animal care

intern included diet preparation, feeding and watering, various animals, exhibit cleaning, animal enrichment, processing meat for large felids, and administering medication. I gained experience working with a wide variety of animals; kinkajous, primates, tigers, lions, leopards, bears, bobcats, macaws, cockatoos, boa constrictors, pythons, iguanas, tortoises, camels, and various other exotic and domestic animals.

This experience has made me realize how big of an issue the exotic pet trade is in northern Indiana and throughout the United States. Looking at the number of animals (487) Black Pine has had to turn down in the past seven years, shows just how large the problem really is. When looking at the scale of the problem here in the U.S. it's difficult to understand why it remains a silent problem. The exotic pet trade will remain a silent problem until people are educated about the dangers, the victims, and the growing size of the problem. Education is a big part of Black Pine's mission for that reason.

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