

Summary brief of the report

AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE PET MARKETS IN THE EU: AN INVESTIGATION AND ASSESSMENT

BACKGROUND

Wildlife markets occur in several regions of the world and take different forms. According to region, wildlife markets offer animals for various reasons including culinary, medicinal, and pet purposes. These events have attracted interest and concern from both the scientific (including biological, veterinary and medical fields) and animal welfare and species protection communities. Amphibians and reptiles at pet markets were the focus of this investigation and report.

STUDY

On site inspections were conducted at three European events: Terraristika (Hamm, Germany), the IHS Show (Doncaster, UK), and Expoterraria (Sabadell, Spain). A desktop study was also carried out. Three primary subject areas were identified for focussed study: animal welfare; public health and safety; and invasive alien species potential.

Animal welfare was assessed using scientifically established non-invasive observation of behavioural signs of stress in amphibians and reptiles. Public health and safety was assessed by analysing visitor behaviour at stalls that sold animals. Invasive alien species potential was assessed using historical invasives success data, propagule-pressure theory, tolerable thermal range (climate matching), taxonomic relationship with known invasives, popularity within the pet trade, reproductive potential, and thermal and dietary requirements. This was supplemented with an additional assessment of invasive risk which we called 'intuitive-risk' (IR). This mode of assessment was based on historical risk factors plus our interpretation of 'species overall plasticity'. Several additional relevant subjects were also considered, including: wild-caught versus captive-bred animals on offer; commercial and non-commercial sellers; proponents', organisers' and sellers' awareness and assessment of stress and welfare at markets; the temporary nature of markets; and unusual species.

The study found that:

- **Animal welfare** – the type and high prevalence of behavioural signs of stress observed at exotic pet markets show that a significant and major representation of both amphibians and reptiles at these events are stressed. This indicates that significant animal welfare problems are associated with exotic pet markets and that current key concerns are justified.
- **Human health** – the established nature of amphibians and

reptiles as a reservoir of known pathogens means that all animals, their containers, seller facilities, and the sellers themselves must be regarded as potential sources of zoonotic pathogen contamination. Indeed, it would be reasonable to conclude that within a relatively brief period all public attendees potentially may be subjected to some level of contamination.

- **Invasive alien species** – there is little doubt that a wide range of species found at exotic pet markets have the adaptive potential to become invasive across numerous regions within the EU. According to this assessment, the continued occurrence of exotic pet markets makes the regular introduction of invasive species almost assured.

CONCLUSIONS

Exotic pet market organisers, traders and proponents have all manifestly failed to address (either significantly or at all) the various problems associated with these markets. Formal attempts to impose regulations (for example in Germany and in the UK) have also either been resisted, poorly met, or ignored altogether. The fact that in the UK the selling of animals as pets at markets is unlawful and the law is flouted via several events again indicates a disregard for formal controls. Where selling pets at markets is unlawful, some local authorities do little to enforce the law, or are inept at controlling illegal sales. The report concludes that exotic pet markets cannot be safely regulated and permitted.

Prevention and control in many cases of problematic animal welfare, human health and ecological issues is already 'too late', and many negative sequelae are attributable to each of these areas. However, prevention and control reside at the heart of what is an extant and developing multifactorial and major problem of exotic pet markets. Pet markets involve potentially catastrophic consequences for animals, people, the environment, and probably also European economies through the introduction of wildlife into the domestic environment and indigenous habitats. A failure to act urgently and robustly to control exotic pet markets is almost certain to permit to occur a situation in which delay is concomitant with exponentially developing difficulties and economic burdens, many of which may be impossible to rectify or recover from.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the inherent problems of pet markets including the transitory nature of these events which travel between Member

States (as do the buyers of the animals for commercial re-sale and/or personal use), it is recommended that the European Commission takes the following action:

1. As part of the forthcoming EU Animal Health Law, address the health risks of wild animals in trade and for sale at wildlife (pet) markets, by pursuing health requirements or eventually prohibitions on such markets within its boundaries due to the associated health (and ecological risks). Specially licensed pet shops would be allowed to sell certain species where these are proven suitable and consistent with health and ecological safeguards.
2. Integrate the policy of the new EU Animal Health Law with the second Animal Welfare Strategy, also under development, to ensure it includes the welfare of wild animals in captivity including those species subject to the exotic pet trade.
3. As part of the new dedicated legislative instrument for an EU Invasive Alien Species Strategy (Target 5 of the Biodiversity Strategy to 2020), include restrictions on the import, intra-community trade and sale of exotic pet species which represent known or serious potential ecological threats.
4. Pursue a policy of prohibition on wildlife (pet) markets within its boundaries, to cover all biological classes of vertebrate animals.
5. Encourage individual countries where possible to compile a database of all known pet markets and their historical venues within its boundaries and make this database available for enforcement authorities to ensure local compliance with all prohibitive measures.

Until such time as the European Commission has developed more complete policies associated with health, welfare and invasive species, it is recommended that the following actions are taken by Member States to close existing regulatory gaps:

- i. Allow only the sale of animals through competent licensed and inspected pet shops. (For example, those subject to staff training and who can be shown to provide responsible information to customers.)
- ii. Establish restrictions on the types of species which are suitable to be kept as pets based on criteria such as the welfare of the animal, health and safety risks, potential threat to native flora and fauna, and available knowledge on care and husbandry of such species in a captive environment.

These recommendations could be integrated with policies within Europe and key EU strategies under development, including, but not exclusively:

- Resolution on the Keeping of Wild Animals as Pet Animals into the Multilateral Consultation of Parties to the European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals (ETS 125) in 1995. (Although not part of the EU, we would encourage all nations to ratify and thereby enhance the Council of Europe (1995)

European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals. Available at: <http://www.felinewelfare.co.uk/coemcp.htm>

- EU initiative in the protection of biodiversity as an environmental priority for Europe. European Commission. Biodiversity Strategy to 2020. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/comm2006/pdf/2020/1_EN_ACT_part1_v7%5B1%5D.pdf and <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/comm2006/2020.htm>
- EU initiative for developing a dedicated legislative instrument for an EU strategy on invasive alien species, as part of its objective (Target 5) to halt the decline in biodiversity by 2020. European Commission. Development of an EU strategy on invasive alien species. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/invasivealien/index_en.htm
- EU Animal Health Strategy (2007-2013) which recognises the potential impact that serious livestock disease outbreaks can have on agriculture. European Commission DG Health and Consumers. The new Animal Health Strategy (2007-2013): "prevention is better than cure".
- EU Commission initiative on protection and welfare of animals 2011-2015. http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/welfare/actionplan/actionplan_en.htm

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The full 52 page report *Amphibian and reptile pet markets in the EU: an investigation and assessment*, 2012, is available from www.apa.org.uk; www.animal-public.de; www.eurogroupforanimals.org; www.faada.org; www.internationalanimalrescue.org; www.peta.de