



# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## KEEPING EXOTIC WILD ANIMALS AS PETS

During 2008 the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) launched an initiative to contribute to strengthened compliance and enforcement of South Africa's environmental legislation and specifically wildlife-related legislation.

A burning issue is the increasing threat to exotic animals posed by the illegal pet trade. In recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of wild animals entering South Africa for the pet market and this has raised alarm bells over the impacts of such trade on wild populations, as well as to the potential risk posed to indigenous species should these "pets" escape.

In South Africa, the general public and government authorities alike have raised many questions regarding the keeping and trading of exotic animals as pets. The following questions and answers aim to provide facts and useful information regarding the current legislation, practicalities and ethical issues relevant to the wildlife pet trade.

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### Q What is the difference between an exotic and an indigenous animal?

In South Africa, an alien species is defined in terms of the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act 10 of 2004 (NEMBA) as '*a species that is not an indigenous species in South Africa*' (exotic and alien animals are basically the same). An indigenous species means '*a species that occurs or has historically occurred naturally in a free state within the borders of the Republic but excludes a species that has been introduced in the Republic as a result of human activity*'.

This means that an exotic animal has been imported (with or without the requisite permits) into the Republic and is either being kept in a captive situation or has been released:

-  intentionally and with the requisite conservation permits: for example the **South China Tigers (*Panthera tigris amoyensis*)** that are being kept in the Free State until they can be released back into China;
-  intentionally without the necessary permits: for example the thousands of **Red Eared Terrapins (*Trachemys scripta*)** which are discarded into our river systems every year; or

 unintentionally: for example the **Himalayan Tahr (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*)** that escaped from a zoo at the base of Table Mountain and became an invasive threat to the biodiversity of that entire area.

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## Q What does it mean that an animal becomes an invasive threat?

A species becomes invasive when the establishment and subsequent spread of the species outside its natural distribution happens in such a way that it poses a significant threat to the biodiversity of that area. For example, the **Common Mynah (*Acridotherus tristis*)** is classified as an invasive alien species, as they pose a significant threat to the indigenous birds of South Africa that occupy the same habitat and eat the same food.

The reason why some of these alien animals become invasive is that they are no longer kept in check by their own natural predators and diseases. Indigenous species are at a competitive disadvantage with such alien species.

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## Q What is a pet?

There is currently no legal definition for a pet animal in any of South Africa's legislation. It is however, incorrect to assume that should a wild animal have been classified as a pet in any other country, that it is automatically the same in South Africa. It is always advisable to contact your nearest conservation office for clarity on whether the animal you intend to buy as a pet is indeed accepted as a pet by the relevant authorities. Please [click here](#) for a list of conservation offices in your province.

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## Q What is a threatened species?

This is a species which falls into any one of the following IUCN Red List categories:

-  Critically Endangered: faces an **extremely high risk** of extinction in the wild.
-  Endangered: faces a **very high risk** of extinction in the wild.
-  Vulnerable: faces a **high risk of extinction** in the wild.

Species may be at risk due to, for example, habitat reduction, population reduction (due to illegal trading, diseases or in rare cases natural causes) or a combination of all of these. For more information on the IUCN Red List categories of threat please visit the following website: [www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org)

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## Q Which South African animals are threatened?

Examples of threatened indigenous animals include the **Saddle-billed Stork (*Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*)**, **Riverine Rabbit (*Bunolagus monticularis*)** and **African Wild Dog (*Lycaon pictus*)**. For more information on these species please visit the following website: [www.ewt.org.za](http://www.ewt.org.za)

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## Q What are examples of threatened exotic animals?

Examples of mammals, classified as exotic or alien in South Africa, but listed as threatened by the IUCN, are: all tiger species and **Red Pandas (*Ailurus fulgens*)**. Reptiles include **Brothers Island Tuataras (*Sphenodon guntheri*)** from New Zealand, and the **Round Island Keel-scaled Boa (*Casarea dussumieri*)**. In South Africa these species are exotics and all of them are globally threatened.

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## Q What is CITES?

CITES is the commonly used abbreviation for the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of wild fauna and flora. The convention applies to the trading of CITES-listed species across international borders. Animals and plants are listed as

Appendix I, II or III according to the threat posed by international trade to their conservation status, with animals listed on Appendix I given the greatest protection from trade. For example, **Bengal Tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*)** are listed on Appendix I which means that international commercial trade is prohibited in terms of CITES. Please [click here](#) for more information on how CITES works.

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## Q When would you need a CITES permit?

A CITES permit is required when importing or exporting an animal or plant listed on any of the three CITES appendices, across international borders. For example, when a registered zoo in South Africa wishes to import a **Red Panda** for breeding, conservation, or display purposes, South Africa will be required to issue a CITES Appendix I import permit first, before the exporting country will issue the CITES Appendix I export permit. However, this process may take several months as all the relevant authorities are required to ensure that all requisite conditions have been met by both the exporter and the importer. The Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) is the CITES authority for South Africa, but CITES permits are issued at provincial level by the provincial conservation authority.

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## Q Do you need any permits to keep an exotic wild animal as a pet?

Permits are required for keeping exotic animals as pets in certain provinces. Conservation issues are mainly dealt with through the various provincial acts and ordinances. In Gauteng, North West, Mpumalanga and Limpopo no permits are required for the legal possession or keeping of an exotic wild animal. However, any import into, export out of, or transporting of an exotic wild animal, *within* any of the nine provinces, always requires a permit. Possession or keeping permits as well as permits to sell and purchase ANY wild animal are required in the Northern, Eastern and Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State, as well as for the import, export and transport of these animals. For example, keeping a **Black-capped Capuchin Monkey (*Cebus apella*)** in KZN requires a possession permit with specifications as to how the animal may be kept and transported.

In all nine provinces provision is made for the manner in which exotic animals may be kept and transported. This refers to the welfare and safety of the animals whilst in captivity. Some of the provinces also have a list of prohibited animals, which means that there is no legal way of possessing, importing, conveying, breeding, selling and/or purchasing such animals. For example the **Red Eared Terrapin** is a prohibited species in Gauteng and Limpopo provinces.

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## Q What is the current legal regime?

Prior to 2004 and the publication of the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act 10 of 2004 (NEMBA), all wildlife issues were regulated by provincial acts and ordinances. There are currently no regulations under NEMBA to regulate the activities around exotic wild animals, and the provinces are therefore still bound by the old and sometimes outdated provincial acts and ordinances.

Some of these provinces have to make use of more than one piece of provincial legislation, due to the creation of nine provinces after the elections in 1994. For example, in the North West Province the following pieces of legislation are still applicable: Bophuthatswana Nature Conservation Act Nr. 3 of 1973; Cape Nature and Environmental Conservation Ordinance Nr. 19 of 1974 and Transvaal Nature Conservation Ordinance Nr. 12 of 1983.

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## Q What will happen if you don't have the necessary permits?

In terms of the various provincial acts and ordinances you would be committing an offence and may be prosecuted by the provincial authorities. **If convicted, you could be issued with a fine or a prison sentence or both.** Environmental crimes are being taken increasingly seriously in South Africa: the Vietnamese citizen, who was caught at O.R. Tambo International Airport in July 2010 and charged with being in illegal possession of rhino horn, was sentenced in August 2010 to 10 years' imprisonment with no option of a fine. Environmental crimes are as destructive as any other criminal activity and need to be dealt with severely.

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## Q Why do people keep exotic wild animals as pets?

Despite humans having collected wild animals as far back as almost 4000 BC, it is not recommended to keep wild animals as pets, even if they were captive bred and/or hand reared. Wild animals should only enter captivity as part of a coordinated conservation programme.







The oldest zoo or menagerie or animal collection was revealed during excavation in Hierakonpolis, Egypt in 2009 and was dated ca. 3500 BC. Historically, wild animals were collected by royalty as a sign of wealth and prosperity, and in later years for scientific research and as human entertainment.

People are usually attracted to baby animals - those which look cute and cuddly, which display human characteristics, or are potentially lethal.

Some of the most popular wild animals being kept as pets include venomous snakes, monkeys, bears, large cats and crocodiles.


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## Q What are the potential problems with keeping wild animals as pets?


-  **Stress for the animal:** Capturing, transporting and incorrect care can often lead to stress related-illnesses or death. Even captive-bred animals being kept in enclosures or in a manner which does not enable them to display most of their natural behavioural repertoire can cause stress. Many animals are not used to being handled constantly and the infants of these species often contract stress-related illnesses and other abhorrent behaviour patterns such as self mutilation.
-  **Black market trading:** There is a very prosperous and thriving illegal trading business in wild animals and wild animal products. Every year thousands of chameleons, snakes, iguanas and other reptiles are illegally removed from their natural habitats and smuggled between countries all over the world.
-  **Endangering biodiversity:** Removing wild animals for the illegal pet trade can jeopardise the survival of natural populations. The lack of successful and strict regulation of the trade in these species means that South Africa may very well be assisting the decimation of biodiversity in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania and Madagascar. The current legal import into South Africa of thousands of **African Grey Parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*)**; chameleons and mammals from the island of Madagascar; **Abyssinian Ground Hornbills (*Bucorvus abyssinicus*)**; **Southern Ground Hornbills (*Bucorvus leadbeateri*)** and **Grey Crowned Cranes (*Balearica regulorum*)** from East African countries (all wild-caught species) are examples of how poor regulation assists with the decimation of wild populations of animals in other countries.
-  **Exotic diseases:** Wild animals are sometimes the carrier of diseases which might be transmissible to humans. These are called zoonotic diseases. For example, psittacosis from psittacines (parrot family), herpes from primates and extremely lethal diseases such as some of the hemorrhagic fevers (Congo Fever, Marburg Virus, etc.).
-  **Invasive species:** Alien invasive species can disrupt local ecosystems. This occurs when an exotic pet escapes or is deliberately released into an area where they do not naturally occur. An example is the **Red-eared Terrapin** which is now completely prohibited in South Africa. However, there are still pet shops keeping and trading these animals illegally and irresponsibly.
-  **Cruelty issues:** Very often a wild animal being kept as a pet becomes a nuisance or a problem for the owner. The owner then decides to release it back into nature, which is of course the nearest area which looks remotely wild enough to release the animal. Such animals can however not fend for themselves and very often they die a long and slow death by starvation.


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## Q What are the ethical issues you need to consider?


-  **Animal welfare issues:** This is by far one of the most important ethical issues pertaining to the keeping of wild animals as pets. The questions are simple: can you provide the correct diet, proper exercise, socialization and as natural as possible way of life for a wild animal? Find out from registered and ethical zoos what would be required to keep such an animal in captivity. For example, although lions and tigers may be hand-reared and may be very playful and seem tame, they are still wild animals and are still predators. A fairly innocent playful activity can very quickly turn into a hunting exercise.

 **Legal issues:** Ensure that you have obtained all the required permits prior to acquiring a wild animal as a pet. Do not rely solely on the advice of a pet shop salesperson or a captive breeder. Contact the local conservation authority, or an organisation such as the EWT, to make sure that the specific animal is legally in the province and in South Africa and make sure exactly what permits you are required to obtain for the purchasing, transporting and possessing of such an animal.

 **Wild animals often become problem pets:** A wild animal very often becomes a problem pet, especially once it reaches sexual maturity. For example, although many primates are social animals, they are often not kept in family groups and this reduces their ability to express their natural behavioural repertoire. This can lead to aberrant behaviour and aggression towards handlers.

 **Suitability as a pet:** Many zoos have been swamped with “pet” parrots, macaws and cockatoos which were given to elderly people as pets. These birds attach to only one person, but unfortunately outlive their owners. Some of these birds can live as long as people. Because it was never kept with other birds, this bird does not adapt to a zoo situation where it needs to be placed in a big aviary, and ends up living in a cage in solitary confinement.

Parents also need to be cognisant of the fact that many wild animals are unsuitable as “pets” for children. Many animals do not like being handled and fondled and will retaliate by scratching or biting in an effort to escape. Tarantulas and bearded dragons (*Pogona spp.*), for example, are not the type of animals that enjoy being handled.




 **Neighbourhood nuisance/danger:** People are often ignorant of just how dangerous wild “pets” can be and how quickly they can escape when kept under incorrect and unsafe conditions. **Bengal Tigers** allowed to roam freely are very likely to escape: at heart these animals are potentially lethal predators and can cause serious damage or even death. Even small animals such as **capuchin** monkeys can be lethal. Owners may be charged with culpable homicide in the event that the exotic pet causes human death.

Animals such as parrots and primates can be extremely noisy neighbours and disturbing the peace of other people in the area can become a serious legal problem for the owners

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## Q Where can you legally obtain an exotic animal for a pet?

Exotic animals may only be obtained from reputable, legal outlets and private dealers. Important questions to ask before purchasing your pet include:

-  Where did the animal come from?
-  Are copies of the required permits for import into the province and conveying within the province available?
-  Do you need permits to keep the animal?

If answers to these questions are not adequate this should raise alarm bells about the legality of the transactions.

Some reptile breeders are members of a registered reptile association. Contact your nearest conservation office for a list of such associations. Please [click here](#) for contact details of conservation offices.



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## Q What should you do when you can no longer keep your exotic pet?

Contact your nearest conservation office for a list of reputable legal institutions or individuals who might be willing to take over the animal. You can access contact details for conservation authorities on the EWT website or contact the EWT directly.

Do NOT just dump your pet in the nearest park or river. Not only is this illegal, it constitutes cruelty towards the animal and can pose a significant threat to our biodiversity.

Please contact the following organisations for assistance and advice in placing the animal in a suitable facility:

-  The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ (NSPCA) wildlife unit: +27 (0)11 907 3590
-  The National Zoological Gardens Veterinary Department: +27 (0)12 328 3265