

# Exotic Pet Welfare Needs



## An introduction to animal welfare

**Good animal welfare means that an animal feels good.**

Over millennia, wild animals have evolved physical, psychological and social attributes that allow them to live in specific kinds of habitats and conditions. In captivity, for example when a wild animal is kept as a pet, only the most rudimentary aspects of an animal's natural living conditions can be replicated, even in the best of circumstances. Conditions analogous to the spacious, complex, flexible environments that animals experience in nature cannot be provided.

The reality for many exotic pets today is that they live in spatially limited, sterile and unchanging environments. That can be the case for small, common African clawed frogs and Green anole lizards, as well as for the more charismatic monkeys and tigers who are kept as pets. Substandard conditions that restrict natural movements and activity can be chronically stressful and debilitating. The results of marginal or poor conditions may be manifested in poor or diminished physical health and/or psychological/behavioural issues, including, but not limited to, lethargy, stereotypies, hyper-aggression and other aberrant behaviours, and negative emotional states such as boredom, frustration, anxiety and fear.

All animals require far more than food, water and a small sterile living space to achieve good welfare. Animals need sufficient space to engage in normal movements and behaviours, a complex, species-appropriate physical environment that encourages natural activities, an ability to exercise control and make choices and an appropriate social context, to name just a few key requirements.

Unfortunately, many exotic pet keepers equate good animal welfare with the animal looking "normal," being free of obvious injury or disease, moving about, eating and often the ability to breed. But animals may look fine, move about, eat and breed and still be experiencing very poor welfare. Many keepers point to breeding as a key welfare indicator, but the drive to reproduce is very powerful in many animals, so many will still breed in excessively poor conditions.

Making things even more problematic is the fact that many exotic pet keepers, some of whom may be familiar with physical indicators of health, are unaware of the behavioural indicators of stress, discomfort and suffering. This is often the case because animals like reptiles, amphibians, birds and fishes express their suffering differently than animals who are more relatable to us like a dog or cat.

Animal welfare has been defined as the state of an animal as it attempts to cope with its environment. Welfare exists on a continuum from poor to excellent. While physical health is an important facet of good welfare, it is only one of several factors that affect animal welfare. Good animal welfare also includes both the psychological and social aspects of animals, so, to enjoy good welfare animals must also have positive experiences and positive psychological/emotional states. In a nutshell, good animal welfare means that, for the most part, an animal feels good.

### The Need for Space

A lack of space restricts natural movements and suppresses normal behaviours. In fact, space is a critical husbandry consideration that is often dismissed, ignored or overlooked when exotic pets are concerned. When it comes to space for wild animals in captivity a good principle to apply is that bigger is better. There is no downside to providing more

space than an animal needs and not having the animal use that space, but there is a significant downside in not providing an animal with the space it requires. Unfortunately, many wild animals kept as pets are housed in spaces that allow only a limited ability to move around and many animals are so severely confined and restricted that they are forced into a state of almost perpetual idleness.

Restrictions of movement and exercise caused by a lack of space can also result in physical deterioration, such as a general loss of fitness, and problems such as obesity, skeletal disorders, decreased muscle mass, friction sores and lesions, to name just a few. But physical health problems are not all the animals have to deal with. Being forced to sit, lie or stand the majority of the time may lead to unpleasant emotional states and psychological issues.

In an attempt to cope with impoverished living environments, many animals develop abnormal behaviours, such as pacing, circling, rocking, bar biting, excessive licking, overgrooming, hyper-aggression, hyper-sexuality, to name just a few. Other animals may just sit, lie or sleep for excessively long periods of time - the perpetual idleness mentioned previously.

Unfortunately, when animals develop abnormal behaviours as a coping mechanism, the behaviours fail to address the source of the problem (i.e., captivity) which caused the behaviours in the first place. Unless something changes, the behaviours may persist and become even worse over time resulting in increasingly poor welfare and suffering.

### **The Need for Proper Environmental Conditions**

Inappropriate or inadequate environmental conditions, including unsuitable temperatures, humidity, ventilation, light and hygiene, can also have a negative effect on wild animals kept as pets. In their wild state many animals live within a specific temperature range and employ a variety of physiological and behavioural strategies to stay within that range, even when the ambient temperature fluctuates widely. They may also seek particular intensities of light or humidity or other conditions to regulate physiological processes. In contrast, most exotic pets are kept in environmentally uniform environments that fail to consider natural daily and seasonal cycles of temperatures, light, humidity, etc. If variety is provided, it can fall far short of what that animal would experience if it were in a wild state. For example, many reptiles that in the wild would live in an environment with a broad range of temperature choices are kept in thermally simplistic environments with nothing more than a cool area and single hot spot.

### **The Need for Choice**

In their normal wild state, animals live in complex, flexible environments, including many that are exceptionally dynamic and changing. Most, if not all, vertebrate species have evolved physiological, physical, behavioural and/or social attributes and capabilities that allow them to live and thrive in the specific kinds of environmental conditions they inhabit. In their daily lives, many, if not most, animals also make decisions and choices about how they live and what they do. Some of those decisions and choices may be the result of the animal's hard-wired internal processes, but many involve some level of deliberation and thought.

Some decisions may be very small, such as how to move over or around a rock pile, while others may be more serious, such as where to find water in a drought. Making decisions and choices is how animals exercise control and make a meaningful contribution to the quality of their own lives. But for most exotic animals kept as pets, the ability to make decisions and choices is severely restricted or, in some cases, entirely eliminated. A good example is the keeping of snakes in plastic tubs and drawers.

The animals are entirely removed from their natural ecological context and are unable to do anything they would normally do, including making any decisions or choices about what they do or how they live. They are viewed and kept

as biological robots that have no cognitive, emotional or social lives at all. This unscientific way of looking at snakes and other animals is outdated and damaging to the welfare of the animals.

### **The Need for a Proper Social Environment**

Many highly social exotic animals are kept as pets, and a great many are kept in social isolation. Parrots, monkeys, wallabies, sugar gliders and other exceptionally social animals are often sold individually and kept alone for however long they survive with their custodians. This antiquated, damaging practice has been fueled in part by unscientific assumptions and beliefs regarding the non-social nature of animals; ideas that were in many cases debunked long ago.

Greater consideration should be given to the social aspects of animal welfare, especially since, new science has been revealing that many smaller animals, including reptiles and fish, may have complex social lives. Unfortunately, until this day, the social needs of exotic animals continue to be ignored or overlooked aspects of proper housing and care. Social context is important to animals, often even to animals that were thought in the past to not be particularly social.

### **Inconvenience Impacts Welfare**

The costs of owning exotic pets range considerably depending on the species, but for anyone trying to keep an exotic animal captive, in a way that truly provides for its full range of needs, the costs are not insignificant. It is cheap to keep an exotic animal poorly, but expensive to keep it properly. The expense of providing for an exotic animal in the best way possible can have profound implications on its welfare.

In addition to housing and care costs (e.g., veterinary costs), which can be substantial for even small animals, feeding expenses may not be inconsequential. Many exotic pets require specialized diets or consume relatively large quantities of food.

Some exotic pets also become an inconvenience when they become aggressive (often at sexual maturity) or too dangerous to handle due to size or other physical attributes, like sharp claws or teeth. Instead of trying to provide more satisfactory conditions to mitigate problematic issues, exotic pet keepers often simply choose to keep their animal confined all the time in a cage or on a tether or they may pursue other more radical measures, such as surgical declawing or removing canine teeth in big cats. Animals may also be castrated or altered in other ways. These measures tend to address the symptoms of problems, rather than their cause.

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