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Most of the people who buy animals for pets do so with the belief that those selling the animals are experts in the animals' captive care requirements and behavior, with layperson's working knowledge of basic veterinary medicine, and some knowledge of the natural history of each of the species they sell.

That means that people who go into pet stores to buy or get information about an animal expect the people working there to be experts on the animals they sell. The customer believes the employees and management to be knowledgeable about what equipment and supplies are appropriate for each species, and what to do when there is a health or behavior problem.

Unfortunately, nothing could be farther from the reality of pet stores and many other venues at which animals are sold.

Pet stores are businesses, in existence to make money. They make their money by selling products. That some of those products are living, breathing beings with varying degrees of sentience is immaterial, both to the majority of store owners and their employees, and to the cities and counties who issue the business licenses businesses need to operate.

Instead of banning animals, why not ban stupidity and cupidity?

Why not create laws and regulations that require pet stores to actually become the experts their customers think they are?

Make them responsible for actually learning about the proper care of the animals they sell.

Require that all species be identified with their scientific as well as common name.

Require that all species have specific, accurate information about the species' adult size and housing requirements.

Require that all stores have one or more veterinarians on retainer to routinely perform health checks on all their animals, and provide necessary treatment.

Why more than one vet? Because not all vets are equally experienced with a working knowledge of all species.

What constitutes "necessary treatment"? Keeping sick animals off exhibit until they are either healthy again, after treatment prescribed by the vet, which may include rehydration, nutritional support, eliminating/reducing internal and external parasites, systemic antibiotics, etc.

Require that all stores provide written care, health, behavior and temperament information to all customers who are considering purchasing an animal. While volumes can easily be written about most species sold as pets in the U.S., the basics for most of them can be reduced to a few pages each. This should be enough for the customer to be able to decide if the animal is appropriate for him or her (or whomever they are buying it for). Such material should also provide resources where the customer can obtain more extensive information.

Require the animal regulatory agency operating in the city or county also have one or more individuals on staff, both in facility and working as state humane officers, who are familiar with all aspects of basic care, recognition of sick or stressed animals, and who will in fact enforce any local and state laws regarding the welfare of animals obtained and maintained for the sole purpose of resale as pets.

If your state doesn't have provisions that cover all animals sold as pets, regardless of type of animal (invertebrates, for example, such as hissing roaches, millipedes, stick insects, and tarantulas), propose it, draft the language, and vote it into your own city or county regulations.

Make use of knowledgeable people within your own communities, especially as regards to exotics, including reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates. If there is no hobbyist/special interest group, like a herp society, or caged bird society, in your area, check with the local veterinarians who specialize in the types of animals you are interested in drafting laws about.

Veterinarians can be an excellent source of information and recommendations on the role of the veterinarian in pet store animal health,. They can also provide leads to citizens in the area who can be your best source of knowledge about exotic species care--and "domestic" animals, assuming dogs, cats, and rabbits are still being sold in pet stores in your area.

If you are going to ban animals, ban intelligently. One can easily argue that a tiger or alligator are not appropriate pets for keeping in an urban, or even suburban or rural, environment. It is much more difficult to make such an argument about a corn snake, or hedgehog, a ball python, or even a green iguana.

Many "dangerous" species, such as the large iguanas (*I. Iguana*, *Cyclura* sp.), are dangerous only because of owner ignorance...ignorance that can be traced back directly to the pet store that sold that species to begin with.

Some species of animals that are sold as pets could pose an agricultural hazard, and so should be looked at closely (examples: many of the roaches and beetles; stick insects). Other venues of sale need also to be monitored as well, such as pet expos, herp expos, etc., where a wide range of species are on display and sold. For these species and regulations, you will need to work with your county extension agent and/or state agriculture department, where you may find some laws already exist which are being ignored willfully or through ignorance on the part of the sellers.

Decisions about which species to ban and which to allow, subject to certain conditions, should be considered carefully and deliberately. Sweeping "all exotics" bans just makes those proposing such bans look silly when anti-banners gleefully point out to them that

"all exotics" also means their child's goldfish and grandmother's aviary full of exquisite finches.

Many of those who don't keep exotics, or nothing more exotic than a dog, cat, fish, rabbits, mice, rats or guinea pigs, or small birds, just don't see what captivates people who keep exotics, especially species they may have a personal bias against, such as reptiles, or invertebrates. Don't let such biases get in the way of law-making. If laws are made with the public interest at heart, keep in mind that 'icky', 'slimy' and 'creepy' are not traits that in and of themselves pose a threat to the public weal.

Non-traditional pet species can serve two important purposes. For those individuals who are unable to keep traditional species, due to health problems or other situations, some non-traditional species allow them to still have a link to the animal kingdom that cat and dog owners have. Not everyone needs or wants a pet who will come when called or turn haughtily away if they aren't interested in answering the summons. While a velvety leopard gecko or prickly bearded dragon may seem like unlikely substitutes for a cuddly dog or purring puddle of cat to someone with no interest in reptiles, for keepers of these lizards, they suit very well.

I have been fortunate in my life to have been able to share large parts of it with both traditional and non-traditional pets. I have also been fortunate to have been able to spend time with a variety of large exotics and wild animals, mostly mammals and birds, caring for them and working with them, rather than keeping them. When a turn in health resulted in my not being able to keep dogs, cats or birds, I am grateful that, with reptiles, I was still able to maintain the contact with the animal world I had come to cherish.

All that being said, I still struggle daily with the uncomfortable knowledge that, at the end of the day, most exotic species are just animals kept in a cage. For life. That has come to bother me, including my own keeping of animals. I recently visited one of the six private zoos in the U.S., taking a tour through their huge spread. Unlike the wildlife rescue/refuge facility I volunteered at in Southern California, other than a few large psitticines who are allowed regular out-of-cage time, all the animals live in huge, open areas, complete with hills and trees and a lake. There were herds of zebra, wildebeest, oryx, Watusi cattle, Cape buffalo and more, large and small. There were giraffes, including a neonate and two more due soon. A large aviary area allowed many species of birds to congregate or not, swim or drink, even fly limited distances. Two young cheetahs are being raised to take part in an international breeding effort to save the species. Big, huge, healthy, and wild...but at the end of the day, they are just animals in a cage, far too many of them coming from private parties who thought they would be cool pets.

At the end of the day, I have to deal with my own conflicting desires, beliefs and feelings about the keeping of animals in captivity. I keep coming down on the selfish side, as I not only still keep animals, but also continue to provide information on the proper care and keeping of many species, as well as trying to educate people about their behavior and other facets of natural history.

Do I want to see changes in the billion-dollar pet trade and wildlife trade industry?  
Absolutely.

Are changes going to happen? Yes.

The questions, then, are:

Will the changes needed be done appropriately, with due thought and consideration, or will the lawmakers opt for the quick, easy and not-so-thoughtful route?

Will those who feel threatened by the proposed changes act to help bring intelligent discourse to the discussion, or simply rail against those who will ultimately make the decision.

Everyone's best interests, including those of the animals, will be best served by opening the discussion up to knowledgeable pet keepers and veterinarians willing to work collaboratively with the lawmakers and animal regulatory people to come up with the best solution for the community at large and the animals who may come to reside in them.

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