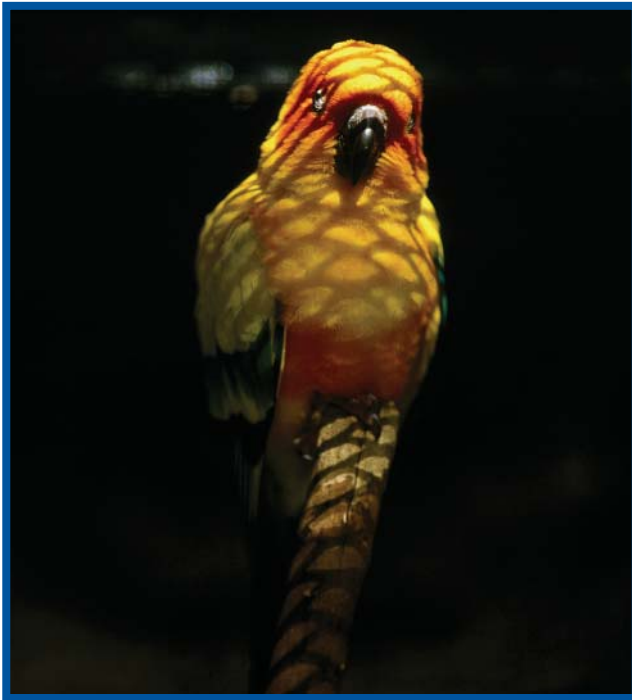




*Unfortunately, many wild animal pet owners naively believe that if they no longer want their pets, then someone else will take them off their hands.*



While wild animals have been kept as pets for a very long time, their popularity has increased substantially during the past twenty years, especially in North America, Europe and Japan. With increased numbers has come a corresponding increase in the number of displaced and unwanted wild animal pets. Some of them may have become too big, expensive or dangerous for their keepers, while others simply lost their appeal and are no longer wanted.

Unfortunately, many wild animal pet owners naively believe that if they no longer want their pets, then someone else will take them off their hands. They assume that zoos, wildlife sanctuaries and other facilities will take their animals in, but nothing could be further from the truth. While a few facilities may accept unwanted pets from time to time, most are already filled to capacity and will not accept them.

Humane societies and animal shelters are also not an option for the disposal of wild animals. They can only take in dogs, cats and small domesticated animals. They do not have the facilities, expertise or financial wherewithal to house and care for wild animals, especially large, dangerous ones like big cats.

Since zoos, wildlife sanctuaries and humane societies can accept only the tiniest fraction of unwanted wild animal pets, keepers often turn to specialist rescue organizations. Unfortunately, most rescue organizations in Canada and the United States are very small, all-volunteer, home-based and poorly-funded, so they are only able to accommodate a small number of animals. The majority focus on reptiles and birds, while a smaller number take in large exotics, such as primates and big cats. Unfortunately, their efforts do little to solve the overall wild animal pet problem.

Wild animal pet keepers dispose of animals for a variety of reasons. A few of the more common reasons are:

- size and temperament of their animals;
- financial commitment;
- poor animal health and difficulty obtaining veterinary care;
- loss of interest.

Tigers are the most popular big cat pets. In fact, experts estimate the number of pet tigers in North America at somewhere between 7,500 and 20,000; more than the total number of tigers remaining in the wild. While tigers are cute and appealing when young, they grow into large, extremely dangerous adults that are difficult to house and handle. Every year, a number of tiger owners are injured or killed by their pets and hundreds more are bought, sold, exchanged, given away or abandoned by their owners.



Burmese pythons and other large, constricting snakes are popular in the pet trade as well. When mature, these extremely robust snakes can reach more than 4 metres in length and may pose considerable risk to their keepers. Attacks by large snakes can result in serious injuries or death. Many keepers find these snakes too much to handle, so they look for ways to dispose of them.

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## The Fate of Unwanted Wild Animal Pets

[ continued ]

Every year, tens of thousands of wild animal keepers look for ways to get rid of their animals. They use classified ads in newspapers and specialist magazines or they advertise over the internet. Hundreds of websites and publications offer wild animal pets for sale, exchange or free to a good home. Unfortunately, the majority of these unwanted animals end up being shunted from one bad situation to the next or they simply languish in their cages until they die.

### Releasing a wild animal pet is cruel

Another unfortunate disposal method used by some wild animal pet keepers is release to the wild. Release may be an act of desperation after all other attempts to place an animal have failed or the keeper may believe their animal will actually be better off. But releasing pets to the wild is cruel and poses a risk to both humans and indigenous wildlife.

Most captive wild animal pets will not survive if released. Being confined in home situations, they are physically unfit, psychologically damaged and lacking in basic survival skills. If released, they would die of starvation, injury, cold or predation.

Abandoned or escaped pets, such as big cats, can also threaten human safety. If encountered, they are easily capable of killing an adult human. In Canada, there have been numerous reports of big cats on the loose.

Occasionally, abandoned or escaped wild animal pets survive and establish themselves, outcompeting or displacing native wildlife species in the process. For example, here in Canada, non-native red-eared slider turtles can now be found in British Columbia, Quebec and throughout the Great Lakes, where they compete aggressively with native turtle species.

Wild animal pets can also introduce new diseases to indigenous wildlife. They may have brought a range of natural disease organisms with them if they were captured in the wild or, if they are captive-bred, they may have picked up or developed diseases during breeding, holding and transport. Regardless of how diseases originate, exposing indigenous wildlife to them is extremely dangerous.

With increasing numbers of wild animal pets has come a corresponding increase in the number of displaced and unwanted animals. Acceptable homes are few and far between. The only reliable way to deal with the problem is to stop the keeping of wild animals as pets.



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