UTILIZATION OF WILDLIFE SPECIES AS PETS

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Abstract
Different species of wild animals are utilized as pets in different areas. The use of wildlife as pets could serve as an effective way of preventing and treating many psychological and stress-related diseases. However, keeping of wild species is tasky and could have health implications on the pet keeper as in the case of zoonoses, when not properly managed. International pet trade has implications on conservation of some popular pet species due to over exploitation.

Introduction
Wildlife includes all non-domesticated plants and animals. The term wild in this context specifically applies to any species of animal which has not undergone a fundamental change in behaviour to facilitate a close co-existence with humans. Some species that would be mentioned in this study may have been bred in captivity for a considerable length of time, but are still not recognized as domesticated e.g. Parrot (Psittacus erithacus). Wildlife resources are utilized in different localities for various purposes. Among these purposes include utilization for sports, medicine, consumption (bush-meat), tourism, culture and pets.

A pet is a household animal kept for companionship or personal enjoyment unlike other purposes of keeping wild animals, livestock, laboratory animal, working animals or sport animals, which are mainly for economic or productive reasons. Wild animals are often kept as pets. Many of these pets are kept as a hobby, rather than for companionship. This has been observed in countries like in Nigeria. The study therefore highlights some wildlife species used as pets and the benefits and implications of keeping pets.

Purpose for keeping Wild Animals as Pets
The most popular pets are noted for their loyal or playful characteristics, attractive appearance, or songs. Parrots and monkeys are also used as security in some parts of Nigeria like Delta State, because of their ability to recognize strangers and alert the owners, and also as companion when lonely. Also wild pets like Iguana guana is kept for spiritual purposes in Orogun, Delta State while tortoise (Geochelone denticulata) is kept for spiritual purpose in Benin.

Wildspecies Kept as Pets
Among the numerous animals kept as pet worldwide include the few under listed here.

Parrot (Psittacus erithacus): Birds such as parrot (Plate 1) is a common pet kept for their beautiful colours, displays (courtship), calls and ability to mimic human voice.
Plate 1: Picture of a parrot used as a pet
Source: Mike (2011)

Chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*): This species are kept as pets for their abilities to perform acrobatic displays, behave like humans, and sharp memory in remembering and recognizing people and things. Chimpanzees (Plate 2) are very playful animals that can always make their owners excited.
Plate 2: Twenty six years old chimpanzee nicknamed Bubbles by the owner and playmate.
Source: Copping (2011)

Wild-dogs (*Lycaon pictus*): These are kept and trained as domestic dogs, and used for hunting.

Duiker (*Cephalophus spp.*): Small antelope that has been successful kept as pet in different house holds worldwide.

Monkeys: Patas monkeys (*Erythrocebus patas*) and green (*Cecopithecus patas*) are popularly kept as pets. The popularity of these species as pet is due to their ability to be trained to dance, sing, or play musical instruments for the entertainment of their human companions. They are appreciated for their comic appeal. Patas monkeys (Plate 3) are kept by many Hausas in northern Nigeria including lorry drivers.

Plate 3: Patas monkey, a species commonly used as pet.
Source: Rasfaya (2011)

Hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*): These animals (Plate 4) are kept as pets and also used for hunting, security, to scare people, and to sell charms, and for begging.
Plate 4: A man with his Hyena pet on the road
Source: Hugo (2007)

Nile Crocodile (Crocodylus niloticus): Although not often regarded as a good pet because of the size and level of aggressiveness but people still keep this species (Plate 5) as pet.

Plate 5: Costa Rican fisherman, Chito, plays with Pocho his crocodile pet
Source: Boyd (not dated)

Iguana (Iguana iguana): Blue neck iguana and other species of iguana are kept as pet in America and some parts of Nigeria, like in Orogun, Delta State

Python - (Python sabae): These are scary animals (Plate 6) but are not venomous, so are kept by some people as pets. This is commonly observed in areas like Nembe in Bayelsa State.
Plate 6: A man and a girl with their Pet, Python
Source: Hugo (2007)
Lion (Panthera leo)

Plate 7: A 27 years old Lucian Craita, from Romania with his pet
Source: Justcoolpics (2009)

Elephant (Loxodonta africana)
Plate 8: Mercy and her Elephant pet
Source: Stehbens (2008)

Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*)

Plate 9: A girl and her Alligator pet
Source: Sangent (2009)

Baboon (*Papio anubis*): Species of baboon (Plate 10) are used as pets in Northern parts of Nigeria.
Ostrich (*Struthio camelus*) – this species (Plate 11) is kept as pets for their unique size as birds and for their periodic fast movements.

Red-eyed turtle dove (*Streptopelia semitorquata*): These are kept as pets for its beauty and songs. Tortoise (*Geochelone denticulata*): It (Plate 12) is also kept as pet by many people, including a student of Forestry and Wildlife Department of the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
Plate 12: Tortoise, a species used as Pet
Source: Gurley (2011)

Benefits of Keeping Wildlife species as Pets
There are a number of benefits for allowing individuals to keep native animals as pets. The most obvious as in the case of Australia is that the practice may help to save some species from extinction since many native animals are endangered (Mornement, 2011). However, that depends on means of procurement, legislation and management as the pet trade is the major source of threat to the endangered African grey parrot.

Effects on Pets' Health
Taking them from the Wild can endanger the Species
As a result of over-exploitation, some of the species used as pets are endangered e.g. Parrots are the world’s most endangered family of birds due to over-exploitation by the international pet trade. The enormous global demand for these and other exotic pets is fueling the illegal capture and trade of millions of birds, mammals and reptiles annually, most of which die while being captured or transported.

Effect on May affect Species' Health
Keeping wild animals as pets may become detrimental to their health if their basic management requirements are not properly taken care of. An important issue is the inappropriate feeding; passive smoking is another recurring problem, aggravated by the fact that fur animals groom themselves, which means taking in extra harmful substances that have landed on their fur, not just those inhaled.

Lack of Appropriate Medical Attention
Many veterinarians are unwilling or untrained in the care of wildlife species, so when injuries or illness occur in a wild pet, finding proper veterinary care may be difficult or impossible (Buifiloski, 2004).

Poor Animal Welfare Increases Risk
Many wild animal pets experience poor welfare because their husbandry conditions are inadequate. Deprived of any real ability to engage in natural movements or to express natural
behaviours, they become bored, frustrated and stressed. Some animals incessantly search for escape routes, or start to display abnormal behaviours, such as pacing, head weaving or paw-sucking. Others become withdrawn, interacting less with their surroundings as time goes by. Disturbed and chronically stressed animals are less predictable and unreliable.

Effects of Pets on their Care-Giver's Health

Health Benefits Associated With Pets
Pets have the ability to stimulate their caregivers, in particular the elderly. Taking care of pets helps the elderly to be occupied as they also exercise themselves through that process which help them in recovering fast from a physically or psychologically troubled past. Having a pet may help people achieve health goals, such as lowered blood pressure, or mental goals, such as decreased stress. Evidence has shown that having a pet can help a person live a longer, healthier life. In a study of 92 patients hospitalized for coronary ailments, 11 of the 29 without pets died within a year, while only 3 of the 52 who had pets died (US Government National Institute of Health, 2006). Pet ownership was shown to significantly reduce triglycerides, and thus heart disease risk, in the elderly. A study concluded that owning a pet can reduce the risk of a heart attack by 2% and that pets are better than medication in reducing blood pressure (US Government National Institute of Health, 2006). Owning a pet can also prolong survival of a heart attack (US Government National Institute of Health, 2006) as it reduces the stress of thinking, and depression when playing with the pets or gets carried away with the actions of the pets.

Health Risks Associated With Pets
1. Keeping wild animals as pets can be dangerous. Many can bite, scratch, and attack an owner, children, or guests. Animal owners can be legally responsible for any damage, injuries or illnesses caused by animals they maintain. Finding new homes for large, hard-to-handle animals can be difficult, if not impossible, particularly since most zoos are unable to accept them used as pets (Marks, 2009).

2. Bites and attacks by pets can lead to injuries, maulings and sometimes deaths. Parasites due to poor animal hygiene (disposal of faeces and urine) or inappropriate treatment of pets can lead to transfer of parasites to humans.

3. Behavioural pattern of wild animals. Wild animals have complex behavioural, social, nutritional and psychological needs. Wild animals need to be with members of their own species (Marks, 2009). Domestication is a process that takes centuries within an animal species. Apes, including chimpanzees, gorillas, baboons, orangutans, and gibbons, are intelligent, sensitive, and highly social animals. As human closest living relatives, they are fascinating, and ape infants are appealing. These attributes make apes popular as performers in commercial entertainment, advertising programs and, sometimes, pets. But this popularity and attractiveness masks the often cruel and dangerous practices commonly required for making apes compliant in such appearances. When kept as pets, apes can unexpectedly cause severe injury when natural instincts trigger fear or aggression.

4. Fear or distress from animal presence or behavior.
Wild animals can carry diseases dangerous or fatal to humans. Diseases include rabies, distemper, herpes viruses, salmonella, polio, tuberculosis, Rocky Mountain spotted fever and bubonic plague, monkey pox. Wild animals also harbour parasites, such as intestinal worms and protozoa (Marks, 2009). Many wild animals, like raccoons or skunks, can be carriers for rabies without showing any symptoms. And according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2003) tens of thousands of people get salmonella infections each year from wild reptiles or amphibians. Bringing a wild animal into one’s home exposes the entire family members and the pet to a potentially fatal disease.

The Impact of Emerging Zoonoses
Emerging infectious diseases are defined as diseases that have recently increased in incidence or geographic range, recently moved into new host populations, recently been discovered or are caused by newly evolved pathogens (Lederberg et al., 1992; Smolinski et al., 2003). New and emerging infectious diseases affect humans, domestic animals, livestock and wildlife, and can have a significant impact on health (WHO, 2001), trade and biodiversity (Daszak et al. 2001). Most human infections are mild enough to go unnoticed and apparently produce no permanent damage. However, sometimes infections result in severe and even fatal diseases. For instance the common raccoon roundworm, Baylisascaris procyonis has been implicated in cases of serious eye disease or central nervous system disorders, and can cause death. Presently, there has no curative treatment for raccoon roundworm infection (Butfioski, 2004). Of the emerging infectious diseases of humans, 75% have been discovered to be zoonotic; with wildlife being an increasingly important source of inter-species transmission (Daszak et al. 2001; Taylor et al., 2001).

Wildlife Zoonoses
A few zoonotic diseases, including monkeypox, SARS, rabies, salmonellosis, tularemia, psittacosis, and plague are discussed to show the chances of contacting them from wildlife species kept as pets.

Monkeypox
The outbreak of monkeypox in pet owners and handlers (including a veterinarian) in the USA in 2003, highlighted the importance of wildlife species in zoonotic disease and the extent of the international trade in wildlife species (Guarner et al. 2004; CDC, 2003). The source of the outbreak was traced to the illegal importation of exotic rodent reservoirs of monkeypox from Ghana in West Africa. Native pet prairie dogs housed near some of these rodents in a distributor’s premises became infected, and the subsequent multi-state distribution and sale of the prairie dogs resulted in human infections.

Rabies
Rabies is a zoonotic viral disease that affects humans, domestic and wild animals. It is transmitted to animals and humans through close contact with saliva from infected animals. Dogs have been established as the predominant vector of rabies in Nigeria, the most logical and cost-effective approach to rabies control is elimination of stray and ownerless dogs combined with a programme of single mass immunization in the shortest possible time, at least 80% of the entire dog population (WHO, 2001).

Salmonellosis
Salmonella is predominantly transmitted to people through contaminated food, but contact with animals that are shedding the bacteria and with surfaces contaminated by these animals can also result in infection. Pets commonly associated with salmonellosis include snakes, tortoise, although other animals such as livestock and baby chicks can also be sources of infection.

Psittacosis
Psittacosis, also known as parrot fever and ornithosis, is a bacterial infection that can cause severe pneumonia and other serious health problems. It is caused by *Chlamydophila psittaci*, formerly known as *Chlamydia psittaci*. From 1988 through 2002, 923 human cases of psittacosis were reported to CDC, and most resulted from exposure to infected pet birds, usually cockatiels, parakeets, parrots, and macaws. In birds, *C. psittaci* infection is referred to as avian chlamydiosis (AC). Infected birds shed the bacteria through faeces and nasal discharges, and humans become infected from exposure to these materials.

Plague
Plague is caused by *Yersinia pestis* bacteria that are usually transmitted to humans from infected animals through a vector such as a flea. Direct contact with infected animals may also lead to infection. Several animals including ground squirrels and carnivores are susceptible to severe and often fatal infection with plague bacteria.

Conclusion
Pet keeping is one of the easiest ways of managing boredom, a major killer of elderly and unemployed persons. However, the health status of animals used as pets should be periodically examined to ensure that they are not diseased. And on no occasion should pet keepers mate with their pets as that is one of the major ways many diseases are contacted and spread to humans. There should be regulation on procurement of species for pet by conservation bodies to avoid popular pet species going on local extinction. Wildlife expert or a veterinarian that is an expert in wild-animals should be consulted to know the necessary requirements for managing the particular species one ones to keep as a pet: the housing, feeding and health requirement of the species.

Reference


World Health Organization, (2001): Fifty-fourth World Health Assembly Resolution