



Reptiles make wonderful pets and are good for a child to help understand the environment more

The rise in keeping native wildlife as pets in Australia is causing much concern among nature conservation, wildlife rescue and animal welfare groups. Caroline Zambrano explores the debate of bringing wildlife into our homes.

Australians love their pets and native species are no exception. More and more animal lovers are realising the benefits of caring for slithery, scaly and feathered companions, just like our four-legged ones. Today's modern lifestyle, with smaller homes and backyards, is also conducive to keeping smaller native animals.

As one example of the increasing popularity of keeping native species as pets, in the mid-1990s the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage's predecessor agencies licensed about 1,000 individuals to keep native animals (predominantly reptiles) as a hobby. Today, there are about 20,000 licensed animal-keepers¹.

Whilst owners of snakes, lizards, parrots and other native species say their pets bring them closer to nature and help with conservation efforts, others believe it is cruel to keep wildlife away from their natural habitat and it does not help with nature preservation. One issue everyone agrees on, however, is that public education about the exotic pet trade and caring for native animals as pets are paramount!

Like with domesticated dogs and cats, native animals require a high standard of care, but they can be more difficult to adequately provide for. In many cases, native animals require specialised husbandry and facilities to mimic their natural environment and meet their physiological and ecological

requirements. This is resulting in many animals being surrendered to wildlife rescue groups or worse, released into the wild where they are unable to survive.

Also, at a time when the destruction of natural habitats and the effects of climate change is already posing a threat to the survival of many species, people are concerned about the consequences of bringing wildlife into their homes as pets.

Last month, World Animal Protection (WAP) started running an awareness campaign about the growing global multi-billion dollar 'exotic pet trade' that is having a devastating impact on wildlife populations across the world. Nearly one third of all wild animals die during transportation, according to a WAP report².

World Animal Protection also published a ground-breaking investigation into illegal online trade in endangered parrots, particularly the *critically* endangered African grey parrot! (Both reports available on the World Animal Protection website.)

"Wild animals are suffering whether they are captured from their habitats or born into captivity to be sold," said Simone Clarke, Executive Director ANZ for WAP. "At every step of the journey destined to people's homes; from capture to handling, transport, holding, breeding, sale and the lifetime of captivity in the home. Whether traded legally or illegally, keeping wild animals as pets is cruel."

RSPCA Australia also opposes the keeping of wild, native or introduced animals as pets or companions. The organisation also does not support proposals for keeping native animals as pets as a means of promoting their conservation, stating on its website that conservation programs are far better served by keeping animals in specialist captive breeding centres and in conditions as close as possible to their natural environment to increase the potential for future reintroduction³.

To add to the controversy, the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage is now considering expanding the list of mammals which people can keep as

pets. Wildlife rescue organisations are strongly opposing this proposal and urging people to not buy, own or breed a wild animal as a pet.

WIRES began a petition campaign 'Wild4Life' to the NSW Minister for the Environment, Gabrielle Upton, warning that allowing additional native mammal species to be kept as pets would create significant and irreversible risks to the conservation and the welfare of wildlife in NSW.

WIRES states on the Wild4life website, "By allowing people to keep these animals as pets we will be devaluing them and actually hindering conservation efforts. 11 of the species in the proposed list are currently on the NSW Threatened Species List, 3 are categorised as endangered. There are a further 4 species on the list which are presumed extinct in NSW... We must protect the 37 species listed in the proposal and keep these animals safe in the wild where they belong. "For a list of 37 species, visit www.wildforlife.org.au

You can also check with your National Parks and Wildlife Service office as to what native species you can have in your State and what the conditions are.

BANNING OWNERSHIP NOT POSITIVE MOVE

Pet Industry Association of Australia (PIAA) CEO Mark Fraser contests the NSW Government's proposal, saying "It's not in the interest of animal welfare or preservation of endangered native animals. We don't support the ownership of native animals such as koalas or any endangered or protected species."

However, banning the ownership of native species that are legally permitted to keep isn't a positive move forward, he said.

"Everyone deserves to own a pet of their choice, given they raise it responsibly," said Fraser. "People are fascinated with our native wildlife and some common species can be successfully domesticated. Current licensing laws dictate what animals can be owned as a pet and these rules need to be observed and enforced."

Through PIAA member education days and reptile rescue events, many native animal keepers (especially of

