



Regulation of keeping animals as companion animals through the establishment of lists¹

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It is well recognised that in the last years there is an increase in the numbers of wild animals and other exotic species² kept as companion animals ^(Ref1). This acknowledgement has triggered many discussions about the risks this trend encompass, while the evolving situation has posed new challenges for the veterinary profession. Nowadays, the European veterinarian more and more often is invited to take care and treat such species, indigenous in Europe or not. Rodents, reptiles, insects, primates and other small mammals coming from other continents of the world provide companionship to humans in the place of traditionally domesticated species, like dogs and cats.

However this trend has raised many concerns with regard to animal health and welfare as well as to public health and environmental sustainability. In October 2012 FVE organised a conference on "Import and keeping of exotic animals in Europe" ^(Ref2), in association with the Cyprus Presidency ^(Ref3), the European Commission and the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office. Following this event, FVE launched a big survey among veterinary practitioners with a view to assess veterinarians' exposure to exotic species in their daily practice. The outcomes of those initiatives have shown that:

- Not all species are suitable as companion animals;
- There is a need to raise public awareness concerning the risks to animal health and the welfare of wild animals kept as pets, as well as the potential risks for human health, such as transmission of zoonotic diseases;
- There is need to encourage awareness and education at all levels concerning the special needs of wild species kept as pets, including professionals dealing with wild animals, animal keepers and the general public;
- Limited and inconsistent international, national and local legislation continues to permit unregulated, uncontrolled and unmonitored trade in and keeping of such animals;
- Traceability, where possible through identification and registration of exotics should be promoted and harmonized;
- Abandoned animals, or those that escape captivity, can cause severe negative ecological impacts on the natural environment.

Two European countries, Belgium ^(Ref4) and the Netherlands ^(Ref5), manage to tackle many of the above mentioned issues by having established a positive list of mammals, categorising animal species permitted to be kept by private individuals. The positive list has been incorporated in their national legislation and assisted at large at the regulation of import and keeping of these species in Belgium and the Netherlands. Experience from those countries has shown that conducting assessment studies and defining companionship

¹ **Positive list:** a list categorising exotic/ wild animal species allowed to be kept as companion animals by private individuals

Negative list: a list categorising exotic/ wild animal species prohibited to be kept as companion animals by private individuals

² **Exotic species:** Plant or animal species introduced into an area where they do not occur naturally; non-native species. Exotic animal species may include fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals and they are wild animals, mainly caught in wild or in some cases bred in captivity.

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requirements ensure that animal health and welfare, as well as public health and local ecosystems will not be compromised. Some other countries have a negative list, but a positive list might be more preferable as it represents a more manageable, proportionate and effective regulatory process and a less bureaucratic burden on enforcement agencies.

Assessment of the risk of non-native animals becoming invasive is also a strong recommendation of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) ^(Ref6). Dr B. Vallat, OIE General Director, has many times indicated international trade in exotic pets as one of the factors that have provided greater opportunity for transmission of pathogens between animal species and human ^(Ref7).

FVE calls for competent authorities to work on the establishment of lists of animals, based on a thorough assessment, according to certain scientific criteria, of the risks for the animal itself, its owners and the society, the indigenous species and ecosystems. Animals shall be approved for keeping by private individuals on the basis of their listing. We encourage all European national authorities to establish bilateral relationships with the countries which have already implemented such a system in their national legislation.

Sharing of knowledge and experience should be actively promoted at EU level. European Commission shall assist member states towards that direction and facilitate the dissemination of information through European wide initiatives. Further to this, European Commission shall look into putting in place consistent legislation laying down clear rules for import and keeping of wild animals in EU. Establishment and adoption of lists by the EU member states have to be a fundamental requirement of the EU legislative framework.

Veterinarians are dedicated to actively promote health and welfare for animals and humans and FVE strongly wishes to collaboratively work with all stakeholders and EU Institutions towards that direction.

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