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Social Media’s Contribution to Exotic Animal Sales

As a child, I used to love admiring the exotic animals on display in pet stores. However, my enthusiasm waned after attending a reptile expo where I saw an overwhelming number of reptiles confined in plastic cages and overflowing tubs, treated as mere commodities. I later learned of the hidden and grueling trade of these animals. Unfortunately, exotic animals continue to be exploited, social media being a key method of marketing. Because social media has a tendency to hide the harsh truth and glorify profitable products, the era of chronically online generations has led to a boom in the exotic animal trade with a deficit in the proper knowledge of these animals.

Social media influencers carelessly endorse the unethical exotic pet trade. Some influencers, like YouTuber Logan Paul, even glamorize the keeping of "mini pigs," a nonexistent breed, which can be dangerous for impressionable audiences who may follow their example (Mzezewa). Other cases of YouTubers exploiting the attention exotic pets bring are YouTubers Jacob Feder, ‘Rico Exotic,’ ‘CatAleah,’ and Taylor Nicole Dean that the Animal Legal Defense Fund points out showed a “variety of welfare issues revealed in the exhibitors’ posted videos, including poor and inappropriate living conditions” in their videos (Complaint Demands USDA Provide Oversight of Animal Exhibitors on Social Media Operating without Licenses). These Youtubers target children as their main audience which means it is highly likely that a viewer will be inspired to get their own pet and accept improper animal care as normal. Unchecked, these social media presences spread misinformation and encourage the malpractices of the exotic pet industry.
Surprisingly, animal lovers are more likely to have less knowledge about an animal they are purchasing (Kellert 1980, 1984 qtd. in Kieswetter). They are more easily enticed to make impulsive purchases of animals. In general, impulsive buys are much more common due to the “increased availability in pet stores and online” of exotic pets and “due to public representations and a lack of education” (Kieswetter). The issue with compulsive purchases is that minimal previous knowledge and research about an exotic pet goes along with them. According to a resort about UK pet owners, around a quarter of UK pet owners “undertake no research at all before acquiring a pet” and “98% of owners underestimated the lifetime cost of owning their pet” (“Pets’ Welfare at Risk as One-In-Four Pet Owners Do No Pre-Purchase Research”). A lack of knowledge and preparation before getting a pet can be detrimental to the health of the animal. Furthermore, most people are unlikely to buy a pet after they are informed “about the realities of owning exotic species” (Moorhouse et al 2017 qtd. in Kieswetter). Yet more and more people are filling the pockets of the exotic pet trade without a second thought.

Shelters and nonprofit organizations are completely full in the current state of overconsumption of exotic pets. Jessica Petalas, “a shelter director at Humane Indiana in Munster” reports “a huge influx of owner surrender requests” (Simon). Common reasons are the lack of pet-friendly housing, COVID-19 impacts, and the cost of housing (Simon). Important factors like these are often overlooked when someone impulsively makes a purchase and when buyers find that exotic pets are more than they expected, they ultimately give up their brand-new pets. It’s not a surprise that a study done by the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy found “the majority of the surrendered dogs (47.7 percent) and cats (40.3 percent) were between 5 months and 3 years of age” and “the majority of dogs (37.1 percent) and cats (30.2 percent) had been owned from seven months to one year” (Endo). I conducted a scan of different
guinea pig rescues in California - to name a few, Orange County Cavy Haven, LA Guinea Pig Rescue, Cavy Spirit - through direct emailing or reading up on their availability to take in new animals at this time. I failed to find any that would take new guinea pigs because these facilities were already at capacity or even exceeding capacity. The unfortunate reality is that the brutal cycle of buying and ridding of exotic pets has burdened the organizations that are working to better the lives of these animals.

Without any place to trash an animal, there have, regrettably, incidents of domesticated animals being released into the wild. Orange County Cavy Haven even advised me to “not let your pigs go free as a) it is illegal, and b) they will not survive” in response to my question, “does the Orange County Cavy Haven currently take in guinea pigs?” This commonplace has had impacts on a greater scale than the releaser of the exotic pet intended. In the rare case that a domesticated animal survives in the wild, they can become invasive species that harm the balance of the wildlife into which they are released. Invasive species “degrade, change or displace native habitats, compete with native wildlife, and are major threats to biodiversity” as the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service describes (“Invasive Species | U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service”). These impacts are most notable in Florida, where “there are more species of nonnative lizards breeding in Florida than native lizards” (Mazzotti and Harvey). In addition to this fact, the most recent occasions of invasive species being released into the wild were from the pet trade (Mazzotti and Harvey). So the actions resulting from impulsive purchases of exotic animals can lead to entire ecosystem breakdowns.

Not only has the exotic pet trade impacted the ecosystems to which animals were dragged to, but their movement away from native lands may also disrupt their native ecosystems just as much. Some animals are bred in captivity but others come from the wild (“Exotic Pet Trade”).
The result of this practice means “these species are effectively removed from the native, breeding population,” reducing the natural population’s genetic diversity and overall biodiversity (“Exotic Pet Trade”). Even with nations who uphold policies against removing animals from their natural habitat, “wild caught animals are often poached from protected populations to meet the demand for the pet trade” (Siev). The depletion of wild animal populations alters existing ecosystem structures greatly.

The method of in-captive breeding is also not ideal. Research from Michigan State University reveals statistics that are gruesome but not well-known by the public; did you know that “for every ten birds or reptiles captured in the wild, as few as three actually make it to the pet store” and “the chances of a new exotic pet living through its first year after purchase is just over 20 percent?” (Siev). But these statistics are not too surprising if one knew that “the animals offered for sale are kept in small, temporary containers that are insufficient for their care” (Siev). An animal’s well-being is sacrificed for higher profits and more money for sellers. Sad to say, these high mortality rates still drive demand for exotic pets upward (Siev).

The prevalence of social media in society has propelled the exotic animal trade. From YouTubers endorsing exotic pets and the rising amount of content containing exotic animals on TikTok and Instagram, people are more exposed to these rare animals that society feels “increased normalcy of these species and decreased concern for their vulnerable status” (Spee et al.). The glamorization of exotic animals to society, in addition to the easy and cheap manners of obtaining them, has fueled the exotic pet trade while previously mentioned problems of the exotic pet trade heighten in severity.

However, social media can serve as a powerful tool in reducing of the demand for exotic pets and increasing the education of pet owners. Social media companies and users must thrive to
manage and take down content that endorses negative practices in the exotic pet industry, such as illegal trade and poaching (Siev). In replacement of previous advertisements and marketing ploys, there should be content that teaches the public about these extraordinary animals and reestablishes society’s views of these animals as wild and complex organisms. Changing the perception of exotic animals by the public starts on the Internet. Many organizations and shelters on social media already do this. The Los Angles Guinea Pig Rescue has an entire section of their website dedicated to “Guinea Pig Care” and “Guinea Pig Veterinarians” alongside a multitude of videos covering guinea pig husbandry. I plan to contribute to these efforts as well with my up-and-coming Instagram page called “4 Publicized Pet Care” which talks about issues in the pet industry and animal welfare facts. Through my journey of learning about the injustices animals face, I now know it takes a collective group of people to initiate change and that even I, in my bedroom, can contribute to this movement. I see that social media is a weapon that animal welfare advocates must take hold of to right the wrongs of the pet industry.
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