



Mobile petting zoos Animal welfare and public safety issues

What is a mobile petting zoo?

Such facilities keep and sometimes breed mainly exotic animals, hiring them out for kids' parties, taking them to schools and sometimes retirement homes for people to pet and handle.

What animals are used?

A wide range of exotic animals may be shown, including mammals like sugar gliders, monkeys and African pigmy hedgehogs, reptiles such as lizards and snakes and even invertebrates for example giant snails, millipedes and other large exotic insects. Domesticated species including rabbits, rats and guinea pigs may also be used.

What's wrong with keeping exotic animals in captivity?

Even if born in captivity, these wild animals retain all the behavioural and social needs they would have in their natural environment. Respected animal experts including the British Veterinary Association and the RSPCA express great concern about the keeping of exotic pets, due to their specific needs, the negative welfare impacts and threat to native wildlife in the UK in the case of escape.

Promoting the keeping of exotic pets also has devastating impacts on the wild populations. The demand reptiles and exotic mammals as pets results in millions of animals being taken from the wild and shipped all over the world. Experts express concern that the demand for their removal from the wild and is responsible for huge mortality and morbidity.

Reptiles have extremely specific environmental needs for lighting, humidity and temperature which makes it very difficult to meet their needs in captivity. It is acknowledged that the life of a captive reptile will be restricted.



Reptiles have extremely specific environmental needs

Similarly, exotic mammals such as sugar gliders and African pigmy hedgehogs are nocturnal. Their natural cycle means they spend the daytime sleeping, waking at night to live in the darkness. Guidelines suggest that nocturnal animals should not be exposed to persistent bright light, as their bodies are specially adapted for activity in low light. Living in a human based environment means these cycles can rarely be respected, causing disturbance and stress on the animal's natural biology.



Nocturnal animal behavior is disturbed causing chronic stress

What's wrong with letting people meet the animals?

Handling stress - Exotic animals, due to retaining their wild behavior patterns and needs, have been identified as being particularly vulnerable to stress from handling. This issue is only exacerbated when animals are taken to a variety of environments and handled by inexperienced children and adults.

To prey animals, handling by humans can cause stress because they equate it to being predated upon. Such stress in the wild is adaptive and short, but long periods of handling will result in chronic stress.

Inappropriate environments – In nature, reptiles carefully use their environment to control their body temperature. Taking these animals domestic human environments such as schools, children's parties and retirement homes, removes the ability for the animals to carry out this behaviour. This can result in acute stress and chronic debilitation.

For nocturnal exotics like most amphibians, sugar gliders and African pigmy hedgehogs, exposure to persistent bright light is out of the control of handlers taking such animals to external environments, even if this were controlled in their usual enclosures.

Disease and injury risk – Exotic animals, especially reptiles, present a risk of disease transmission to the general public. This can include the passing on of salmonella, E. coli, campylobacteria and microparasites. Disease risk is a heightened threat for children and the elderly who are particularly vulnerable. Such risks were uncovered by an inspection at a circus in the UK where the public handled a snake who later died from salmonella. It was noted by inspectors that sanitising hand gel and even hand washing would be "not fully effective", especially because of risk of contamination around the neck.



Exotic animals can pass on disease and injure members of the public

As with the handling of any wild animal whose behaviour is unpredictable, there is also a risk of injury to those coming into close contact with them. One study looking at NHS data showed that in a 6-year period, over 700 people were admitted to hospital with injuries from exotic pets, including crushing and tearing or bites, claw lacerations, tail strikes, and constriction. The study stresses that, while these animals are being chosen to be kept as “pets” exotic species are “essentially wild animals with intact defensive and aggressive behaviours, and robust physical attributes”.



There are countless other ways to learn about the beauty and intelligence of animals

What if they are rescued animals?

It is vital that rescued animals, who may have been subjected to neglect or abandonment, are given appropriate sanctuary. Taking such animals, with very specific welfare needs, on regular, stress inducing visits to varied and uncontrollable environments with inexperienced members of the public, is not providing sanctuary.

A facility which is freely open to passing public, and close to a road with heavy passing traffic leaves animal open to stress form an environment which is not peaceful or suitable for exotic animals and especially rescued animals.

True sanctuaries provide a true haven for animals, limiting contact with the public in environments which are controlled and giving animals a chance to escape the human gaze. Many will have only the occasional open day in order to fundraise and raise awareness of the plight of the animals. Such rescued animals are not kept for commercial gain.

How else can people learn about animals?

There are hundreds of other ways in which children and adults can learn about the beauty, intelligence and biology of animals. Most importantly for children, there are activities and events which they can take part in which are fun and informative, whilst teaching them respect for wild animals as they live their own life in the natural world.

Educational activities can include mini beast inventories in the school grounds and learning about the role which native insects play in the ecosystem; bird watching; setting up and recording the findings from camera traps; create wildlife homes and using all information gathered to take part in local and national wildlife surveys and activities such as those carried out by [Buglife](#), [RSPB](#) and the [Hedgehog Street campaign](#).

Kids parties can be animal themed with party goers coming dressed as their favourite animal, animal face painting and animal games! A trip to a local animal sanctuary could also be organised, especially on sanctuary open days when fun activities are arranged.

Retirement home residents can enjoy movie nights which focus on epic and award-winning animal documentaries or talks by animal organization representatives can give them an exciting insight into the world or animal protection and rescue. Similarly, where practical, residents may also enjoy an outing to an animal sanctuary, where domestic animals may choose to make themselves available for petting.

Please contact walthamforestvegan@gmail.com for more information on alternative learning activities and for further references to the above information.