

Wildlife as pets in Queensland

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RSPCA Queensland is a registered charity that accepted 43,000 animals last year. RSPCA Qld has an annual operating budget of \$22.5 million dollars each year. With less than 1% recurrent funding from the State Government, we rely on donations and in kind support from the community.

RSPCA Qld provides for pocket pets like rats, mice and guinea pigs but the category "Pocket Pets" also includes native and exotic wildlife species: birds, reptiles, fish, crabs, amphibians and invertebrates. These animals are presented as strays, private surrenders, seized or rescued wildlife. The Wildlife Department under the direction of Veterinary Services attends to the needs of both domestic and wild taxa. Specialist knowledge, experience and exposure to all relevant requirements of captive management and care of a broad range of animals are essential.

As the human population increases in Australia so does housing density, especially on the East Coast. The popularity of smaller animals as pets is on the rise. It is generally considered, and most often incorrectly, by the broader community that these species are less needy and easier to care for than dogs and cats. I offer the following for consideration in the wildlife as pets debate and argue that having wildlife as pets is generally not a good idea.

In Queensland, The Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM) administer the Nature Conservation Act 1992 (NCA) which regulates keeping native wildlife as pets. Wild native animals are not able to be taken from the wild and kept as pets in Queensland. However, in 2006, regulations were relaxed allowing trade in native reptiles much easier. Pet shops and reptile keepers can trade on the condition that both parties hold a permit. Generally, you can only keep native reptiles if you have a license. Anyone over 13 may apply for a Recreational wildlife license to purchase and keep native and lawfully obtained birds, reptiles and amphibians. Lawfully obtained (legally captive bred) native birds can be kept without a license. These include many species such as Budgerigars, Cockatiels, Bourke's parrots, Star and Zebra finches, Brown, King and Stubble quail, and Diamond and Peaceful doves. These are called exempt birds. A record (receipt) of how an animal was obtained is needed to be produced on request to prove that he or she was legally acquired. If you want to keep other native bird species a Recreational wildlife license is required.

RSPCA Policies and Positions are not legally binding and are currently undergoing a review. RSPCA draft position states that RSPCA is opposed to the taking of animals from the wild to be kept as pets. However, under particular circumstances RSPCA may support the keeping of some species as pets. Native animals require equally high standards of care as any domestic pet, however in many cases it is much more difficult to adequately provide for them. They often require specialised husbandry and facilities to mimic their natural environment and meet their physiological and ecological requirements. Most people do not have the skills, experience and facilities to do this (something evidenced by the difficulty many people have in providing adequate care for traditional types of companion animals). Domestic animals have been selectively bred for hundreds or even thousands of years to ensure they have

behavioural and physiological qualities that make them appropriate companions. RSPCA Australia would only support proposals for keeping native animals as pets as a means of promoting their conservation under exceptional circumstances. Generally, 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 reintroduction.

There are also The Five Freedoms to consider. Whilst not able to be accommodated for wildlife in the wild, they must be used as the standard for keeping any animal in captivity.

The Five Freedoms are:

1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst

By ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.

2. Freedom from Discomfort

By providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.

3. Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease

By prevention by rapid diagnosis and treatment.

4. Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour

By providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.

5. Freedom from Fear and Distress

By ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

Dogs and cats are predators. Most of our wildlife are prey animals. Prey animals are renowned for masking injury and illness for fear of becoming predated which has implications on Freedom No 5 (Freedom from Fear and Distress). Most animal "lovers" – including wildlife carers have other pets (often a dog).

Wing clipping and caging birds has implications on Freedom No 4 (Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour).

Generally birds have higher metabolisms, higher body temperature requirements and specific nutritional needs. Physiologically they lack the body weight to support injury and illness in a robust manner and for the most part changes in their physical fitness are rapid resulting in an implication of Freedom No 3 (Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease - By prevention by rapid diagnosis and treatment). Rarely does a bird owner take a sick or injured pet bird for veterinary treatment in time and rather considers the bird as disposable and easy to replace.

Freedom No 1 (Freedom from Hunger and Thirst) and Freedom No 2 (Freedom from Discomfort) are often misrepresented with a full nutritional diet rarely offered. In particular, browse is often not included. Feet, nails and beak issues occur because of poor husbandry. Unsuitable perches (generally dowel – wood or plastic), substrates and enclosure materials provide an inappropriate environment resulting in many issues most often difficult to resolve. Some common diseases directly related to inappropriate husbandry include, but are not restricted to; periodontal disease,

bumble-foot, lumpy jaw and stomatitis. Also Calcium, Thiamine, Vitamin D deficiencies, obesity and starvation are seen.

There are also some zoonotic and species specific diseases worthy of consideration. Zoonotic diseases of wildlife include but are not limited to:

Disease	Species affected	Mode of spread
Ornithosis	Birds	Inhalation
Cryptosporidiosis	Reptiles, Birds, Mammals	Faecal - Oral
Q-Fever	Marsupials	Inhalation, Open wounds
Campylobacteriosis	Birds / Mammals	Ingestion, Faecal - Oral
Leptospirosis	Possums, Quolls	Inhalation, Wound contamination, Ingestion
Lyme disease	Bandicoots, Possums / Mammals	Ticks
Yersiniosis	Birds / Mammals	Faecal - Oral
Brucellosis	Pinipeds	Through open wounds
Aust Bat Lyssavirus	Chiropterans	Contact with infected animals saliva & an open wound

Species specific diseases of interest currently include:

Chytrid fungus (*Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis*) and Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (Pbfd). The Australian Government has two Threat Abatement Plans, as attempts to manage wildlife disease at a National level using a comprehensive, integrated approach. One for “Infection of amphibians resulting in chytridiomycosis”, a highly virulent fungal pathogen of amphibians is capable at the minimum of causing sporadic deaths in some populations, and 100% mortality in other populations; and the other Pbfd affecting Endangered Psittacine species. In Queensland many lorikeets, often referred to as ‘runners’, are taken in and caged by the community because they are unable to fly due to Pbfd.

There are also some reptile diseases worth noting. Inclusion Body Disease (IBD) is an important disease in Australian snakes because of its 100% fatality rate. This is mainly a disease of boas and pythons. The incubation period is unknown but has been seen to exceed 12 months. Its current status in wild Australian snakes is unknown. Prevention and control recommends quarantine periods as long as 13 months.

Ophidian Paramyxovirus (OPMV). Transmission is by aerosol and through faeces. The snake mite (*Ophionyssus natricis*) has also been implicated as a possible vector. Snakes should be quarantined for a minimum of 90 days with good mite control practise in place. Families affected are elapids, boids and colubrids.

All pets should have routine veterinary consultations that incorporate a veterinary medical program. Pocket pets including wildlife as pets should not be considered any differently. Historically though pocket pets often do not see a veterinarian during their lifetime. It is generally considered not worth the effort and expense. Specialist veterinary services to support wildlife as pets are also restrictive. The on-line Pet directory lists 70 Australian and 24 Queensland Avian veterinarians; 40 Australian and 10 Queensland Reptile veterinarians; 8 Australian and 1 Queensland wildlife veterinarian; 11 Australian and 3 Queensland Fish veterinarians. A couple of Veterinary support groups exist. The Unusual and exotic pet special interest group of the Australian Veterinary Association and the Association of Avian Veterinarians

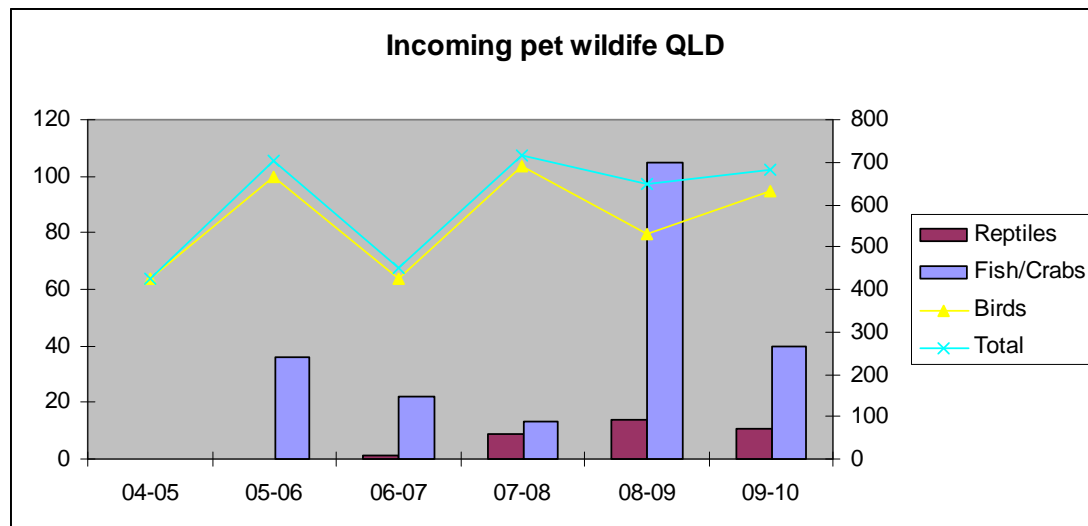
Australasian section (also lists 10 Avian vets in Qld/ 43 Nationally). The Veterinarian magazine quoted in an August 2006 publication ‘...The Reptiles are coming’. Advising veterinarians to be prepared.

RSPCA statistics

	National 04/05	National 05/06	National 06/07	National 07/08	National 08/09
Dogs	60030	66344	67703	70514	69383
Cats	55291	61183	58480	69034	66205
Livestock	2513	2918	2504	2622	2663
Horses	53	97	173	196	214
Wildlife	8674	11051	10890	13419	11684
Other	4598	5228	4671	6209	6472
	Qld 04/05	Qld 05/06	Qld 06/07	Qld 07/08	Qld 08/09
Dogs	12090	17309	17456	17257	17946
Cats	14511	18831	17093	18090	17827
Livestock	772	897	942	1153	942
Horses	8	27	37	52	44
Wildlife	3089	4009	4213	4257	4698
Other	1003	1570	1193	1566	2158

Other animal include but are not restricted to: pet birds, guinea pigs, rats, mice, rabbits, tame ducks, reptiles and chickens.

Of the total incoming animals nationally (156,621) and State-wide in Queensland (43,615), this table shows incoming small pets totalling 4% nationally and 5% for the state in the last 12 months.



Shelters in Queensland are seeing a few trends. Birds provide the bulk of small animal intake in Queensland. Annual reptile intakes are increasing. Birds are coming in imprinted on humans expressed as major behavioural problems including, screaming, self mutilation (feather plucking), excessive aggression, separation anxiety and / or depression. Also evident is the sale and trade of unweaned birds as pets, specifically to imprint on a new owner. These birds generally end up

with untrained owners and suffer crop injuries (burns, perforations, infections), nutrition deficiencies, even starvation.

Another trend is fish as prizes at Agricultural shows, given to kids without parental consent, preparation or husbandry advice. Many fish are also left in rental properties when tenants move on. Real estate agents refer them as abandoned animals to RSPCA which is still preferable to flushing them down the toilet or releasing into rivers or dams. Problems arising from release of unwanted wildlife pets has been documented in Australia with Red eared slider turtles.

Reptiles – The subject of more recent interest and hobby in Queensland. DERM has a local facility that has been taking the “illegal” wildlife presented to RSPCA Qld. The facility is starting to have difficulties in re-homing the reptiles due to saturation of permit holders and staff are not confident to perform a competent formal adoption process, that is, they are unable to say no without appearing biased or prejudiced (pers com).

The RSPCA Adoption process can be quite lengthy and justifiably so. Firstly pet-detect searches for owners during a “sorting” period looking for an ‘owner’ to reclaim. Staff are aided by registrations and the regulation of local council laws, microchips (National registries), tags, bands and tattoos etc. Failure to locate an owner is 95% more likely for animals other than dogs. Many tags and bands are untraceable because there is no national trend to utilise the service. Dog and cat microchip registrations cost \$20. Pocket pet owners and service providers (Pet shops / Vets) are either naïve to the availability of a micro-chipping service or not willing to spend the money.

Behavioural and veterinary assessments are then made and the ‘pet’ ‘sorted’ accordingly. Presently birds are assessed on their Behavioural needs and categorised into needing a Companion or an Aviary environment. They also receive a Veterinary assessment.

Due to regulations we have been unable to re-home reptiles and restricted bird breeds. RSPCA Qld is working with DERM towards being able to re-home reptiles in the future. RSPCA staff have no hesitation in making recommendations or implementing restrictions on a ‘pets’ file and acting upon them during a potential guardians adoption application. RSPCA Qld is also currently working towards the promotion and development of National recording of microchips for wildlife, both free-living wildlife that has been in care for some reason (Universities, rehabilitation, surveys) and pets (birds and reptiles). Negotiations with Homesafe are almost finalised with registrations of an additional charge (~\$15.00) for wildlife as pets / pocket pets undergoing adoption.

During the last few decades the community have been expressing their views that the keeping of wildlife behind bars was / is unacceptable. As a result the zoo industry has improved itself professionally. The development of standards, advanced husbandry skills, training, trade qualifications for keepers, resources, knowledge and global networks have been established. The government regulation of zoo standards is continually under review and because animals are on display welfare issues can be detected early. Wildlife as pets are, and will continue to be, kept behind closed doors. Knowledge and observation skills of an animals’ natural healthy confirmation and

behaviour is needed to be able to determine what is unnatural and unhealthy. Many welfare issues go unnoticed and unreported.

However the majority of the community still find it acceptable to house Australian native wildlife such as Cockatoos in 1 Meter square cages, trade unweaned birds to children and to poorly cut wings. As soon as a bird is hand-reared: bred and taken from his or her parents specifically for this purpose, it is psychologically altered. Historically we have already kept many wildlife animals as pets, legally and illegally. Birds can form bonds and often strong bonds with an owner. Reptiles however, tend to learn to tolerate captivity. What of mammals? They tend to be crepuscular or nocturnal, males can be quite smelly, most are arboreal (meaning will climb) and what of the possible interactions with wild counterparts?

Advantages of wildlife as pets include:

- Education, Awareness,
- Ownership, Understanding,
- Human Health and,
- Preservation.

Disadvantages of wildlife as pets may include:

- Animal Welfare,
- Lack of understanding,
- Lack of resources to manage (Govt),
- Disease transmission,
- Release to wild,
- Mutations,
- Population genetics,
- Line breeding,
- Demographics,
- Nutritional deficiencies,
- Reduce Appreciation of wild populations.

Sentience is not often recognised for many animal species. A New Caledonian crow is second in tool making skills only to the Chimpanzee; Fish can learn and recognise carers and vets; Day old chickens have the ability to recognise clutch mates; and Pigeons recognise shapes some 6 months later after recognition studies. RSPCAQld has even had a pet hermit crab – as cute as he or she was - said to be *stray but not homeless!*

I believe that in general wildlife deserve to be wild and not caged. I also believe that the community does not possess the necessary knowledge and skill to attend to the needs of pets. If wildlife were to be kept as pets then the license process should include thorough training in the needs of the species to be kept. The community must become aware that animals are not commodities or throw-away items, easily replaced!

References

The pet directory - <http://www.petdirectory.com.au>

Association of Avian Veterinarians Australasian committee;
<http://www.aavac.com.au/localvet.html>

IBD fact sheet

[http://www.wildlifehealth.org.au/AWHN_Admin/ManageWebsite%5CFactSheets%5CUploadedFiles/122/Inclusion%20Body%20Disease%20in%20Australian%20Snakes%2025%20Jul%202009%20\(1.0\).pdf](http://www.wildlifehealth.org.au/AWHN_Admin/ManageWebsite%5CFactSheets%5CUploadedFiles/122/Inclusion%20Body%20Disease%20in%20Australian%20Snakes%2025%20Jul%202009%20(1.0).pdf)

OPMV fact sheet

[http://www.wildlifehealth.org.au/AWHN_Admin/ManageWebsite%5CFactSheets%5CUploadedFiles/122/Ophidian%20Paramyxovirus%20in%20Australian%20Snakes%205%20Sept%202009%20\(1.1\).pdf](http://www.wildlifehealth.org.au/AWHN_Admin/ManageWebsite%5CFactSheets%5CUploadedFiles/122/Ophidian%20Paramyxovirus%20in%20Australian%20Snakes%205%20Sept%202009%20(1.1).pdf)

Threat Abatement Plan; Infection of amphibians with chytrid fungus resulting in chytridiomycosis.

<http://www.jcu.edu.au/school/phtm/PHTM/frogs/papers/chytrid-report.pdf>

Threat abatement plan; Pbfd

<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/tap/pubs/beak-feather-tap.pdf>

About SARS - Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome:
<http://www.abc.net.au/science/features/sars/default.htm>

DERM – Native Animal Pets, Birds, Reptiles

http://www.derm.qld.gov.au/wildlife-ecosystems/wildlife/living_with_wildlife/native_animal_pets.html

DERM -

<http://www.derm.qld.gov.au/register/p01386aa.pdf>

RSPCA wildlife as pets position

http://kb.rspca.org.au/Is-is-acceptable-to-keep-native-animals-as-pets_132.html