A PET PEEVE

THE PLEASURES AND PITFALLS OF PRAIRIE DOGS AND OTHER EXOTIC PETS

Prairie dogs are cute. They're covered with sandy-brown fur. They stand about a foot high when balancing on their hind legs. They frequently pop their little heads out of the underground tunnels they make in the prairie lands of the Western U.S.

Sound like something you'd like to cuddle? If so, you're not alone. Prairie dogs—members of the squirrel family—are the latest exotic pet craze. Definitions vary, but pets considered exotic are generally anything beyond the basic dog, cat, or goldfish.

Animal experts and pet lovers alike have long debated making pets of animals that may have very special needs. But when some prairie dog owners started coming down with a rare disease this summer, the federal government got involved. U.S. health officials banned the purchase of prairie dogs.

The scare not only shines a light on America's growing interest in exotic animals. It also raises concerns about the possible health risks involved in introducing new "pets" to people.

Health Alert

The purchase of prairie dogs was banned after some owners became infected with monkeypox. The disease causes chills, rashes, and high fever in humans. The prairie dogs probably caught the disease in a pet store from Gambian giant rats. The rats, imported from Africa, are another exotic pet.

Exotic-pet owners don't want to give up their unique companions. But public health and animal-welfare experts say monkeypox is just one of many diseases that pets can pass to people. For instance, salmonella, a bacterial disease that causes high fever, is spread by turtles and other reptiles.

A Bad Rap?

Fans of exotic pets say the monkeypox scare is giving exotics a bad rap. Marshall Meyers, of the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, says better rules—not fewer exotic pets—are the answer. In a recent editorial, he said that animals entering the U.S. need to be better inspected. Few animals are quarantined upon

HOME SWEET HOME?

Exotic pets come from all over the world. Here are some exotic pets and information about their habitat, or the natural conditions in which they live in the wild.

**SUGAR GLIDERS**

- Live in the forested areas of northern and eastern Australia and New Guinea.
- They use skin flaps that reach from their hands to their feet to glide between trees.
- They got their name because they have a sweet tooth. They eat sugary liquids like tree sap.

**CAPUCHIN MONKEYS**

- Are found in the tropical forests of Central and South America.
- They spend most of their lives in trees. They use their tails to hang from branches.
- They live in groups of about 50.

What's that word?

**exotic:** (eg-zot-ik) adjective. Strange and fascinating, or from a faraway country.
arrival to the U.S. In other words, perhaps if someone had detected the infected Gambian rats, monkeypox might never have surfaced.

The National Alternative Pet Association believes proper care is most important. According to its Web site, all exotic animals can make good pets.

Laws Vary

The number of exotic pets sold in the U.S. is uncertain. But prairie dogs are not the first exotic animals to catch the eye of pet owners. Vietnamese potbellied pigs were popular in the 1990s. Sugar gliders—flying-squirrel-like marsupials from Australia and New Guinea—also have won the hearts of exotic-pet lovers.

Much larger exotic pets, such as tigers and primates, have been popular for years. Around 6,000 tigers are kept as pets in the U.S., experts say. That's more tigers than are estimated to be alive in the wild.

In addition, laws governing the sale and ownership of exotic pets vary. Tigers can't be sold or owned in Massachusetts, for instance, but they're okay in Texas.

A Word of Caution

Laws may vary, but animal experts say wanna-be pet owners should proceed with caution. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals says exotic animals often have habitat, care, and dietary needs that the average pet owner just can't meet. Many animals are cute while they are babies, but they can grow to be large—and sometimes ill-tempered—adults.

—Steph Smith

VIETNAMESE POTBELLIED PIGS

originated in the woodlands of China and Vietnam.
- An average adult weighs about 125 pounds.
- They live in herds, and wallow in mud to keep their skin moist and cool.

PYTHONS

live in the tropical regions of Southeast Asia, India, Indonesia, Africa, and Australia.
- They can grow to be up to 30 feet long.
- Pythons love densely forested places that have lots of rain. Most pythons climb and swim well.

What's that word?

quarantine: (kwar-uhn-teen) verb. To keep someone or something from others to control the spread of disease.

Back To YOU

- If you have, or are thinking about getting, an exotic pet, do your research. Talk to a vet and make sure you know how to care for it.
- Laws regarding exotic pets vary from place to place. Should the laws be the same everywhere? Should any animals be banned as pets? Why or why not?