

INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGNS ON EXOTIC PET OWNERSHIP

Addressing the elephant in the room





The paper lays the foundations for the development and execution of a communication campaign focusing on reducing consumer demand for illegal exotic pets.

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The paper was written in the context of the EUCPN's cooperation within the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) of 2022. It lays the foundations for the development and execution of a communication campaign focusing on reducing consumer demand for illegal exotic pets.

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Europeans look in increasing numbers for exotic animals to keep as pets. This is partially facilitated by illicit supply chains for animals, which, in many cases, are endangered. The rarer they are, the more appealing they can be.¹ Reducing consumer demand is one important avenue when it comes to tackling the broader issue of wildlife trafficking, which generates immense profits for criminal networks.

Unfortunately, information on how to reduce consumer demand (successfully) is fragmented or unavailable. This short paper will look into the current landscape of illegal exotic pet ownership and put forward a concept for a communication campaign to influence consumer demand.

What is an exotic animal?

There is no common definition of what does and what does not count as an 'exotic' pet.² Its meaning has not been standardised in international or EU law and Member States use varying definitions.³ Some use it to refer to non-native wildlife, while others apply the term to all 'non-standard' species being kept as pets. Both definitions have their upsides and limitations, but for the intent and purpose of this paper, we define exotic pets as 'Animals kept as companions, which are generally not kept as pets' but we will pay particular attention to especially popular animals that are imported from abroad and bred illegally and can be used in a communication campaign. The types of pets included under this definition will depend on both the country's legal framework and pet-keeping culture, as well as upon ongoing cultural trends.⁴

The European market plays a substantial role on the global exotic pet market, as both a transit and destination region. This gives the European Union the opportunity to play a significant role in the fight against illegal trafficking of exotic animals. This, however, stands in stark contrast to the limited resources currently being dedicated to law enforcement and the limited enforcement of legislation.⁵

This position came into being in parallel with the evolving structure of international trade, which has become faster and much more interlinked. Coupled with the growth of e-commerce and social media, which provides new avenues for the selling of wildlife and for attracting new customers.⁶

A legal jigsaw puzzle

One crucial thing to consider when talking about illicit exotic pet ownership in the EU is the fact that the types of animal it is illegal to keep varies between Member States. This complicates international initiatives to tackle the illegal ownership of exotic pets. A more localised approach that takes national differences into account is therefore a necessity.

EU and international legislation mostly focus on the trade in illicit animals and includes exemptions.⁷ One of the main differences between Member States is the use of negative and positive lists. Negative lists start from the assumption that all animals are *a priori* allowed to be kept. Only the animals mentioned on the negative list are prohibited. A positive list turns this on its head and adopts a precautionary approach: the baseline becomes that all animals are prohibited from being kept except for the ones on the list.

All Member States have either a positive list, a negative list or both. Only Greece has neither.⁸

Campaigns, where do I even begin?

Traditional conservation outreach from NGOs has focused on informing the audience about an issue and linking this with their preferences.⁹ Although it has been argued that this method of changing behaviour is not always effective. When organising a successful campaign focusing on the illegal ownership of exotic pets, it is important to pay attention to the message, the medium and the approach.¹⁰



If you want to learn more about what (not) to do in awareness campaigns, make sure you read our short paper 'Awareness-raising never hurts, does it?'.

There are two minimum criteria that a campaign must fulfil:

- It should concentrate on the emotive and affective aspect of behaviour change, in addition to knowledge transfer and awareness-raising.*
- It should accompany and support other approaches within the realm of crime prevention.*

The message

The message of your campaign should be relevant, to the point and of immediate significance. You should do more than just 'give information'. Do not simply convey the message that 'illegal pet ownership is bad', but put across a compelling message and let people know additional facts, for example how to spot illegal exotic pets. An active message with instructions on what to do, rather than what not to do, will always be more compelling. Campaigns can also use subjective feelings to convey their message and are more effective when they are localised. So EU-wide campaigns should still consider adopting a concentrated and context-specific approach in order to bring about behavioural change.¹¹

When people are given information on exotic animals, demand can be reduced significantly. A recent study measured the effect of four different kinds of information on people's attitudes towards the ownership of exotic pets and compared them to a control group, in which no argument against exotic pet ownership was made. In the control group, 25% of respondents indicated an interest in owning an exotic pet. Of the people who received information on the risk of disease transmission between exotic pets and humans, only 13% were favourable to exotic pet ownership. Other types of information were less effective, but still reduced the level of interest in exotic pet ownership: of the people who were informed about the (possibly) illegal nature of exotic pet ownership, animal welfare issues or conservation issues, 21% showed an interest in exotic pet ownership.¹² It should also be noted, however, that the message is dependent on the context in which it is delivered. Key visuals used in an awareness raising campaign should therefore preferably be pre-tested in order to gauge their effectiveness.

The medium

Use the medium that enables you to get in touch with your target audience. While this might sound obvious, it is something that requires consideration, proper research and (ideally) a digital marketing expert.¹³ The main selling platforms for illegal exotic animals are social media, online dedicated sale platforms, pet stores and national and international animal fairs.¹⁴

Social media are an especially relevant medium, as some exotic pet owners use them to capitalise on their animal collection by advertising and selling them online.¹⁵ This not only gives them a source of income, but also normalises the holding of such animals to new experience seekers. A significant portion of the sales also originates from informal advertisements and personal connections formed on social media.

The approach

An awareness campaign on its own is often ineffective and tends to exert a greater influence when embedded within a larger project, in which case it can be an efficient tool. It cannot have much of an effect when used on a stand-alone basis, but if it is used as just one piece of a larger, coordinated approach, its potential impact increases considerably. There are two minimum criteria that a campaign must fulfil.

First, it should concentrate on the emotive and affective aspect of behaviour change, in addition to knowledge transfer and awareness-raising. Simply transferring information is insufficient. A well-thought out context that grabs people's attention will be more effective. Second, it should accompany and support other approaches within the realm of crime prevention if possible.

Who wants to be an exotic animal owner?

The scope and variety of exotic pet ownership within the EU has been insufficiently studied. Some attempts have however been made to examine specific types of exotic pet ownership and these give us the chance to identify the animals that offer the greatest potential when designing a communication campaign.

Many of the reptiles illegally sold in Europe are sourced from small geographical areas and are specifically under threat as a result of the pet trade.¹⁶ It is therefore difficult to identify a single species to focus on. According to the available literature, however, snakes and turtles are particularly popular among pet-owners.¹⁷

Parrots are also in high demand when it comes to illegal exotic pet ownership.¹⁸ Especially the African grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) is highly popular as an exotic pet.¹⁹

In order to successfully form a campaign, you should carefully consider your target group. Pet ownership is a complex concept, people are diverse and so are the reasons why they keep animals. Animals can be kept for work, agriculture, research, companionship and more.²⁰ Exotic pet ownership adds another layer of complexity as to why this specific group of animals would be chosen as a pet. Unfortunately, insufficient studies have been carried out into the incentives of exotic pet ownership.²¹

Pet ownership is arguably the most intimate human-animal relationship. The period when animals were owned for purely utilitarian purposes has long since passed and many new criteria influencing the decision have formed. Beauty, intelligence, behaviour, cuteness, singing ability and other factors all play a part when choosing a pet.²²

When it comes to exotic animals, more specific determinants also play a role which exclude some potential owners.

Firstly, exotic animals tend to be more **expensive** to keep. This is due to fact that their frequently foreign habitat needs to be recreated, which means that more effort, time and money is required. This is especially the case for carnivores, which require fresh meat.

Secondly, location is an important determinant. Some animals simply require more **available space** than

others, either because they need space to roam or are large themselves. A tiger is difficult to keep in a densely populated city with smaller apartments. But that does not mean it does not occur, the 2003 case of 'Ming of Harlem' in New York being one example.²³

Finally, the effect of popular **media** and **culture** cannot be overestimated. Which animal is considered to be beautiful and the functions it fulfils vary wildly from country to country.²⁴ Even in European households, differences are noticeable. For example, French households are ten times as likely to have reptiles as pets compared to Finnish ones.²⁵



Film and television exert a strong influence on the types of pets that are in demand, as was the case with clownfish following the release of the animated movie "Finding Nemo", with blue macaws as a result of "Rio" and with terrapins following the screening of the "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles". The effects of "Finding Nemo" are particularly well-documented, in that the wild clownfish population decreased by 75%, causing the species to become extinct in certain areas of South East Asia.²⁶

Typology of owners of exotic pets

Yet the arguments above are insufficient to explain why someone would take the decision to buy an exotic pet. A framework focusing on this is provided by Sofiya Shukhova and Douglas MacMillan. In their study into exotic pet ownership in Russia, they identified four types of pet owners, each of which have their own reasons as to why they keep pets, their own characteristics and ways in which they could evolve into a different type.²⁷

Firstly, there are those who take a pet out of pity, **life savers**. This could be a red fox or a raccoon which was rescued from a fur farm, or a wolf cub that was abandoned and saved from euthanasia. Life savers are characterised by their internal division on exotic pet ownership. Some are very positive in their experiences while others discourage exotic pet ownership. They consider themselves to be quite knowledgeable about their pets and display a relatively high emotional connection to them. Some of them evolve into 'new experience seekers' or 'advocates against exotic pet ownership'.

Some owners never wanted an exotic pet, but due to unforeseen circumstances, **accidental owners** received an animal anyway. This could be due to a divorce, former owners suffering allergies, previous owners dying or because they received the animal concerned as a gift. These owners tend to be very inexperienced on the needs of their pets, which influences their opinion on pet ownership as they are more critical of it. But this is not the case for all accidental owners, so this group of owners is quite divided with regard to their views on exotic pet ownership. Just like 'life savers', they either evolve into 'new experience seekers' or 'advocates against exotic pet ownership'.

New experience seekers are people who are looking for something different. They tend to be quite new to exotic pet ownership and are relatively inexperienced in keeping pets. But their connection with their animals is the most emotional. In many cases, they had been interested in nature and animals as children and they are especially impressionable by the media with regard to the type of exotic animal they wish to own as a pet. Over time, they may either evolve into 'advocates against exotic pet ownership' or 'collectors'.

The most persistent group of exotic pet owners are **collectors**, who can be seen as a destination category amongst the owner types. The others have the potential to evolve into a collector, but collectors themselves are stable, as they tend to remain collectors. They are more knowledgeable about the animals and their needs and

those requirements play a more significant role when determining which animal they take on as a pet. Collectors are also more outspoken on the origin of the animal. Most prefer captive-bred animals over ones caught in the wild, based on the assumption that they are more docile.

They are also outspoken with regard to the (in their opinion positive) link between conservation and exotic pet ownership. They perceive their actions as contributing towards conservation efforts due to endangered wild habitats for some animal species.

They are less personally attached to individual animals and have less physical contact with them. But some view the promotion of exotic animal ownership as a personal goal and do so online while also sharing knowledge. The online aspect of the collectors' community is very important to them. It allows them to socialise with like-minded people and provides an opportunity to capitalise on their husbandry by selling pictures, animals and private petting opportunities with the animals.

Character traits pet owner

The EUCPN disseminated a questionnaire on the profile of illegal owners of exotic pets to all EU Member States in 2022. Most responses from the questionnaire point towards parrots and reptiles being the types of animals most commonly kept as exotic pets. The owners of these animals generally have the same profile, with one noteworthy difference.

Both reptile and parrot owners are mostly male and live in a suburban area. They enjoy financial stability or could even be considered to be well off financially and have a level of education ranging from secondary school education to a bachelor's degree.

The main difference is a slight difference in age. Whereas parrot owners tend to be between 26 and 40 years old, reptile owners are slightly older, and are between 30 and 50 years old.

Campaign concept

Taking the above into account and despite the difficulties and the incompleteness of the available intelligence, opportunities still exist to conduct a successful communication campaign. The EUCPN will proceed with the development of a short, animated video focusing on a popular exotic animal that is often kept illegally. This will most likely be an African Grey Parrot, given the fact that it is widely exploited in the illegal exotic pet trade and for breeding. But the focussing on snakes or reptiles is also possible. The video will also relate specifically to the corresponding profile as mentioned in the section above.

The goal is that the video will be disseminated via social media (e.g. Twitter, Instagram and Facebook). As these are popular platforms for selling exotic animals, it can be specifically directed towards the relevant target groups. The goal of the video is to explain to viewers how to obtain an exotic pet legally and what to watch out for in order to identify the unlawful selling of animals. This video will have voice-overs in several languages, depending on the country where it will be shown.

The video will refer viewers to a web page explaining the procedure in accordance with the applicable legislation in their country. This context-specific approach is crucial due to the significant variations in national and regional legislation between Member States. Links to other relevant websites may also be included.





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