



# Wild at heart

The cruelty of the exotic pet trade





**Left:** An African grey parrot with a behavioural feather-plucking problem, a result of suffering in captivity.

## Wildlife. Not Pets.

The exotic pet trade is one of the biggest threats to millions of wild animals. World Animal Protection's new Wildlife. Not Pets campaign aims to disrupt this industry and to protect wild animals from being poached from the wild and bred into cruel captivity, just to become someone's pet.

This campaign builds on sustained successful campaigning to protect wild animals from the cruel wildlife tourism industry. Since 2015, over 1.6 million people around the globe have taken action to move the travel industry. TripAdvisor and other online travel platforms have committed to stop profiting from wildlife cruelty. Over 200 travel companies worldwide have pledged to become elephant and wildlife-friendly.

Wildlife. Not Pets focuses a global spotlight on the booming global trade in wild animals kept as pets at home, also known as 'exotic pets'.

Most people aren't aware of the suffering of the animals in the exotic pet trade. Any wild animal in captivity is suffering. They are denied their natural habitats and instincts. As we will reveal, there is also heart-breaking suffering, and death on an unprecedented scale, for millions of animals. This campaign will educate the public about the suffering both in the trade and at home in captivity.

Everyone, from our supporters and pet-owners to the wider public has an important role to play in protecting millions of wild animals from terrible suffering. We will work together to uncover and build awareness of this suffering, and take action to stop the cruelty.

Companies, governments and international trade organisations involved in the wildlife pet trade, whether wittingly or not, all have a crucial role to play. They can cut out illegal wildlife crimes, and they can do more to protect wild animals from this cruellest of trades.

Now is the time to turn the tide on the exotic pet trade and keep wild animals in the wild, where they belong.

# Contents

<b>Wildlife. Not Pets.</b>	<b>02</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>05</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>08</b>
<b>Poached out of existence: Spotlight on African grey parrots</b>	<b>16</b>
Conservation concerns	17
Welfare concerns	18
Not good pets	19
Online trade: The new frontier	20
Illegal on many fronts	20
<b>From investigation to action: Airlines, the not so friendly skies</b>	<b>22</b>
Turkish Airlines - the poacher's airline of choice	23
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>26</b>





# Executive summary

Humans have been sharing their homes with domesticated animals for millennia. But a darker side of the pet trade has exploded in recent times: exotic pets, and the cruelty that is inevitable in the poaching, breeding, trade and ownership of wild animals.

History shows us that exotic pets have been around for thousands of years. But what was once a relatively small scale, elite operation is no longer. Today, these animals are caught up in a multibillion-dollar global industry. The value of the trade globally stands at USD \$30-42 billion, and \$20 billion of that is estimated to be generated from the illegal trade.<sup>1</sup>

Ease of access to transnational air travel and global internet connectivity are leading to the boom in trade in wildlife for pets by increasing both the accessibility to and the acceptability of owning a wild animal as a pet.

World Animal Protection believes that by tackling this growing concern through our two-pronged approach, we will be able to disrupt the trade and exploitation of wild animals and shift attitudes around the ownership of wild animals to create long-term, sustainable change.

The cruelty, suffering and impacts of the exotic pet trade should be examined by looking through the lens of the welfare of the animals, conservation of the species and human health impacts.

## Welfare conditions

Whether they are captured or 'farmed', exotic pets experience cruelty at every stage of the journey to a lifetime of captivity:

- Captive breeding facilities breed animal 'parents' repeatedly, often replacing them with new wild-caught animals when they have exhausted them for breeding purposes.<sup>2</sup>

- Breeding certain traits to create 'morphs' - animals that are specifically bred to be certain colours or patterns - can also result in neurological conditions and other disorders.<sup>3</sup>
- Exotic pets at pet fairs or shops live out their days without the space, social interaction or diet they would enjoy in the wild. Just because it's legal, it doesn't make it right.<sup>4</sup>
- The stress of capture can be fatal: although exact data is difficult to obtain, many hold concerns that mortality rates are extremely high for grey parrots. Post-capture and pre-export mortality rates for grey parrots have been estimated between 30-60% and as high as 70% - 90% in some instances.<sup>5</sup>

## Conservation

- The wildlife pet trade is a threat to wild animal populations. The trade has made some species, like African grey parrots, critically endangered, or even locally extinct. In Ghana 99% of the wild grey parrot population has been wiped out.<sup>6</sup>

## Impact on human health

- Contagious and sometimes highly dangerous illnesses can spread to humans. Some recent examples include SARS, West Nile Virus, and HIV to name a few.<sup>7</sup>
- Reptile related salmonella, for example, has the potential to be responsible for 27% of hospitalizations of children under 5 years of age.<sup>8</sup>

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**Post-capture and pre-export mortality rates for Grey parrots have been estimated between 30-60% and as high as 70% - 90% in some instances**

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Left: An African grey parrot in the wild.  
Credit: Michele D'Amico / Getty Images

## Poached to order: the fight for African grey parrots

In the wild, these beautiful, highly intelligent birds live in large groups and fly several kilometers a day to forage. They are monogamous and parent co-operatively.

Despite having the highest level of protection Appendix 1 of the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), African grey parrots are one of the most illegally trafficked birds, with an estimated 2-3 million deemed to have been poached from the wild over the last 40 years. World Animal Protection's 12 month undercover investigation revealed the sad reality that these birds are still in high demand and thousands of birds are illegally taken from wild to endure a life of cruelty in captivity.

Our evidence shows the process of snatching an African grey parrot out of the wild is inherently cruel: they are often lured to a sticky branch from which they can't escape. Their perilous journey from being caught, to time spent at a holding facility where they are held in dirty, dark facilities, fed inadequately and are left vulnerable to predators all before even making it to the planes. Many birds captured this way die even before they are brought to market.

If they survive this, their fate is to be crammed into crates and onto planes, approximately 60-80 birds in one box, sometimes for as many as 24 hours or longer. Although exact data is difficult to obtain, mortality rates post-capture and pre-export have been estimated to be as high as 70-90% in some cases.<sup>9</sup>

Being bred in captivity is no less cruel. Ill health and mental suffering are common. Unlike domesticated animals, these birds are typically only one or two generations away from their wild counterparts, yet denied from birth the opportunity to learn and grow, and fly, like wild birds.

Whether wild caught or bred in captivity, parrots are destined to a life of suffering: stress, boredom, isolation and bad diet all take their toll. The effects are many: feather plucking, aggression, chronic illnesses and malnutrition to name a few.

Unfortunately, few owners really understand the extent to which grey parrots are wild animals and not suited to life in captivity, no matter how caring and loving the owner is. And because they can live for several decades, very few humans can provide a singular home for the entire life of the bird. Emotional trauma follows every time they are rehomed.

## Disrupting the trade

It is clear from our investigations that legal protections alone are not enough to stop the trade of African grey parrots. Despite their ongoing trading privileges being suspended, the DRC continues to see thousands of birds being poached from their wild homes.

Known shipments that have been intercepted by enforcement authorities are significant: one contained approximately 340 birds.<sup>10</sup> Research undertaken by World Parrot Trust and World Animal Protection<sup>11</sup> exposed a hive of online trade activity that clearly show breaches of animal welfare standards in transit and in holding facilities, including the absence of perches, and overcrowding.

Our undercover investigations also tell us that bribery and corruption are factors in the circumventing of enforcement measures and government regulations, and traffickers are finding even more covert and clandestine ways to skirt the law.

And African greys aren't the only species to suffer in the same trade chain. The holding facility where we followed the poached parrots to also housed a variety of other animals: crested cranes, hornbills, and even a baby bonobo.

**Below:** Animals in cages in an export holding facility in Kinshasa, DRC.



## Turkish Airlines – the poacher’s plane of choice

Our investigation reveals Turkish Airlines and Turkish Cargo are enabling the exotic pet trade, despite making commitments to combat wildlife trafficking. Wildlife traffickers are using the airline and its cargo subsidiary to illegally transport wild-caught African grey parrots on flights from the DRC, Nigeria and Mali to countries in the Middle East, western and southern Asia.

By failing to properly check its cargo and train its staff, Turkish Airlines is putting these wild animals through immense cruelty and suffering and making them the poacher’s airline of choice. Shockingly, as recently as August 18, 2018<sup>12</sup>, African grey parrots were transported by Turkish Airlines between Kinshasa and Kuwait via Istanbul, with more than 60 found dead on arrival.

**World Animal Protection is calling on Turkish Airlines to stop transporting all birds, until it’s sure African grey parrots and other protected species aren’t being flown illegally on its planes.**



Above: African grey parrots during transportation.

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## A call to action



**JOIN US** in calling Turkish Airlines to stop transporting all birds, until it’s sure African grey parrots and other protected species aren’t being flown on its planes.



**PLEDGE** to protect wildlife and not buy wild exotic animals as pets. Wild animals belong in the wild.



**SHARE** the petition and help grow the movement for wildlife.



**Above:** The Indian star tortoise has a lifespan of up to 80 years.

## Introduction: Exotic pets past and present

Humans have been sharing their homes and workplaces with domesticated dogs, cats, horses and other animals for millennia. Thousands of years of selective breeding for specific traits have created - for better or for worse - animals that can, with proper care, live a full and rich life with their human companions.

Unfortunately, a darker and crueler facet of the pet trade has grown exponentially in recent times.

Exotic pets including birds, reptiles and many mammals have not been domesticated and are still wild animals.

The happiness and desires of the owner in caring for these animals is often at the physical and psychological expense of the pet, who suffers in captivity.

According to the history books, some cultures have been keeping exotic pets for thousands of years. Records show the ancient Egyptians kept exotic birds for companionship dating back to 4000 BC. The Song Dynasty of China (960-1279) were the first society documented to selectively breed fish for decoration. Once open water sailing became widespread, animals from 'new worlds' were traded and gifted among royalty and the elite. Animals never-before seen or taken



out of their natural environments began to become common status symbols – lions, leopards, tigers, elephants – in the menageries of some rich and powerful families across Europe. But what was once a relatively small-scale operation is no longer so; the twentieth century witnessed the popularity and trade of exotic pets increase rapidly and become more prevalent. Today, these animals are caught up in a multibillion-dollar global industry.

## Big money

Currently, the annual value of the wildlife trade stands at USD30-42.8 billion.<sup>13</sup> Shockingly, up to USD20 billion is estimated to be illegal – a substantial proportion of this economic value is in endangered and protected species being traded as pets. But whether captive bred or poached from their wild environment, the trade has a devastating impact on the animals forced to endure a life of captivity – mentally and physically. Legal or illegal, it's all cruel.

Below: A reptile at a pet expo in Florida, USA.



## What's driving the trade?

There are two big factors, namely ease of access to **transnational commercial air transport, and global internet connectivity**, that are helping to drive both the desire for and the availability of exotic pets and hastening a massive boom in the trade. In response, World Animal Protection is working on both fronts to stem the growth and ultimately start to shrink the size of the unnecessary and damaging trade in wildlife for pets.

This massive expansion of the exotic pet trade now causes millions and millions of wild animals to experience suffering, pain and premature death each year. It's also causing a catastrophic decline in some species and in biodiversity in some parts of the world. And because the trade in some of these animals can easily and unwittingly spread disease, they are also a major threat to human health and public safety.

This report outlines our specific concerns with elements of the trade that are often unknown to exotic pet owners. Often when the stark and undeniable cruelty inherent in the exotic pet trade is made obvious, potential buyers change their minds.

These concerns fall into three categories: **welfare, conservation and human health risks.**

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## Welfare concerns

Welfare concerns arise in both wild capture and in captive breeding facilities, at all stages of trade and transportation of these animals, and their sentencing of a lifetime in captivity.

### Taking wild animals from the wild

Every day, thousands of wild animals are caught - legally or illegally - or "farmed" and sold into a global multibillion-dollar industry. Suffering occurs at every step of the journey: from capture to handling, transport, holding, breeding, sale and the lifetime of captivity in the home. Over 500 species of birds and 500 species of reptiles are traded around the world<sup>14</sup>. And the journey is cruel. The mortality rate is high: in some instances, the post capture death rate has been as high as 90%.<sup>15</sup> Those who survive are subject to a lifetime of chronic physical and psychological suffering.

The methods used to snatch these animals from their natural habitats are cruel, barbaric and inhumane; the numbers of animals involved are equally shocking. Over 55,000 Indian star tortoises<sup>16</sup> were recorded to have been collected from the wild in a single year from just one of the many trade hubs used to traffic this animal from the wild. And up to two thirds of African grey parrots<sup>17</sup>, for example, will die during capture before being sold to traders. Simply put, poaching animals for the exotic pet trade is happening on an industrial scale with devastating results.

The animals that manage to survive the pain and suffering caused by their capture then face a perilous journey. They are sold to traders, packed into small containers or crates, often unable to breathe properly or move. Crammed into these small spaces, many, sometimes a vast majority, will suffocate, starve or succumb to diseases. Suitcases are stuffed with tortoises and snakes. Dark crates are filled with so many parrots that they sometime crush each other.,

Worse still is that the illegal and illicit elements of the trade are often aided by government corruption and inadequate enforcement.

### Captive breeding

Many animals caught from the wild end up in captive breeding facilities or farms.<sup>18</sup> Still more are bred in captivity themselves and then kept to produce offspring again and again. Being born in captivity does not make an animal domesticated - although they may become tame to the touch of humans they are still wild animals. The captive breeding industry causes its own set of distinct problems for the animals trapped within them.<sup>19</sup> It is by no means a safe and cruelty-free option for purchasing a domesticated pet.

**Below:** Indian star tortoise hatchlings are sorted and packaged to be smuggled out of India.



The selective breeding that takes place to produce certain fur markings and scale patterns as well as altering the natural size can have a negative impact on physical and mental health of the animal. This is particularly common in some snakes and other reptiles as buyers increasingly want genetically altered versions that bear little resemblance to their wild counterparts - designer breeds known as 'morphs'. It has been proven that snakes and reptiles who have been selectively bred to produce unique colours show signs of neurological conditions such as disorders to the central nervous system, with scientific reports indicating possible negative welfare impacts on the animals affected.<sup>20</sup>

### **Pet fairs and shops: Peddling cruelty**

Exotic pet fairs and expositions (commonly referred to as "expos") are widespread in many countries, attracting a wide variety of visitors from seasoned owners to complete beginners. Investigations carried out by World Animal Protection and our partners have highlighted the typically poor conditions animals are kept in at these large-scale events. Physical pet shops continue to be able to sell exotic pet species in many markets, normalizing the sale of wild animals and feeding the misconception that it is acceptable to keep these animals far from the freedom, space, interaction and diet they have in their natural habitat. More often than not it is the very minimum of standards of captivity that are preached and adhered to.

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**Exotic pets have been observed to display behaviours that researchers have likened to emotional trauma in humans**

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### **Lifelong captivity**

For those animals that do survive the inhumane trade system, a life in captivity as a pet causes further trauma. Exotic pets have been observed to display behaviours that researchers have likened to emotional trauma in humans. Parrots rip out their own feathers due to isolation and chronic stress - not dissimilar to self-harm in humans. Asian otters have been observed to display repetitive destructive behaviours when kept in captivity, similar to people suffering from obsessive compulsive behaviour.<sup>21</sup>

There is no aspect of the exotic pet trade that is free from suffering. Ultimately that's because these animals are not meant to be pets, and therefore no amount of love, affection and quality care can ever make up for the harm that is inherent in the trade.

**Below:** Iguanas for sale at a pet expo.





## Conservation concerns

Research has shown that the exotic pet trade is now a key threat to many species' survival with large-scale poaching and theft from the wild devastating natural populations – adding to existing threats such as habitat loss. The trade has made some populations critically endangered and, in some cases, locally extinct. Some species are targeted by poachers at their most vulnerable stages of life (i.e. babies, juveniles, and egg bearing females). In some cases, animals that have already been extensively exploited for other reasons, such as hides, fur, or other body parts, are now under attack for exploitation as exotic pets, so measures to protect them have had limited success.

## Human health impacts

And if the horrifying impacts on animals and ecosystems wasn't enough of a concern, the risk of highly contagious and dangerous illnesses is both real and likely to become more common and more intense.

Zoonotic diseases – or diseases that can transmit between animals and humans – can have lasting and permanent health impacts. The most severe are both highly contagious and lethal. Ebola, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and avian flu are three examples in recent decades that have had serious, large-scale, sometimes global impacts on human health.<sup>22</sup>

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**By the numbers, the human toll of zoonoses is enormous:**

- They cause about a **billion cases of human illness and millions of deaths** each year.<sup>23</sup>

**The economic impact is also profound:**

- The 2003 SARS outbreak alone cost the Chinese economy USD \$25.3 billion.<sup>24</sup>
  - By one estimate the economic damage of emerging zoonotic illnesses is hundreds of billions USD over the past 20 years.
  - The World Health Organization and most infectious disease experts agree that the origin of future human pandemics is likely to be zoonotic.<sup>25</sup>
- .....

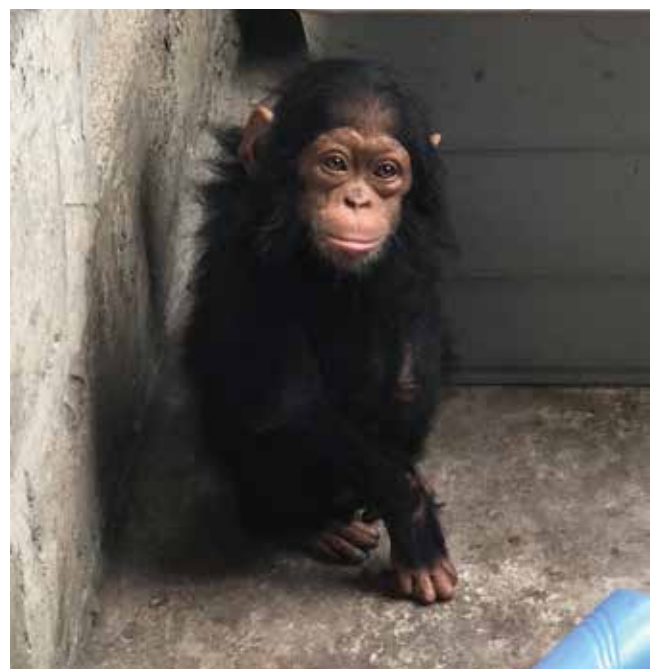
SARS, Ebola and avian flu are the severe examples of zoonotic diseases.<sup>26</sup> Many, like anthrax, tuberculosis, plague, yellow fever and influenza have come from domestic animals, poultry and livestock. However, with changes in the environment, habitat and human activity, it's now thought that as much as **70% of emerging diseases** come from wildlife.<sup>27</sup>

For example, 280,000 cases of reptile related salmonellosis (RRS), a zoonose transmitted by reptiles<sup>28</sup>, were diagnosed in the US in the 60's and 70's as having been transmitted from turtles. When the turtle trade was banned in the US in 1975, the country saw a 77% drop in human disease in one year. But today roughly 70,000 cases of RRS are diagnosed, due to the proliferation of pet snakes and lizards. RRS has the potential to be responsible for 27% of hospitalized children under 5 years of age.<sup>29</sup>

**“In effect, an exotic animal may harbor a raft of potentially infective microbes and microparasites making any animal a possible Trojan Horse of infection and infestation...”<sup>30</sup>**

We know that contagious illnesses can travel fast. And now that market transactions can be virtually instantaneous, and communities of interest can find each other on social media at the push of a button, the sale of exotic pets – and the illnesses they can spread – couldn't be easier, or faster.

**Below:** An infant bonobo found at a parrot holding facility in the DRC.





## Online trading of exotic pets

The glamorization of exotic pets through pop culture and social media masks cruelty, and falsely legitimizes the trade.

With even a cursory glance through Instagram, Weibo or Facebook you will find hundreds of photos and videos showcasing everything from tigers and sugar gliders, to ball pythons and turtles, with thousands of likes to each post. What we think looks cute on YouTube is actually images of animals that have been sentenced to a lifetime of suffering. Asian otters are one of the latest victims, a current trendy 'it' animal and subject of massive online attention, social sharing and ultimately purchasing by unwitting pet owners. World Animal Protection research shows that the 'cute' videos prospective purchasers see shared across social media influences people's decision to buy a wild animal: a full 15% of exotic pet owners surveyed found inspiration for their purchase via YouTube videos.<sup>31</sup>

We know that social media is a largely unregulated marketplace. Facebook has been identified as a key online channel facilitating the sale of exotic pets, and although they

have committed publicly to ban the trade of endangered species on their site, evidence shows the company is not adequately enforcing this in practice. Thousands of animals continue to be listed on groups dedicated to the trade and to specific species every single month, making the buying and selling of wild animals alarmingly simple.<sup>32</sup>

Without question, the vast majority of exotic pet owners love their animals. The challenge comes with the fact they are usually unaware of the horrors their beloved pet may have experienced or the stress that keeping them causes. In our research we have found that over 47% of first-time exotic pets buyers spend little to no time researching the animal they purchased.<sup>33</sup> As a result, they are likely also unaware of the conservation status of their pets in the wild. At a time when the destruction of natural habitats and the effects of climate change already poses a clear danger to the survival of many species, the exotic pet trade is yet another one of these threats – one that with greater government and corporate diligence, could be entirely prevented.

**Below:** Otters being used as a tourist attraction in a cafe in Tokyo, Japan.  
**Credit:** Fernando Machado





Image: A flock of African grey parrots mid-flight.  
Credit: Cyril Ruoso / naturepl.com







Above: An African grey parrot in the wild.

## Poached out of existence: Spotlight on African grey parrots

The African grey parrot is historically among the most popular bird species kept as pets in Europe, the USA and the Middle East where they are seen as an attractive pet due to their long life span, their ability to mimic human speech (their vocal mimicry skills are similar to young humans), and their high intelligence (similar to primates). They form large flocks in the wild, but are now an endangered species - with populations estimated to have decreased by up to 79% over the past 50 years.<sup>34</sup>

Wild African grey parrots are highly social animals and nest in large groups. It's common to see over 100 birds perched

in one tree, comprising of small family groups. During the day they fly long distances in small flocks to forage, flying up to several kilometres a day. They have complex social relationships and tend to cooperate with other members of their group.

African grey parrots form monogamous pairs, and both parents take care of their chicks. Other members of the flock also help to take care of the young - with each chick having at least four adults caring for them. Nesting lasts from April to November, ending with the start of the rainy season.



## Conservation concerns

Of all the types of birds in the world, parrots are among those most threatened with extinction. The wild populations of many parrot species are exploited in large numbers to supply the global pet trade. As a result, almost the entire order is protected by the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the international agreement that commits governments worldwide to regulate international trade in endangered animals and plants.

The African grey parrot includes two species: The Timneh – slightly smaller in size with darker grey feathers; and the Congo – a lighter coloured and larger parrot with a red tail. The African grey parrot's range extends over 3 million kilometres across the lowland forests of West Africa to the Congo basin.

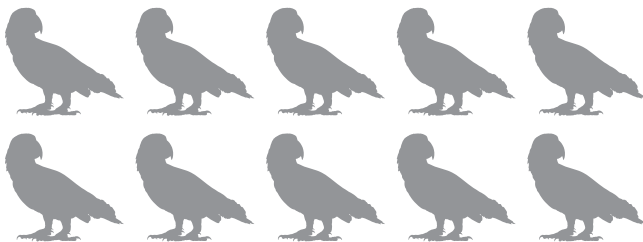
In addition to legal trade records with CITES, African greys are considered one of the world's most illegally trafficked birds, with an estimated 2-3 million deemed to have been poached from African forests over the last 40 years. It is estimated that up to 21% of the wild population is harvested for the trade every year.<sup>35</sup>

That is why in 2016 a number of measures were taken by CITES to protect these birds. First, the DRC was placed under trade suspension for their inability to enforce good trading practices, which was reaffirmed at the most recent Standing Committee 70. Secondly, it was decided that South African captive breeding facilities were prohibited from trade without CITES approval and registration. Finally, the species was ultimately uplisted to Appendix I of CITES, which provides legal protection to prohibit almost all commercial trade of African greys.

Below: An African grey parrot in captivity.

The legal and illegal trade of African grey parrots has resulted in a catastrophic decline over the last 47 years: Ghana has lost up to 99% of its population. In Togo they are considered locally extinct.

1990's



2010's



Annorbah et al (2016)



## Welfare concerns

Wild-caught African grey parrots suffer in many ways along the supply chain from the point of capture, transport, and ultimately a life-time of captivity.

To catch them, poachers will use a sticky, gum-like substance painted on branches, and employ a lure bird, who is often injured and tied to the tree branch to provoke screeching, to provoke these highly social animals to investigate. Once a bird perches on the gummy branch, its claws and feet become fixed and they cannot escape. Not surprisingly, many of the birds captured this way die before they are even brought to market: as many as 66% do not survive this stage.<sup>36</sup> And for the lure bird this scene plays out over and over again.

Our investigators witnessed a holding facility in the DRC where the birds were denied access to adequate space as they awaited transport. The containers were dirty and poorly maintained, and the birds were fed a deficient diet. Some birds showed signs of injury and illness.

Our investigators were also shown the shipping boxes used to export birds from one particular location: wooden crates a mere 30x45x80 cm wide would be used to ship around 60-80 birds.

For the relatively small numbers of captured birds that survive all the way to purchase by a pet owner, they are sentenced to lifelong suffering of a different sort. Because African greys are both highly intelligent and social, they suffer when forced to live in isolation and fed a poor diet. Their life of captivity can lead to severe psychological distress and even death.

Parrot farms are big business. The pets bred in these facilities can be just one or two generations away from wild birds, retaining the natural instincts of wild grey parrots. Captive breeding creates or fosters a host of problems related to physical health and mental well-being. Many do not survive captive breeding and for those who do, there are serious psychological consequences: as the birds are kept as breeding pairs, they are deprived of the socialization their wild counterparts engage in. They don't have the opportunity to learn natural behaviours from their parents, receiving only human 'training' before they are put up for sale. After they arrive at a retail location they often endure many more months of suffering, contained in small cages, subjected to bright lights, noise and exposure from which they can't escape, creating fear and stress in these animals.

**Below:** A pet African grey parrot display abnormal feather-plucking behaviour.



## Not good pets

For starters, the very fact that they like to travel great distances in the wild, and tend to live in large social groups means it is inherently cruel to force a parrot to live a solitary life as an indoor pet. In the wild, they are never alone. In a home they cannot possibly be provided the space and the social connections they crave. The single, housebound parrot suffers significant emotional and psychological distress.

Feather plucking is incredibly common among captive African grey parrots and has been likened to obsessive compulsive behaviours in humans. It is associated with stress, boredom and lack of socialization with other parrots or ability to fly the vast distances they instinctively crave. Those who pluck their feathers in captivity have been found to have higher corticosterone levels than wild birds, indicating high levels of chronic stress. Poor diet is also common in captivity, leading to health problems such as hypocalcaemia syndrome, tremors and seizures, resulting from diets that don't and can't replicate the nutrition they are genetically built to live on in the wild.

Furthermore, many pet owners sadly have no idea how to take care of these birds. They were given minimal or misleading information at point of purchase, or nothing at all, and as previously mentioned, few owners do adequate research on their own.

We know African grey parrots are very smart birds. In addition to the fact that they can be taught to mimic speech, they can identify, request, refuse, categorize, and count more than 80 different objects, and respond to questions about colour and shape.

In captivity, African grey parrots have been taught to perform tasks that were once thought to be unique to humans and non-human primates. Their intelligence is yet another reason that a life in captivity is cruel. These birds need stimulation and activity to match their intelligence, yet pet-owners are rarely informed about how to care for the minds and bodies of these beautiful, social, intelligent animals.



**Above:** Stress caused by captivity can lead to abnormal behaviours in African grey parrots, like feather plucking.

Because pair bonding is their instinctive tendency, parrots can form very strong attachments to a singular owner. While some owners can find this bonding tendency appealing, sometimes all other creatures they encounter, human or non-human, are treated as competition and become targets for aggression.

And after all of this, because the lifespan of an African grey parrot is incredibly long – they can live up to 100 years in captivity – few people can provide a singular home for the entire life of the bird. They suffer emotionally as they are often rehomed repeatedly throughout their lives.

There are a number of health issues that African grey parrots suffer related to life in captivity. Nasal and sinus infections and respiratory disease are common afflictions.

In the wild parrots are primarily fruit eaters, but all too often they are fed an all-seed, low calcium diet. Hypocalcaemia syndrome (low calcium in the blood) is a common illness in African greys as a result. Symptoms include tremors, tetanus, and seizures.

African greys can also be incredibly messy and destructive in the home. They replicate their natural foraging behaviours in captivity and it is a normal for them to throw food on the floor throughout the day and destroy their cage and household surroundings. Their beaks are incredibly powerful and can be easily used to break household objects.



## Online trade: The new frontier

Not surprisingly, as e-commerce continues to occupy a growing proportion of global commerce, much of the trade of parrots now also occurs online. The use of the internet and social media to buy and sell exotic pets is really a double-edged sword: while it has certainly made the transactions easier to conduct, it has also created a monitoring and enforcement opportunity for regulators.

World Animal Protection and the World Parrot Trust recently conducted a groundbreaking study of online transactions<sup>37</sup> involving African grey parrots online. It found posts from 21 exporters. 85% of their posts came from the DRC. Of these, 33% occurred after the suspension of trade from that country. And 34% occurred after CITES put the species on their most-threatened list. Clearly, though legal protections are important and necessary, they alone cannot stop the trade.

Our investigation also made it clear that online trade is a significant threat to wild parrot populations, and to their welfare, simplifying the connection from buyer to seller and resulting in illegal trades of large numbers of birds, some in excess of 150 parrots. One shipment that was intercepted contained approximately 340 birds.<sup>38</sup> Many of the images in posts also revealed breaches of animal welfare standards in transit and in holding facilities, including the absence of perches, and overcrowded containers of parrots held together in a single compartment.

Additional enforcement, using methods similar to those used in the study to catch online activity, is needed to ensure that these animals are truly protected. Online platforms and enforcement agencies cannot turn a blind eye to the illegal activity taking place.

The openness with which traders publicly shared their information on illegal trade suggests that traders are quite likely unafraid of enforcement. It's no wonder, then, that TRAFFIC, the leading wildlife trade organization, now recognizes social media as the "new epicenter" for trade in exotic pets.<sup>39</sup>

## Illegal on many fronts

So, despite the legal protections these birds enjoy, evidence is clear that African grey parrots are being taken from the wild and sold to private collectors by the hundreds. An extensive twelve-month long World Animal Protection investigation uncovered an elaborate network of poachers, middlemen, government agents, transportation providers and importers continues to profit, finding ever more covert and clandestine ways to skirt the legal protections these birds have been granted by international law.

Our investigation in the DRC indicates, sadly, that bribery and corruption are commonplace in the circumventing of government regulations and to protect the interests of the traffickers at the expense of supposed protected animals. Corruption and/or bribery could also be a factor in the expedition of shipments through the necessary airport clearances and onto planes.

Another tactic used by traffickers is to mix green and grey parrots in one shipment. One operator confided that they would cram the shipping boxes with a mix of birds, which they would document as only consisting of Green parrots. The trafficker would even put green gauze over the window so that if someone were to peer in the window of the shipping crate all the birds would look green rather than a mix.

African greys aren't the only species falling victim to the illegal trade found along this supply chain. Our investigators were also informed by a woman at one holding location that she sees all kinds of animals from various sources coming through the illegal facility, including pangolins, crested cranes, hornbills and many more. She also showed our investigators a baby bonobo on a leash that had apparently been taken intentionally for a customer. Facilities like the one our investigators went to are for short-term holding after a buyer has already been secured. Like the parrots, these animals are not opportunistically poached and kept until there is a buyer because it is too expensive to care for them. Instead, they are poached to order, when a buyer is already lined up, and kept for a short period of time.

**Right:** During the day, African grey parrots fly several kilometres in small flocks to forage







**Image:** Captured grey parrots being put in a basket for transport to market.  
**Credit:** FTL2 project / Lukuru foundation

## From investigation to action: Airlines, the not so friendly skies

A significant actor in the supply chain of the industry, and in relation to the proliferation of exotic pets in general, is the airline industry. Though the responsibility for enforcement lies with governments, airlines are certainly required to uphold the law, and their staff can play a critical role in gathering intelligence and sharing information with enforcement agencies.

The March 15, 2016 signing of the Buckingham Palace Declaration by over 30 transport and wildlife trade NGO leaders, and 48 airlines<sup>40</sup>, was a key step in the industry recognizing their responsibility to help shut down routes exploited by illegal wildlife traffickers, and the criminals who exploit them. But words need to turn into action.



## Turkish Airlines – the poacher’s airline of choice

One airline which is a signatory to this agreement is Turkish Airlines. Sadly, there is strong evidence that the airline is being used by traffickers to illegally trade in African grey parrots.

World Animal Protection investigations show that despite the CITES trade suspension, large numbers of wild-caught African grey parrots have been transported illegally on flights from the DRC to countries in the Middle East and western and southern Asia on Turkish Airlines flights.

.....

**As recently as August 18, 2018, African grey parrots were transported by Turkish Airlines between Kinshasa and Kuwait via Istanbul, with more than 60 found dead on arrival.**

.....

World Animal Protection has approached Turkish Airlines and Turkish Cargo directly asking them to uphold the agreement where they committed to “not knowingly facilitate or tolerate the carriage of wildlife products, where trade in those products is contrary to [CITES] and as such is illegal under international and national laws.”

In our September 2018 letter to the company, we urged Turkish Airlines to cease transporting all bird species until there is mutual confidence that African grey parrots and other endangered species are not being flown by the airline.

This is the only appropriate course of action given that there have been multiple reports of African birds exported from countries with no CITES registered breeding facilities, yet declared as having been captive-bred. This is being done in order to circumvent the law and bypass bans on wild bird exports. **Through our undercover investigation multiple sources along the supply chain indicated Turkish Airlines as the preferred airline to export the birds illegally.**

## CALL TO ACTION



**JOIN US** Call on Turkish Airlines to stop transporting all birds, until its sure African grey parrots and other protected species aren’t being flown on its planes.



**PLEDGE** to protect wildlife and not buy wild exotic animals as pets. Wild animals belong in the wild.



**SHARE** the petition and help grow the movement for wildlife.



**Image:** Wild African grey parrots are highly social and nest in large groups, containing up to 10,000 individuals, comprising of small family groups.

# Conclusion:

## A wild future for wild animals

World Animal Protection is heavily engaged in a three-pronged campaign to disrupt this trade and promote solutions that will drive change for wild animals.

### We are doing this by:

-  Changing public perceptions of the acceptability of keeping wild animals as pets.
-  With corporations, like the airline industry, to increase their awareness of the animal impact of the exotic pet trade and their role in disrupting the trade.
-  Working closely with international bodies to increase the legal protection offered to these species and improve regulations in regards to animals traded as exotic pets.



**With this approach, together we can make a real difference to the lives of millions of animals who are threatened – by suffering or survival - by the burgeoning trade in wildlife.**





## Changing perceptions

Most owners of exotic pets are unaware of the horrific trade systems or the devastating impact captivity can have on their pet. We are working to change perceptions, awareness and understanding of the issues associated with keeping wild animals. Our investigations work plays a key role in this, bringing to light for pet owners the horrors of the trade. We know from our own research that awareness shifts attitudes, and ultimately reduces consumer demand.

- **First time buyers:** World Animal Protection research indicates that the percentage of people considering a first-time purchase of an exotic pet who actually proceed falls by 11% once they are made aware of the facts around the cruelty of keeping a wild animal as a pet.
- **Existing owners:** 40% of exotic pet owners are less likely to buy again once they're aware of the associated trade and welfare issues.

## Disrupting trade

We continue to pressure for enforcement of, and improvements to CITES to address specific international trade concerns.

Since its inception in 1975, 94% (183) of the world's countries are signed up to follow CITES guidelines, offering levels of protection to roughly 5,800 animal species (and 29,000 plant species) according to their conservation status. The agreement is the cornerstone of international conservation by deterring illegal trade.

By working closely with CITES officials, we aim to increase the welfare and legal protection offered to species and improve the treaty's regulations in regards to animals traded as exotic pets. As we know from our investigations into African grey parrots, the illegal trade still occurs and ending worldwide demand for exotic pets is the key to disrupting the industry – however, improved legal protection is an important step in gaining international recognition and improved protection to these species.

Additionally, we continue to work with and submit evidence to partner organizations and enforcement officials to help expose the illegal activity we uncovered.

## Lobbying, advocacy and corporate partnerships

We are lobbying governments in key targeted countries (Canada, Brazil and the Netherlands) to enact legislation to restrict the keeping of exotic pets and improve enforcement around the selling/keeping of Exotic Pets.

We are engaging corporate stakeholders in the industry - both the transportation industry, such as airlines and shipping companies and on the ground retailers outlets like pet stores and online platforms that support the trade in wild animals across identified consumer countries (US, Canada, Netherlands, China and United Kingdom) to inspire their awareness of the animal impact of the exotic pet trade and support the campaign.

**Below:** An African grey parrot in the wild.



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Image: An African grey parrot in the wild.

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World Animal Protection is the operating name of World Society for the Protection of Animals.

Company Limited by Guarantee in England and Wales, Registration No. 4029540.

Registered Charity 1081849