

# 'Astonishing': Global demand for exotic pets is driving a massive trade in unprotected wildlife

October 7 2022, by Freyja Watters and Phill Cassey



Otter sold via Instagram in Indonesia. Credit: Instagram

Global demand for exotic pets is [increasing](#), a trend partly caused by social media and a shift from physical pet stores to [online marketplaces](#).

The United States is [one of the biggest](#) markets for the [wildlife trade](#). And our [new research](#) has identified an astonishing number of unregulated wild-caught animals being brought into the U.S.—at a rate 11 times greater than animals regulated and protected under the relevant global convention.

Wildlife trade can have major negative consequences. It can [threaten](#) the wild populations from which animals and plants are harvested, and introduce novel [invasive species](#) to new environments. It can also lead to [diseases](#) transmitted from wildlife to humans and threaten the [welfare](#) of trafficked animals.

Tackling this problem requires an [international effort](#)—particularly by rich nations where the demand for [exotic pets](#) is greatest.

## Shining a light on the pet market

Most [live animals](#) transported through the wildlife trade are destined for the global, multi-billion dollar exotic pet market. Captive breeding supplies a portion of this market, but many species are collected from the wild—often illegally.

Animals such as [otters](#), [slow lorises](#) and galagos or "[bushbabies](#)" are frequently depicted on [social media](#) as cute, and with human-like feelings and behaviors. This helps create demand for such species as pets which drives both the illegal and legal wildlife trades.

Non-native animals frequently smuggled [into Australia](#) in the past, include the corn snake, leopard gecko and red-eared slider turtle. Reptiles and birds are among the most commonly trafficked species because they can be easily transported.

Species deemed at risk from international trade are regulated through the

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora ([CITES](#)). It aims to ensure sustainable and traceable legal [international trade](#).

But the [convention lists](#) less than 10% of all described plants and [terrestrial vertebrates](#), and less than 1% of all fish and [invertebrate species](#). No international regulatory framework exists to monitor the trade of the many unlisted species.

Australia has rigorous regulations for exotic pet ownership and trade. Broadly, our [native wildlife](#) cannot be commercially exported.

However, Australia's fauna is [poached from the wild](#) and illegally exported for the international pet market. Once the animal is smuggled out of Australia, its [trade in recipient countries](#) is often not monitored or restricted.

For example, [research](#) last year showed four subspecies of Australia's shingleback lizard—one of which [is endangered](#)—were being illegally extracted from the wild and smuggled out of the country, to be sold across Asia, Europe and North America.

This lack of overseas regulation prompted the former Morrison government to push for [127 native reptile species](#) targeted by international wildlife smugglers to be listed under CITES. They include blue tongue skinks and numerous gecko species.

But in the meantime, the global illegal wildlife trade continues. Our new research analyzed the extent of this, by focusing on the movement of unlisted species to and from the U.S.



Unregulated global trade threatens the wild populations of the Asian water dragon. Credit: Wikimedia

## What we found

The U.S. is one of the few countries that maintains detailed records of all declared wildlife trade, including species not listed under CITES.

[We examined](#) a decade of data on wild-harvested, live vertebrate animals entering the U.S. Most would have been headed for the pet trade. We found 3.6 times the number of unlisted species in U.S. imports compared with CITES-listed species—1,356 versus 378 species.

Overall, 8.84 million animals from unlisted species were

imported—about 11 times more than animals from CITES-listed species. More than a quarter of unlisted species faced conservation threats—including those with declining populations and those threatened with extinction.

For example, we found a substantial trade of the unlisted [Asian water dragon](#). These bright green lizards are native to Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma and southern China, and are considered vulnerable.

In the decade to 2018, more than 575,000 Asian water dragons were imported to the U.S. from Vietnam. The species has been [proposed for inclusion](#) in CITES. But decades of unregulated global trade poses a major threat to the survival of native populations.

## **How do we fix this?**

Our study highlights the urgent need to monitor all traded wildlife species, not just those listed under CITES.

The biodiversity of life on Earth is under enormous pressure. Given this, and the other harms caused by the wildlife trade, this lack of regulation and monitoring is unacceptable.

For a species to be considered for listing under CITES, a national government must demonstrate that regulation is needed to prevent trade-related declines. But if trade in the species has never been monitored, how can that need be proven?

Sadly, the trade of many species is not formally regulated until it's too late for their [wild populations](#). Clearly, tighter regulation is needed to prevent this decline.

Traded wildlife [predominantly flows](#) from lower-income to higher-income countries. Many source countries do not possess the frameworks needed to monitor the harvest and export of unlisted species.

So what should be done? First, all nations should follow the lead of the U.S. and record species-level data for all wildlife imported and exported. This information should be gathered as part of a standardized data management system.

Such a system would increase compliance with the rules and make the origin of wildlife easier to trace. It would allow trade data to be shared and integrated between countries and allow timely assessment of species which may need further protection.

And second, affluent countries—where demand for exotic pets is largest—must take the lead on sustainable trade practices. This should include supporting supply countries and pushing for better data collection.

Such measures are vital to protecting both wildlife and human well-being.

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