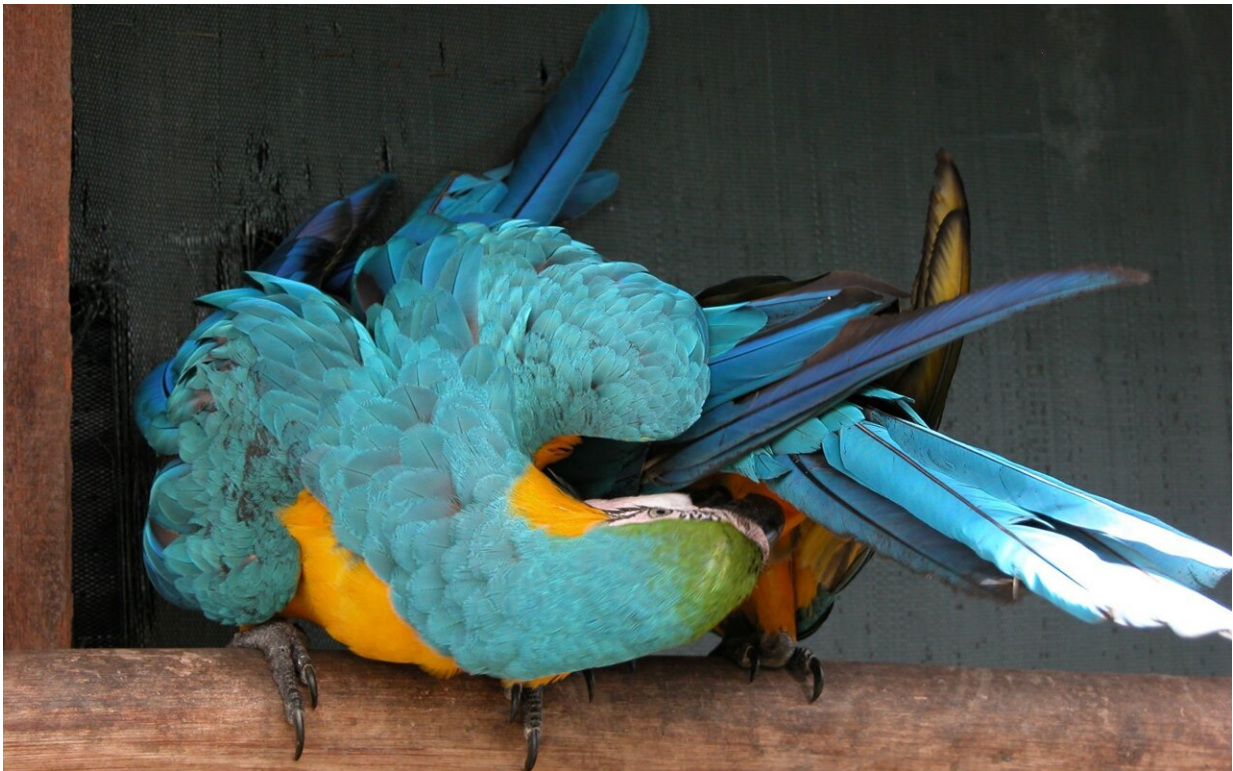


Large survey for exotic pet owners reveals concern for conservation

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The majority of respondents preferring birds as exotic pets expressed preferences for large parrots, such as the "Guacamayos." An example of Blue-and-yellow macaw (*Ara ararauna*) in the picture. Credit: Anna Hausmann

When exotic species such as parrots, snakes, monkeys or aquarium fishes are kept as pets, this may lead to unsustainable trade and

negatively impact the conservation of these species globally. Understanding what drives demand among keepers may help inform adequate conservation strategies to address unsustainable trade.

In a new article published in the journal *Biological Conservation*, a team of researchers from the University of Helsinki, University of Jyväskylä, and University of Kent assessed preferences and motivations for owning exotic pets, by asking more than 300 keepers across 33 countries in an anonymous survey translated into six languages.

Overall, the study found that exotic pet keepers were concerned about [species conservation](#) and preferred captive-bred exotic pets and/or [species](#) that were commonly found in the wild and available in the market, suggesting that respondents' preferences may be aligned with at least some conservation objectives (e.g., sustainable use). Moreover, while respondents favored rare aesthetic or morphological traits, they disregarded animals of wild origin, under higher risk of extinction, and under trade restrictions.

Passionate about the species

The study also found that the most important reasons for exotic pet keeping were relational motivations, such as caring about the exotic pet, as well as learning and being passionate about the species.

"Keepers may establish emotional relationships with their exotic pets and may be concerned by the fact that their interest and care does not impact, but instead supports the conservation of the species in the wild," says Dr. Anna Hausmann, a conservation scientist leading the study.

"However, while respondents showed feelings of care, interest, and responsibility towards the conservation of exotic pet species, practices of breeding, trading, keeping and other close contact opportunities (e.g.,

exotic pet cafes) present several conservation and [animal welfare](#) challenges, which can potentially threaten both species and people's well-being (e.g., spread of zoonotic disease). Keeping exotic pets may represent a way people express, and practice, care toward other-than-human natures, which, however, may not be aligned with conservation goals."

The study used an [online survey](#) where respondents were asked to choose the most and least preferred characteristics in various combinations of hypothetical exotic pets for sale, and indicate their motivations to acquire them.

"The study followed state of the art methodologies for assessing preferences using experimental designs, resulting in the likelihood that each characteristic could be chosen as best or worst when acquiring exotic pets," says Iain Fraser, professor of agri-environmental economics at the University of Kent, who co-authored the study.

Rarity fascinates

Rare attractive aesthetic features of species were sought after by consumers, and respondents supported captive breeding of species as a source for exotic pets. However, the combined preference for rare aesthetic features and for captive-bred animals may lead to the deliberate selection of individual animals for breeding purposes based on specific traits through intensive breeding, in which animals are potentially taken from the wild, or artificially selected for rare aesthetics that do not exist in the wild.

"Certification systems of origin that supports animal welfare and conservation may be one option to help support a more sustainable trade in exotic pet species," says Associate Professor Enrico Di Minin, the senior author of the study, who leads the Helsinki Lab of

Interdisciplinary Conservation Science at the University of Helsinki.

"However, attention should be paid to challenges throughout the [supply chain](#) and not to incentivize consumers' preferences for rare genetic features as this may pose a risk to the conservation of species in the wild."

Feelings of care and curiosity and being passionate about the species were dominant motivations for keeping exotic pets. "In order to enhance conservation of exotic pet species and people's well-being, there is need to explore alternative ways of conceiving and practicing how people care about non-human natures," says Dr. Gonzalo Cortés-Capano a research Fellow at the School of Resource Wisdom, University of Jyväskylä, who co-authored the paper.

"Care, as embodied and practiced in the context of human-exotic pet relations, can act as an important motivation for stewardship, supporting conservation goals if redirected towards caring about species in their own habitats. Existing frameworks such as ethics of care and relational values may provide insights to better understand how to foster meaningful expressions of care with animals in the wild, such as in people's gardens, neighborhoods, or nearby [natural areas](#), as an alternative to keeping animals as [exotic pets](#) at home."

"Understanding demand, and the role of relational dimensions, are crucial when planning [conservation](#) initiatives and policies to address wildlife trade, which is a major threat to biodiversity," concludes Dr. Anna Hausmann.

More information: Anna Hausmann et al, Assessing preferences and motivations for owning exotic pets: Care matters, *Biological Conservation* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.biocon.2023.110007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2023.110007)

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