

Exotic Animal Ownership and Regulations

Amending New Jersey Species Restriction, Bans, and Requirements

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Summary

The purpose of this whole project was to attempt to make a difference or at least get a better understanding of the issues surrounding the banning of owning certain kinds of exotic pets. Julie's original concern went back to her not being able to transport her pet bird and lizard, Bearded Dragon, under her seat with her on a plane. Instead the airline insisted they be kept in storage beneath which can be extremely stressful especially for the bird, which is an African Gray Parrot, a species known for being extremely intelligent but also at the same time, very sensitive. My (Chris) issue had more to do with private responsible owners not being legally allowed to own certain species that really have no obvious reason for being unfit pets in the state of New Jersey. The species I was particularly focused on were salamanders belonging to the genus, *amystoma*. Their common names are the Tiger Salamander and the Axolotl. The first action we took to gain more information about transportation regulations and ownership regulations was to make a trip over to Hamburg, Pennsylvania to attend a reptile show, <http://www.hamburgreptileshow.com/>, which is held there every other month. Reptile shows are gatherings for pet reptile enthusiasts to congregate, buy, trade, sell or just observe captive reptiles and other exotic pets. An educational seminar was also given on exotic animals, their ownership requirements, and their regulations. Editorials were submitted to Reptiles Magazine in an attempt to make the public aware of the regulations and bans on exotic animals in New Jersey.

Video Link

Exotic Animal Education Seminar Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=col27S6WrGI>

Exotic Animal Education Seminar Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhNht98FeNU>

The Issue: Exotic Animals

The biggest reason why we wanted to attend this reptile show in particular is that it is one of the few in the area with “hot” reptiles. This is a slang term used by reptile enthusiasts to refer to any venomous animal. Set up amongst other breeders of less harmful species we found several companies selling cobras, rattlesnakes and other pit vipers as well as many other potentially dangerous varieties of venomous snakes. At one table, I even found a Gila monster, a species of venomous lizard. In addition to venomous reptiles there were also animals being sold that were dangerous in other ways like Alligators and large Pythons. What is interesting is the fact that none of these animals is legal to own in the state of New Jersey. However, they are allowed in Pennsylvania. We took the time to speak with the vendors of these animals and asked them questions regarding any sort of policy they have selling their animals to customers. Most companies said they would not sell to any potential customer under the age of eighteen. Other than that, however, as long as a customer had the money, the reptile was theirs. They said that they do not check what state a customer is from when selling. If an animal is illegal to own in a person’s state, that is their responsibility, not the vendor’s. The same could be said concerning safety. It is assumed by the vendor that if a person is buying a potentially deadly animal, then he or she knows how to properly and safely care for it. In all honesty, this is probably true. The majorities of buyers of potentially dangerous exotic pets do in fact know what they are doing and very rarely is anyone seriously injured. The risk is still there, however. I like to compare owning a venomous reptile like a cobra to owning a gun. Guns are potentially deadly. They are illegal to own in some places and even in the places that they are legal; the owner must have a permit in order to buy. The two most glaring differences between guns and venomous reptiles to me is that a) there is no need for a permit when buying the reptile as long as it’s in a state where they are allowed, like Pennsylvania and b) unlike a gun, a cobra has a mind of its own. If its enclosure is not secure, this “gun” can escape and hide for days and perhaps shoot somebody if it feels a need to. As I said earlier, however, very few owners of these animals actually ever are seriously injured. Most people with common sense do not buy a pet that is potentially deadly unless he or she is already confident and experienced in that field. In all honestly, I really am not against the allowance of the ownership of these animals in states that allow it. What bothers me is that animals like cobras and alligators are allowed but animals like a harmless salamander are not. As I mentioned earlier the animals I am most interested in with regards to this experience are salamanders, particularly the Tiger Salamander, *Ambystoma tigrinum* and the Axolotl, *Ambystoma mexicanum*. Below I will describe briefly each species.

The **Tiger Salamander** is the second largest salamander in the world, being able to grow to about a foot long from head to tail. They are named “tiger” because certain members of the species possess beautiful yellow and black stripes on the body much like a tiger’s. They are highly carnivorous and will not hesitate to devour any animal that is smaller than they are. In captivity, they do best on a diet of earthworms, crickets and the occasional baby mouse. Like all salamanders, they are amphibians like frogs and toads despite the fact that their body shape resembles that of a lizard (salamanders are very commonly mistaken for lizards. They are NOT lizards). Like many amphibians, they lay their eggs in the water, which then hatch into the tadpole equivalent of a salamander, which are called larvae. These larvae, like tadpoles, have gills and must remain in the water in order to survive. Unlike tadpoles, salamander larvae

possess external gills, which give them the appearance of having tufts of red hair sprouting from their heads.



Tiger Salamander Larvae

Over time, they gradually metamorphose into adults and move onto land. Tiger salamanders are almost exclusively terrestrial as adults and spend almost all of their time burrowed under the earth, emerging at night to hunt for food. They only return to the water to breed and lay eggs. For the sake of the issue at hand, the most important thing to know about Tiger Salamanders is that there are at least three distinct variations within the species, which are determined by geographical distribution and by the colors and patterns on their skin

California Tiger Salamander- their range spans much of the Western coast of the USA. They are black with yellow polka dots.



Barred Tiger Salamander- found mostly in Texas. They have black and yellow stripes or “bars” down the length of the entire body.



Eastern Tiger Salamander- as the name says, this variety is found on the east coast, including parts of New Jersey. They are generally an olive green to brownish color with thin black almost mottled markings on the back.



The **Axolotl** is another species of salamander and a very close relative of the Tiger Salamander (they both belong to the same genus and can interbreed with each other). Axolotls exhibit what is known as neoteny (meaning tending to be young). This refers to the fact that unlike most of their amphibian relatives, that hatch as a larvae form and go through metamorphosis to become an adult with lungs, fully capable of living on land, Axolotls remain fully aquatic and gilled their entire lives. They hatch looking almost identical to Tiger Salamander larvae, but as they mature, they simply grow larger, retaining all their larvae characteristics. They breed in this form as well. Axolotls are also voracious predators and will gulp up any small animal that can fit in their mouths. They are also extremely important to modern science because of their amazing regenerating abilities. Most people are aware that many kinds of lizards such as geckos and iguanas have the ability to break off their tails to escape predators and later on can grow back a new tail. Axolotls, however, can regenerate not just their tails, but also their arms and legs. They also can recover from severe injuries that would normally spell death for any other small animal. Unlike Tiger Salamanders that have a rather wide geographical range, Axolotls are only native to a few waterways in Mexico City. Many captive bred Axolotls are albinos (lack of pigment in the skin). Under certain conditions (usually in captivity), an Axolotl can in face metamorphose into an “adult” salamander form that greatly resembles a Tiger Salamander. However, in this stage they tend to be very unhealthy and usually do not live very long after changing. It is also in this form that they are capable of breeding with Tiger Salamanders. It is theorized that the ancestors Axolotls were probably very similar to Tiger Salamanders and simply evolved to be fully aquatic their whole lives due to certain environmental changes over long spans of time in the past.

Axolotls, note how they resemble a large Tiger Salamander larvae



Interestingly enough, both Axolotls and all varieties Tiger Salamanders are illegal to buy and own in the states of New Jersey and New York. Unlike cobras, rattlesnakes, Gila Monsters and Alligators, these salamanders are not dangerous in the least bit to humans. So why are they illegal to have as a pet in certain states? The reason for this is not the safety of people but more so the safety of the environment. In the State of New Jersey, like mentioned earlier, there is a natural population of Eastern Tiger Salamanders. One reason why people cannot own them as pets is that there is a chance that certain specimens could be collected from the wild. This is bad since this particular variety is on the endangered in the wild. It is easier to pass a law preventing anyone from owning one, even if it is a captive bred individual, to further discourage wild collecting. Personally, I think this is not a very realistic mentality. People are going to collect wild reptiles and amphibians for pets whether it is legal or not and the department of Fish and Wildlife would never know. Also, as mentioned there are plenty of captive bred specimens on the pet trade. Yes, they cost money to buy but they are also generally much healthier and conditioned to human care than an animal that was pulled from the wild. To further drive this point, only one kind of Tiger Salamander is native to New Jersey, the Eastern. As demonstrated before, a Tiger Salamander can easily be identified by its coloration so having a black and yellow striped salamander in the State of New Jersey should not be illegal since that particular variety is clearly from Texas and therefore not locally caught to anyone who knows better. The Axolotl looks even more different from all Tiger Salamanders at least in their adult stages so there should be even less confusion there.

Unfortunately, there is another reason why these animals cannot be kept in certain areas which makes a little more sense. One really bad habit that people tend to exercise with their pets is releasing an unwanted animal into the wild. If an owner released his or her pet Texas Barred Tiger Salamander into the wild in New Jersey, the animal has a good chance of surviving. It may even breed with the native Eastern Tiger Salamanders and therefore permanently change the natural gene pool for that population. This is an issue not easily avoidable since any variety of

the listed salamanders, including the Axolotls can interbreed. An introduced animal can also cause competition to native animals and cause stress on the natural population that way as well. Even so, I feel that it would not be unreasonable to somehow make these species of salamanders available to responsible owners in the state of New Jersey. Many times animals that are released into the wild after being owned as pets do not survive because they are used to being fed and cared for by humans.

Later in the semester, my boss, John Tarrant, visited Rutgers for a meeting of the Society of Animal Science. John is the founder and owner of his own business called Outragehiss Pets. Don't let the name fool you, it is by no means a pet store. John takes in and gives a proper home to exotic pets that were previously owned as pets. Most of the animals he keeps at his facility would never be considered good pets for most people.

<http://www.outragehisspets.com/aboutus.html>

One of the eight animals he brought was a python. Burmese Pythons are actually native to a wide range in Southeast Asia and are the fourth largest species of snake in the world. They are sexually dimorphic, meaning that males and females look different. In the case of this python, males are much smaller than the females and grow to be only about twelve to fifteen feet in length. The females can grow to be as long as twenty-five feet long with a body as thick as a telephone pole and a head roughly the size of a football. Full-grown female pythons are capable of swallowing a goat. Pythons, like many snake species, are not venomous. Instead, they rely on their sheer strength to capture and kill prey. After grasping a prey item with their jaws, they wrap their body around it and squeeze until the animal dies. Contrary to popular belief that snakes like pythons and boas suffocate their prey, they actually simply cut off blood circulation and crush it to death long before the prey animal would die from lack of air. Unlike many other reptile species, a mother python protects her eggs by wrapping her body around them and keeping them warm by periodically flexing her body. This muscle friction generates heat and thus, keeps the eggs warm. Baby pythons are only about the size of a pencil when they hatch and are a food source for many predators. When young, Burmese Pythons can climb trees but become too heavy to do so as adults. Despite their immense bulk, pythons can strike amazingly fast. In the wild, they rely on their excellent camouflage that allows them to blend in perfectly with dead leaves and debris on the forest floor to ambush any small animal that comes near to them. However, pythons, especially the large ones, do not need to eat that often. An adult can live off one large meal per year if it needs to. Like all snakes, pythons are excellent swimmers.



Burmese Pythons and their relatives being held in captivity have recently been under siege by the looming threat of legal bans. Some will argue that an animal such as this should not be kept as a pet by anyone and that if such a ban were to be passed it would be for the better. However, the amount of people that already own these animals is quite high and the number of recorded injuries from captive specimens is extremely low. This is because, just like the case of venomous snake owners, most people who obtain a large constricting snake species for a pet know what they are getting themselves into and are prepared to properly and safely care for the animal. Unlike venomous snakes, pythons and other constrictors possess no poison whatsoever. Having worked with John's animals for almost nine years now, I can say I have been bitten many times by pythons and have suffered minor injuries if they can even be considered that. A quick wash off with soap and water on the bite and I was fine. Even large reptiles can be subdued if the owner knows what he or she is doing. Many more people are injured by domestic dogs than are by reptiles. Despite the hype about the threat of these bans, in reality, it is unlikely that they will actually come into being because of the large community of responsible owners who already have pythons and other large constrictors in their possession. If they were all forced to get rid of their animals, there would be no place for them to go since it is therefore illegal for anyone other than zoos to have them in the first place. Zoos can only hold so many specimens. Another reason why the ban on captive large snakes may happen, especially in warmer states like Florida, is the threat of escaped animals forming a wild invasive population and ultimately damaging the ecosystem. This is the same reason why it is illegal to own a Tiger Salamander or Axolotl in New Jersey. In Florida, there is a wild population of Burmese Pythons that do seem to be making a negative impact on the natural ecosystem. However, these invasive pythons are not the result of pets being released into the wild by irresponsible owners. A DNA test was conducted on a large number of pythons caught in Florida and the results showed that they all descended from only a few individuals that escaped from a reptile wholesale company when Hurricane Andrew damaged the building. As I stated earlier, pets that are released into the wild do not generally live very long because they cannot adapt to fending for themselves after being cared for by humans. Many pet Burmese Pythons are captive bred albinos (like the Axolotls). All feral pythons in the State of Florida ever recorded exhibit natural wild type coloration.



Albino Burmese Python

John explained how the hype in the news and on television about “invading pythons” is really an exaggeration put up by the media more than anything else is. The wild pythons in Florida are not as huge of a threat as many people are lead to believe and it is most certainly not because of irresponsible pet ownership.

So when it comes to large constrictors should anyone be allowed to own one as a pet? If you ask me, it all depends on who asks for one. They are by no means easy to care for and absolutely can be dangerous if they are not treated with respect and caution. However, most people who do own these animals have a healthy knowledge of the field and can handle the challenge. Beginners are more likely to be directed towards a smaller, safer reptile species by any responsible vendor.

Even the largest reptile pets are not the same as large predatory mammals. It seems like there are people with illegal pet tigers hiding in their apartments constantly on the news. I strongly agree with laws restricting anyone other than zoos and other professional facilities from owning something like a tiger. The problem is that most people hardly care about the difference between something like a python and something like a tiger. To most a dangerous animal is a dangerous animal and therefore they can all be treated the same. It is a matter of ignorance and perhaps even laziness to differentiate laws and restrictions accordingly depending on the species on animal. The same concept can be applied to the Tiger Salamander issue. No tiger salamander, regardless if it clearly is from a genetic pool across the country or being captive bred, can be allowed in the state of New Jersey for fear of it being wild caught from the local area. When a law regarding a certain animal is proposed, it should be considered individually by someone who actually knows about the animal in question.

Keeping a python in someone’s house is a lot different from keeping a tiger. Tigers, being mammals, have much higher metabolisms, than reptiles. Therefore, they need to eat about once decent meal per day. Pythons (as adults, younger individuals need to eat more frequently because they are still growing. They generally should be fed about once per week), on the other hand, as stated earlier, can survive comfortable off of only a few meals, perhaps even one meal, per year. Tigers, like all warm-blooded animals have a high energy level and need adequate space in order to be comfortable. An animal as large as a tiger would need a lot of space, much larger than someone’s apartment. Pythons are cold-blooded reptiles and therefore have a much lower energy level. Cold-blooded animals generally are much less active than warm-blooded ones and therefore can be content with a much smaller living space if kept in captivity. While working at Outragehiss Pets I frequently have guests walk up to me and ask why we keep our reptiles in such small cages. “They deserve space to be free and run around!” they preach “Just like if they were in the wild!” These are the kinds of people who mean well but in reality do not actually know what they are talking about. Just because someone likes animals does not mean he or she is an expert on them. If one were to observe a reptile, like a python, in the wild what he or she would find is that despite all the space that’s available, the snake would simply find a tight crevice in-between some rocks or perhaps under a dead rotting tree, curl up into a ball and sit there perhaps for weeks on end without moving much. A reptile like that has no desire to “run around in a field”. In fact, if a snake in captivity is kept in an enclosure that is extremely large it actually becomes stressed which leads to health problems. I suppose the point of all this is to demonstrate that another huge issue with irresponsible pet ownership is simply due to a lack of

education about the particular animal in question with regards to care and housing. What someone may see as taking good care of an animal like a reptile may actually be killing it.



This small python is comfortable living in a plastic drawer. Many professional facilities successfully house snakes in this fashion. This is in no way inhumane to the reptile.





Mammals, such as tigers, require much more space in order to be contained healthily and happily.

Lastly and most importantly, despite what many people may think, pythons, even very large ones are nowhere near as dangerous as tigers. Can they be dangerous? Absolutely yes. Nevertheless, if a large python were to attack someone who has a decent knowledge of the animal, that person could probably handle the situation enough to survive without being seriously injured. I myself have been attacked by a twelve foot female Burmese Python and managed the situation well enough to continue working the remainder of the day as if nothing happened. A human, even the most knowledgeable professional, is likely not to survive or at the very least will suffer very serious injuries if attacked by a tiger or other large cat. Reptiles and mammals are two very different kinds of animals and should be treated so and thought about accordingly.



John Tarrant and I are doing a live educational show with two Burmese Pythons. This could never be safely done with big cats.

So should everyone be able to have any animal they want in their homes with them? No. I would love to have a pet rhinoceros that I could ride but I know that is simply not a good idea despite how cool the idea may sound. What people need to understand is that all kinds of animals are different with regards to being kept in captivity. Even those commonly kept as pets like dogs and cats should be treated with respect and require a lot of knowledge, dedication and hard work in order to happily have for a pet. Some reptiles like Bearded Dragons, Leopard Geckos and Corn Snakes (pictured below from left to right) are rather harmless and small. These animals make great pets as long as their simple housing and food requirements are met.



Service Project:

Visiting the reptile show provided insight into some of the regulations and restrictions enforced in New Jersey and enabled us to understand the logic behind some of the bans New Jersey enforces. However, a large quantity of the animals restricted from individual ownership in New Jersey is unwarranted. The service project included the trip to the reptile show, an educational seminar held at Rutgers, and editorial submissions to a reptile magazine that is nationally distributed. Though the reptile show provided a foundation for our project it was not the main aspect of the project. The educational seminar was undoubtedly the most integral part of the service project, providing other students on campus an opportunity to understand the diversity and special requirements of exotics while learning how many exotics find themselves without a home after purchase. Most of the students that attended the seminar are animal science students but the ability to spread knowledge forward is the real gain. Our editorials may be published in the January or February editions of the Reptile Magazine and we both hope that the articles provide people with an interest in exotics a real perspective on the management and demands of exotic animal ownership. We were able to locate a specific address to forward an amendment proposal to in New Jersey at the Division of Fish and Wildlife of NJ, as they are the primary source of exotic animal regulation, and they may see our editorials and give the proposal some consideration.

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