

Thinking of Owning or Farming Capybara?

Wait – It May be Against the Law

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Summary: Capybara, also known as a water hog, is the largest rodent in South America and is now farmed for consumption of its meat. In other areas, not only can you not hunt or farm it, you may need a permit or may not be able to own a capybara at all.

Video Link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uA1dHVg9L0w>

The Capybara

The Capybara, or in translation, “master of the grass”, is a large rodent which is native to South America. Connecting to the scientific name of *Hydrochoerus*, which means “water hog”, the Capybara is a semi-aquatic mammal that lives out its days in the water and on land. The specie’s semi-aquatic nature has adapted them to have webbed feet so they can move more easily in the water. This is especially important when it comes to running away from predators. The speed that comes from their adaptations allows them to escape predators much easier.

The Capybara can live up to ten to twelve years in the wild. They weigh about one hundred pounds and are approximately four feet high. Their size, in comparison to a cat, is shown in Figure 1 below. Capybara, like to travel in large groups, some groups being as large as thirty at a time. While they are in the group, they look out for each other. If danger is approaching they become very vocal to warn others. Capybara make noises ranging from barks, chirps, grunts, and whistles. When a Capybara barks, this is the warning sign that a predator is near and to run to safety. They live and breed on land and can be a target for not only animal predators but humans as well (1-3).



(Figure 1)

Wild Capybara to the Dinner Plate

Capybara are similar to wild hogs, in that they are a target for human hunting and consumption. Hunting is a famous past time that connects us back to the days where, in order to eat, we had to

go out and hunt for food. Capybara, have been the target for hunters because of their similar size and characteristics as wild hogs. Not only does this animal contribute to hunting practices but it contributes to religious practices as well.

“Water hog” is indicative of its lifestyle. Similar to beavers, capybaras love to roll around in the mud and are effective swimmers, and use that ability to not only consume vegetation on land, but also in the water. Due to their semi-aquatic lifestyle, during the religious event of lent, Capybara are seen by the Catholic Church, as a substitute for any animal meat products. Oddly, the church identifies the capybara as a fish (4). Even though this animal is definitely not a fish, the church allows for the specie to be consumed during lent. With capybara being considered as a meat source, they are now being farmed as such in South America in increasing numbers (5). People that have eaten capybara say that the meat is very similar to pork in texture quality and taste (6).

Capybara for Everyone?

Not yet commonplace as an agricultural commodity, capybara may seem to be just another kind of pork product by some and somewhat exotic/outside their realm of acceptability by others. Similar to many other foods we eat, and even in this case, the religion we practice, we make choices in what we consume. An important consideration for whether one consumes a food, specifically meat from wild animals or fish, is whether its consumption will affect the ecosystem. Predators, such as different wild cats, alligators, and bears, can be negatively affected by a decrease in the number of capybara that live in the wild. In consuming capybara, we remove this food source for other wild animals, and therefore could alter the ecological balance.

Capybara are Soooo Cute. I Want One!

A capybara looks similar to a very large beaver and the wild look of the animal can impact people’s desire to have them as a pet. A capybara can be trained and when trained properly, can live in a home with other companion animals, like dogs and cats. People have reported that they make very nice pets. Having a wild animal as a pet however, is different than owning an animal that has been domesticated for many years. Similar to other wild animals, capybara are considered as an exotic pet and in some states you are allowed to own capybara as long as you have an exotic pet license and can show proper documentation that you have the correct living environment for the animal. In other areas however, having a capybara as a pet is illegal. Being informed about the exotic pet laws in your area is important especially if you are considering owning one.

Rules and Regulations

In the U.S, each state has their own regulations on owning wildlife (7). Some states have an outright ban on ownership of wild animals (left column of Fig 2). These states ban ownership of any wild animal, including crocodiles, alligators, large wild cats, bears, wolves, and other wild creatures. Certain states have a ban on ownership of certain wild animals (second column from the left of Fig 2). These states ban dangerous animals including bears, wolves, large wild cats, crocodiles, etc. Depending on the area, some wild animals can be owned, however there needs to be proper documentation. In some states, to own a wild animal, a license, permit, or registration must be attained (Fig 2; third column from the left). Other states have no restriction on ownership of wild animals (Fig 2; column on the right). Even though there are no restrictions, the

animal must be lawfully obtained and must have documentation of lawful obtainment. Further information can be found through your department of natural resources-wildlife division.

Figure 2. Ownership of Wild Animals

<u>Ban</u>	<u>Semi-Ban</u>	<u>Permit Required</u>	<u>No Restriction</u>
Alaska	Arkansas	Arizona	Alabama
California	Florida	Delaware	Idaho
Colorado	Illinois	Florida	Michigan
Connecticut	Kansas	Indiana	Montana
Georgia	Louisiana	Maine	Nevada
Hawaii	Michigan	Mississippi	North Carolina
Iowa	Minnesota	Missouri	South Carolina
Kentucky	Nebraska	Montana	West Virginia
Maryland	Virginia	North Dakota	Wisconsin
Massachusetts		Oklahoma	
New Hampshire		Pennsylvania	
New Jersey		Rhode Island	
New Mexico		South Dakota	
New York		Texas	
Ohio			
Oregon			
Tennessee			
Utah			
Vermont			
Washington			

Questions to Ask Ourselves

One day, capybara may be viewed as just another meat-producing animal like pigs and cattle. Some might also be inclined to own capybara as pets and envision having trained capybara sharing their sofa. Is it ethical to own a capybara as a pet? Should we take a wild animal out of its natural environment for the sole purposes for our companionship or for our consumption? Should we consider raising or farming wild animals to have as companion animals or for food consumption?

When do we know where to draw the line? Should wild animals just be admired from afar or should we “domesticate” them so we can have them as pets and consume their meat. What animals should and shouldn’t be domesticated? Just because we are on the top of the food chain, does that mean that it is OK to farm wild animals so we can have a cool companion pet or have something different to eat? What do you think?

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-Main information on capybara

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