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Letter to Editor

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Disturbing trend of individuals keeping wildlife as pets

There have been several incidents recently which have highlighted a disturbing trend of individuals keeping wildlife as pets.

The first incident highlighted in the media was a Sun Bear which a Malaysian singer had initially mistaken for a dog. Within the same week was a case of a Brahminy Kite which had been held captive for a year in a corner lot of a terraced house.

It was a total disappointment to Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) to learn that a resident had lodged a complaint to the department about the caged bird, not once but four times, and all to no avail. The inaction from Perhilitan - the official custodian of our nation's wildlife - is indeed mind boggling.

It is not uncommon to know that there are a lot of 'pet' owners who disregard the law for the sake of their own pleasure in owning such creatures. People are motivated to own an exotic pet by a variety of psychological factors. These include the prestige factor or the desire to be different - according to Dr. Michael Gumert, a psychology professor at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

What is baffling is how easy it is to obtain and keep these protected species without legal penalty. It is especially easy nowadays with social media. It is so rampant and convenient that with just a few clicks, one can reach a seller and purchase just about any wildlife online. No official or reliable estimate of the extent of the rare animal smuggling market is available but there is plenty of evidence that it is a huge problem.

Ignorance breeds misery for, in the hands of incompetent owners, many exotic animals live miserable lives and may die or be abandoned. The exotic pet business is a lucrative industry that has drawn criticism from animal welfare advocates and wildlife conservationists alike. Selling protected wildlife in pet shops or on the internet is one of the largest sources of criminal earnings, behind arms smuggling and drug trafficking.

But the animals pay the price. Exotic animals have very specific care needs but are often obtained by people with insufficient knowledge, resources or commitment to look after them properly. Pet shop owners are also ignorant of the needs of exotic wildlife and do not educate the buyers on proper care, diet and handling of animals. Much sought after are chinchillas, sugar gliders, iguanas, tortoises and turtles, various primates, iguanas and snakes.

The practice of keeping captive wildlife is in itself a form of animal neglect at best, and animal cruelty at worst. Examples are the cases of the Brahminy Kite and the Sun Bear caged in inappropriate enclosures. High priority should be given to preventing this animal abuse and ensuring that species do not suffer at the hands of their captors.

SAM's growing list of concerns about exotic wildlife include:

- The well known risk of disease transmission to humans;
- Conservation problems in the animals' native countries because exotics are endangered species and this demand contributes to the threat of extinction;
- The ecological effects from released or escaped animals can be serious for local wildlife;
- Lack of education amongst the public; and
- Poor regulation of the trade.

SAM strongly opposes the keeping of exotic wildlife as pets and believes that all commercial traffic of these animals for such purpose should be prohibited. SAM is also calling for a ban on the sale of exotic animals in pet shops. The local pet industry underscores the need for enforcement authorities to deal with the problem fast. It is also a wake up call to the authorities that they must not be complacent and that law enforcement authorities need to strengthen legislation and to monitor all pet shops in the country.

SAM welcomes news of the proposed legislation to ban online advertisement for the sale of endangered animals in the amendment to the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010.

However, despite measures taken, the trade in captive wildlife will likely continue until people realize that wildness is not something that can be confined or owned. Until then, the laws can help prevent these abuses and hopefully foster understanding that animals exist for their own sake, not merely to be possessed as "pets".

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Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM)