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## Should the international trade in wild-caught amphibians and reptiles be abolished?

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Cardoso *et al.* (2021) issued a stark “warning to humanity” concerning the international trade in wildlife. The trade:

- Threatens population stability and sustainability in the wild.
- Helps the spread of invasive alien species.
- Helps spread new diseases both to native wildlife and to humans and our domestic animals.
- Is often illegal and has links to other criminal activities such as the narcotics trade.

Their paper did not mention another adverse aspect of the trade: the negative impact on animal welfare, at all stages of the process, from initial capture to international transportation, to sales outlets, and finally to largely unregulated collectors’ homes. Mainly on welfare grounds, the British Veterinary Association (2023) has concluded that the international trade in wild-caught amphibians and reptiles should be abolished.

The trade is sometimes defended on two grounds:

- Owning a captive reptile or amphibian can be educational. However, this can be based on captive-bred animals, rather than on wild-caught individuals.
- The income generated by capturing and selling wild amphibians and reptiles for the trade is beneficial to people in poor rural areas, and provides an incentive for conservation (Tapley *et al.*, 2011). On the other hand, do the collectors receive a significant income boost, and is there a demonstrable positive effect on conservation?

The following is a summary of the remarks made during a Discussion Topic session at which the attendees were asked to discuss: (1) the pros and cons of a trade ban (possibly continuing to allow trade for limited purposes such as research and conservation), and how such a ban could be implemented; and (2) the question of whether or not NGOs working for the conservation and welfare

of amphibians and reptiles should adopt a trade ban as policy.

A robust discussion, involving about a dozen conference participants, took place with regards to trade of wild-caught amphibian and reptiles. Whilst in an ideal world a ban would cease the trade in wild-caught amphibians and reptiles, it was considered that it would more likely send the trade in wild-caught amphibians and reptiles underground. It was put forward that this would have the following likely consequences for the local populations:

- An increase in the fee that people would be willing to pay for wild-caught animals in order to obtain rare or unusual specimens that may not be available from captively-bred sources, thereby increasing the black market in these animals.
- Reduced welfare conditions for wild-caught and smuggled amphibians and reptiles, leading to an increased mortality and injury to the animals.

Discussion followed over methods of regulating the trade of wild-caught animals, such as the introduction of permits, limiting the number and populations of amphibians and reptiles that could be captured. However, concern was expressed with regards to how this would be implemented, and what process could be put in place to monitor the compliance with the permits. The integration of such a system with regards to the implementation being managed by local communities was considered, since they would have a greater interest in establishing a long-term sustainable trade than in short-term gains. The practicalities of setting up and funding such a system were considered difficult. However, it was considered a possibility that such a system could be linked in with habitat creation and enhancement schemes.

It was proposed that all keepers of amphibians and reptiles should be registered along with their animals. Concern was expressed, as this may negatively impact the welfare of animals whose keepers were not registered and might avoid taking sick or injured animals to vets, due to the risk of prosecution. It was then proposed, as an alternative, that the traders in these animals should be registered, and that registration should come with strict criteria such as agreed welfare conditions, biosecurity protocols etc. No conclusions were reached about the optimal way to implement such a system and what unintended consequences it might have.

One of the discussion participants (Alexia Hesten) had presented a poster on this topic at the conference, and is currently working towards a Ph.D. on the wildlife trade at Liverpool John Moores University. The results of her research should provide guidance in the future.

## REFERENCES

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