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Can keeping native mammals as pets help conserve wild populations?

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An estimated 60 per cent of Australian households own a pet, with dogs and cats the companions of choice. A recent study suggests replacing some introduced pets with native mammals could help preserve dwindling populations in the wild.



Keeping native mammals, such as sugar gliders (*Petaurus breviceps*), as pets could potentially help preserve wild populations.

Credit: Daryl Dickson

Currently, it is illegal to keep most native Australian mammals as pets. But a report, published by the Rural Industries and Development Corporation, advises that keeping native mammals as pets could benefit their wild counterparts in several ways. The research advocates a 'conservation through sustainable use' strategy – putting a monetary value on natives as pets to contribute to their protection in the wild. The report also says that replacing some non-native pets, such as cats, with natives could also have conservation benefits.

The eastern quoll (*Dasyurus viverrinus*), now extinct on the mainland, and Mitchells hopping mouse (*Notomys mitchellii*), presumed extinct in New South Wales, were investigated for their suitability as pets for the purposes of the study. Both of these species are impacted by cats and foxes in the wild.

The report also identified several other potential pet species, including sugar gliders and native rodent species other than Mitchell's hopping mouse. Sugar gliders are already popular pets in the United States.

'Australia is facing a number of mammal extinctions,' explains the lead author of the report, Dr Rosie Cooney. 'An expanded native pet industry could help though a "conservation levy" on purchases of native species, which is used to support conservation of native species and habitats.'

Dr Euan Ritchie, a mammal ecologist from Deakin University, agrees in principle.

'Keeping natives rather than cats would pose less risk to native species,' he says. 'However, for some species not easily bred in captivity, making them worth lots of money could promote poaching of wildlife from natural areas,' Dr Ritchie warns.

Dr Diana Fisher of the University of Queensland has worked extensively with dasyurid marsupials (most of Australia's carnivorous marsupials are classified as dasyurid), including antechinuses and phascogales, and is doubtful many native species would make good pets.

'The major problem with dasyurids is their short life span and slow reproductive rate,' she explains. 'They are not like dogs and cats. Even the biggest species, quolls and Tasmanian devils, live only three to four years.'

The report also considers the welfare aspects of keeping native species as pets, including the potential for poor housing conditions, and vulnerability to stress caused by a confined and unnatural environment. However the authors propose a range of regulatory and educational measures that could be taken to address any animal welfare threats that may arise, including keeper licences and the development of codes of practice for keeping a variety of native mammals. These measures would ensure that animals are kept only 'in the hands of committed, well-educated private keepers who have the appropriate skills and experience to look after native species,' Dr Cooney explains. For the two focal species, the study suggests that knowledge of appropriate food, space and behavioural enrichment measures should be known to potential keepers.

The study also suggests that keeping native mammals as pets could make the Australian public feel more passionate about the animals' survival in the wild. Dr Cooney uses amphibian and reptile pet owners as examples.

'Keeping of native amphibians and reptiles has generated a lot of understanding of reproduction and husbandry requirements,' she says. 'Many keepers are also enthusiastic about conservation, participating in biological surveys of wild populations.'

However, Mr Daryl Dickson, a wildlife carer who has rehabilitated injured gliders, is skeptical.

'In my experience, while pet owners love their animals, this does not always translate into interest in their ecology or habitat in the wild,' he says. 'All pets, even natives, have the potential to become dangerous pests if they escape into areas where they do not normally occur.'

Dr Cooney cites the establishment of a safeguard population of captive animals, which could be used for reintroductions into the wild in the future, as another potential positive benefit.

'One of the primary potential benefits of carefully managed expansion of native mammals as pets is increasing captive populations,' she explains. 'There are already examples where individuals of threatened animals kept in private hands have been reintroduced into the wild.'

However, Dr Ritchie warns tight regulations would be required.

'Captive populations may benefit reintroductions, but could also serve as reservoirs for disease which could impact wild populations,' he says.

Other problems could include genetic and behavioural differences in captive-bred animals, which are unsuitable for life in the wild.

Keeping native mammals as pets will require significant changes to current laws in most states and territories. Since this will likely prove a slow process, the native pet debate seems set to continue indefinitely.

More information

Australian Native Mammals as Pets: tinyurl.com/native-pets

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