



May 6, 2009

Domestic hiss: law on keeping dangerous pets to be eased

By Michael McCarthy, Environment editor

RSPCA alarmed at plans to reduce 'burden' of red tape for private keepers

People who want to keep lions, tigers, crocodiles and other dangerous wild animals in their homes will have fewer obstacles put in their way, under new plans being put forward by the Government.

A recent survey of just 87 local authorities found 267 dangerous snakes, 36 camels, 36 scorpions, 30 crocodilians (including caimans and alligators), 23 big cats, and one zebra were kept in homes across Britain.

But now under proposals to change the Dangerous Wild Animals Act, 1976, such owners would only need to get a licence every two years and would have their premises inspected less often.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) says it wants to reduce the "burden" of red tape on private animal keepers and says that the Act is "considered by many stakeholders to be overly burdensome".

The RSPCA has attacked the proposals, pointing out that only five years ago Defra proposed to change the Act in the opposite way – in the department's own words, "to make it more robust". Furthermore, the Act has already been relaxed: 18 months ago a number of exotic species, from emus and sloths to raccoons and squirrel monkeys, were removed from the list for which a licence was required, a step which the RSPCA said at the time left it "disappointed and concerned", as it said that many exotic animals were not only potentially dangerous to humans, but were extremely difficult to look after properly, and needed special care.

Now the proposal to relax the Act still further has drawn renewed opposition from the society. "We don't think the legislative framework is strong enough anyway and we're really not happy with any kind of weakening of it," said Ros Clubb, scientific officer in the RSPCA's Wildlife Department. "It wasn't exactly great protection for them in the first place, and weakening it even further will have a detrimental effect on the welfare of these animals."

Earlier this year, in an attempt to find out the national picture, a news agency in Sussex approached every local authority in Britain – more than 400 – and under the Freedom of Information Act asked what dangerous wild animals they had licensed. The agency received replies from 87 councils which shone a remarkable light on just what some people prefer to cats and dogs.

The replies revealed that one residential address in Bovingdon, Hertfordshire, is home to a collection of 58 dangerous wild animals including 15 snakes, 14 death stalker scorpions and two crocodiles; in West Oxfordshire, the authorities know of four dwarf caimans, two spectacled caimans, two west African dwarf crocodiles, an American alligator and a Chinese alligator; and two alligators and 60 venomous snakes are kept at a private house in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire.

A snow leopard lives at a private residential home in East Cambridgeshire, two ocelots reside in Gravesham in Kent, and two leopards are licensed by Rutland County Council, while a cheetah is kept in a 20m x 50m enclosure at a disused farm in Macclesfield in Cheshire. "It's in a large compound with 20ft-high fencing and a double-door entry system," said the local environmental health officer Philip Brown.

Dangerous wild animals are not defined as such by the 1976 Act, but they are considered to be any animal on the Act's list for which a licence is needed, which include most of the world's large mammals and reptiles from elephants down, as well as smaller creatures which may pose a risk, such as venomous snakes.

The Act was brought in because of the 1970s fashion for keeping exotic pets such as lions and tigers. But one of the problems with it is the cost of the local authority licences. Defra says the cost can run from £30 to nearly £700, with the average being £165, and it feels this may be deterring some people from applying for a licence in the first place.

But the RSPCA feels that welfare considerations should be paramount. Because the plans extend the licence from one to two years and make inspections on renewal non-mandatory, it says this will lead to welfare problems in the future. "With a lot of dangerous wild animals, people don't know how to look after them properly – you get into the realm of specialist keepers," Dr Clubb said. "Our concern is that people don't fully understand that."

But the Government is pressing ahead with the changes, which are likely to be brought in in the autumn.

"The changes will help local authorities to better target inspections of premises," said a Defra spokesman.

Case study: 'You need an alarm – and CCTV'

By Mark Amey

Some people have Spot the dog, others have Tibbles the cat. Mark Amey has 27 venomous snakes and Kid Croc – a 5ft-long African crocodile.

In a purpose-built pool enclosure behind Mr Amey's three-bedroom semi in Bovingdon, Hertfordshire, Kid Croc spends his days feeding on fresh trout, chickens and rodents. He was given a home by the 47-year-old pet shop owner when no longer wanted by his former owners, a company supplying animals for films.

"He's an absolute nightmare to keep, but then the larger wild animals are," said Mr Amey. "You need secure enclosures, complicated alarm systems and CCTV."

Mr Amey and his partner, Siouxsie Gillet, also own more than 30 scorpions. Mr Amey thinks the switch to an easier licensing system for dangerous wild animals is a retrograde step, since animals can grow a lot in that timespan.

"Sure, financially, it's great," he said. "I'm a licence holder; I'll be pounds up. But extending a licence from one year to two years isn't good from an animal welfare point of view. Some people who keep wild animals aren't qualified and just don't do it properly."