

From Pet to Threat

Imported pets become major menaces in the United States.

Back in 2005, a wacky photo made headlines. It looked like a joke, but it was the real deal: A 13-foot Burmese python had burst open after trying to swallow a 6-foot alligator in Everglades National Park in Florida.

Thirty years ago, people never would have seen such a clash of **predators** (animals that capture and eat other animals). Burmese pythons are native to Asia. But over the last few decades, many pet snakes have escaped or been set free in Florida by owners who were tired of caring for them.

Todd Hardwick rounds up troublesome animals—both native and exotic. He runs Pesky Critters Wildlife Control, a business in southern Florida. At least once a week, Hardwick gets a call to catch a strange animal. Many of those animals started out as somebody's pets.

"When they're no longer the 'in thing,' people let them go, or they escape," Hardwick says. "For me, it seems like Miami is a large open-air zoo."

Hardwick has wrangled iguanas, lizards, hedgehogs, potbellied pigs, and plenty of pythons. Many imported animals thrive in Florida's tropical weather.

But the introduction of exotic animals into the wild isn't happening only in the South. A species of wild parrot native to Argentina now lives in New York City. Foreign fish have been dumped from aquariums into rivers and lakes across the United States.

Exotic creatures, such as pet tigers, can be dangerous to people. Many foreign animals damage the environment. Pythons, for example, dine on the local wildlife.

Keeping exotic pets isn't bad for just native animals; it's bad for the exotic animals too. Many of these pets are brought illegally from their home countries, to where they may be threatened in the wild.

Pet owners may not realize it, but wild pets are often illegal. About two dozen states ban some kinds of foreign pets. Python imports were banned in 2012. "Obviously," says Hardwick, "they don't belong here."

Sick Pets, Sick People

Exotic pets can bring exotic diseases into your living room.



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Prairie Dogs are cute, but they can carry monkeypox.

In 2003, a creepy-sounding disease popped up in six Midwestern states: **monkeypox**. The disease usually infects monkeys. But it can also spread to people, causing fever, headache, muscle pain, and blisters on the skin.

Monkeypox is normally found in Africa, halfway around the globe. How did it get to the United States? Pets.

Diseases that jump from animals to humans are called **zoonoses**¹ (zo-AHN-uh-seez). About 70 people in the Midwest became infected with monkeypox after handling pet prairie dogs. Before those people bought their pets, the prairie dogs had been stored with a rat from Africa. The prairie dogs probably

caught monkeypox from the rat.

The people who caught monkeypox recovered after being treated by doctors. But other zoonoses can be more serious. In some parts of the world, people who have had contact with birds have contracted **bird flu**, a deadly virus. So far, the disease hasn't shown up in the United States. But government officials are still preparing to protect us from new zoonoses.

¹ **zoonoses**: plural of **zoonosis** (singular) - a disease that jumps from animals to humans

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the passage, where do Burmese pythons originally come from?
 - A Florida
 - B Argentina
 - C Asia
 - D New York City

2. Based on the passage, which animal was likely the *cause* of prairie dogs contracting monkeypox?
 - A a monkey
 - B a python
 - C a bird
 - D a rat

3. After reading this passage, you can conclude that exotic pets
 - A are a threat only to alligators
 - B cause harm mainly in southern Florida
 - C are a problem throughout the United States
 - D will no longer be brought to the United States

4. Read the following sentence from the passage: "Many imported animals thrive in Florida's tropical weather."

In this sentence, the word **thrive** means

 - A get cold
 - B do poorly
 - C do well
 - D sweat

5. Which statement best supports the main idea of this passage?
 - A Monkeypox spread to six Midwestern states in 2003.
 - B Burmese pythons have been banned as pets in the United States.
 - C Foreign pets cause trouble when released into the wild.
 - D Scientists are concerned about the growing cases of bird flu.

6. What are zoonoses? Give two examples.

7. Todd Hardwick runs Pesky Critters Wildlife Control, a business in south Florida that catches troublesome animals. In the passage, he says, "For me, it seems like Miami is a large open-air zoo." Why do you think he compares Miami to a zoo?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Releasing exotic pets into the wild, _____ pythons and tigers, can cause a lot of harm.

- A because
- B such as
- C otherwise
- D at last

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

In southern Florida, some owners set their pet snakes free because they were tired of caring for them.

Who? _____

(did) What? set their pet snakes free

Where? _____

Why? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** illegally: in a way or manner that breaks the law.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____
