

Are Exotic Pets a 'Disaster Waiting to Happen'?

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On October 3, 2006, Amy Ellis Nutt, of the New Jersey Star-Ledger, published an article titled "Exotic pets: A disaster waiting to happen".

<http://www.newhousenews.com/archive/nutt3100606.html>

The thesis of her article was that keeping wild animals as pets poses a major health threat. My response to her article, which was submitted to the Star-Ledger on October 20, 2006, but was not published, is given below:

The recent article by Amy Nutt on exotic pets ("A disaster waiting to happen", October 3, 2006) claims that it is only a matter of time before we face deadly epidemics arising from diseases brought into this county by imported wild animals. However, an analysis of the diseases mentioned in this article indicate that the threat from exotic pets is extremely low. This is because these diseases require direct contact with either an infected animal or its body fluids and none of them can be spread from person to person. Thus, they are easily avoided either by avoiding contact with animals that might carry them or else by taking proper sanitary precautions (such as washing your hands).

To begin, although Nutt's article claims that most cases of salmonella infection come from reptiles, such as turtles, this is not true. As the Centers for Disease Control website reveals, the main sources of salmonella are chickens (eggs) and cattle. Salmonella infection from reptiles is easily avoided by washing one's hands after handling them, which should be done after handling any pet, not just reptiles.

Next, although we should prevent the smuggling of animals, it will have little effect on the incidence of psittacosis as this disease has been around for a long time, not only in birds kept as pets, but in wild birds and poultry. To avoid it, do not inhale the dried secretions of birds.

Hemorrhagic fevers, which can be lethal, are also avoidable. For example, if you don't want to catch Rift Valley hemorrhagic fever, then stay out of the Rift Valley—~~moreover~~, this is a disease of African livestock, not of exotic pets, and you won't catch it from another human being. Similarly, the monkey pox that jumped to rodents and was then caught by humans who handled them never spread between humans. Indeed, one of the lessons of the monkey pox outbreak was how quickly it was contained—it was over in a few months.

However, it is macaque monkeys that the article singles out as being the most dangerous to human health. Not only do they harbor the herpes B virus, which can be fatal to humans, but they carry their own form of AIDS known as simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV). So how could the manager of the animal auction in Ohio be unaware of the dangers posed by a Java macaque that was for sale? The answer is simple. First, SIV rarely infects humans and when it does it is not known to cause any sickness. Second,

although fatal cases of herpes B virus have occurred in laboratory workers, there is no known case of herpes B infecting the general public despite the fact that millions of people are exposed to macaque monkeys annually. That's right, millions of people visit the monkey temples of southeast Asia, some of whom get bitten, and yet no tourist or worker at these temples is known to have contracted herpes B. In short, this disease, though deadly, is very difficult to catch.

This does not mean that wild animals are harmless, only that the threat from exotic pets is very low and you can choose to make it zero for yourself by not going near them. Where the threat from wild animals exists is in our native wildlife. For example, you do not need to go to Africa to get hemorrhagic fever as there is a North American variety, called Hanta virus, that is spread by the droppings of deer mice and other native rodents. However, the most dangerous wild animal in North America is the white-tailed deer: about 150 people are killed each year, and tens of thousands are injured, when deer collide with vehicles--and, unlike the case with animal diseases, they can be difficult indeed to avoid.