

Should a Tiger Be Your Pet?

EXOTIC PETS CAN BE CUTE AND FASCINATING, BUT THEY CAN ALSO BE DANGEROUS. WHY ARE THEY SO POPULAR? **BY JUSTIN O'NEILL**

Florida teen Felicia Frisco loves her cat, Will. She cuddles with him, plays with him, and feeds him. Until his first birthday, Will slept with Felicia every night.

Sounds like a typical cat, right? Not quite. For one thing, he's enormous. When fully grown, he'll weigh around 500 pounds.

Will is a Bengal tiger.



What happened to teddy bears?

Cute But Deadly

Six in 10 Americans own some type of pet—a dog, a cat, or maybe a hamster. Such animals are “domesticated,” meaning that, over time, their species has been bred to live among humans. Will, however, is an “exotic pet,” that is, a wild animal. According to some estimates, as many as 18 million Americans own exotic pets, from iguanas to monkeys to kangaroos.

Why would you want to own a wild animal—especially one that could eat you? There are

lots of reasons. Owning an exotic pet can be a way to express your personality. For some, these pets are status symbols—a way to show off.

But that can backfire. Just look at Paris Hilton. In 2005, she adopted a kinkajou, a small mammal native to Central and South America. She adored going out on the town with “Baby Luv”—until one day, Baby Luv bit her so deeply that she had to go to the hospital.

Hilton made a full recovery, but she was lucky. Exotic pets can turn

on their owners at any moment. The thing about wild animals is . . . they're wild. They have instincts we can't always predict or control. Plus, exotic pets may carry deadly diseases that spread to humans.

The danger these creatures pose isn't the only problem with keeping them, though. Animal-rights advocates say it's downright cruel to remove animals from their natural habitats. Wild monkeys, birds, and big cats are used to

roaming several miles per day, not living in a cage or doing circles in someone's yard.

A Lot of Work

Nevertheless, exotic pets, when cared for responsibly, can make wonderful companions. As professional animal handlers, Felicia's parents are well-qualified to give Will a good life. But not everyone is so knowledgeable.

The fact is, exotic pets are a lot of work and a lot of money. (Felicia's parents spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on Will every year.) As a result, many owners end up neglecting or even abandoning their animals.

For years, people have been dumping their pet pythons in the Florida Everglades when the snakes get too big. Today, these reptiles are wreaking havoc as they gobble up the natural wildlife, altering the entire ecosystem of the Everglades.

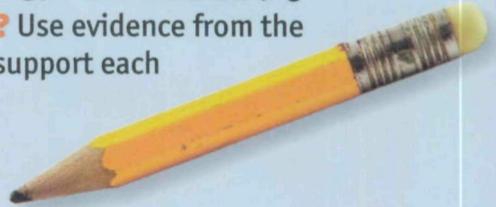
Despite the risks, many Americans are willing to fork over big bucks for an exotic pet. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 650 million were imported legally from 2003 to 2006. Countless more are smuggled into the U.S. illegally.

As for Felicia and Will? Some experts say a tiger shouldn't ever share a bed with a person. Zookeeper Jack Hanna compares it to sleeping with a bomb. But Felicia isn't concerned. She says that raising Will is "kind of like raising a dog."

Yeah . . . kind of. ●

What Do You Think?

Should we own exotic pets? Use evidence from the article AND your own ideas to support each side of this debate. Write the information on the lines below.



YES

TIGERS DON'T SCARE ME!

1 For responsible
owners, exotic pets
can be wonderful
companions.

2 _____

3 _____

NO

ARE YOU NUTS?!

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

EXAMINE POINTS ON BOTH SIDES—AS WELL AS YOUR OWN BELIEFS AND EXPERIENCES. Decide what you think. Should we be allowed to own exotic pets? State your answer in one sentence below. This can become a thesis statement for an essay on this topic.

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