

Leaders in U.S. states worry about dangerous pets like lions, alligators

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Irwin, a partially paralyzed kangaroo, lies on a rug dressed in his diaper as his owner, Christie Carr, is interviewed at her home in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, March 30, 2011. Photo: AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Residents of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, were fascinated by reports of a lionlike creature roaming city neighborhoods this summer. Authorities set up traps, but the big cat was never found.

Wisconsin state Senator Van Wanggaard has been crafting a bill. If his bill is passed, and becomes a law, it would limit ownership of exotic or rare pets in Wisconsin.

Wild Animals, Big Business

Wanggaard wants his state to join dozens of others that have already passed laws banning or regulating big cats, bears, apes and other exotic pets. Animal welfare supporters say the animals can threaten public safety when they escape. They are also at risk of being poorly cared for by private owners, these critics say.

Exotic animal laws

Nineteen states ban private ownership of dangerous exotic

It's difficult to determine exactly how many people have exotic pets. However, the Humane Society of the United States says they are part of a multibillion-dollar industry. Born Free USA, a wildlife conservation and animal welfare group opposed to private ownership, estimates that between 10,000 and 20,000 big cats alone are in private hands in the U.S. The federal government largely leaves it to the states to regulate exotic animals. It is up to state lawmakers to tackle the problem.

Since 2013, laws that deal with exotic pet ownership have been proposed in more than a dozen states, including Wisconsin, according to Born Free. Of the 22 bills put up for vote, 18 have failed and two have passed. One created in Louisiana had an exemption. The law allowed the owner of a Louisiana truck stop to keep his tiger, Tony, as a roadside attraction.

"Wildlife Belongs In The Wild"

Two remaining bills are still not decided, including Wanggaard's in Wisconsin and another in Pennsylvania.

Opponents say many owners are not prepared to house and care for exotic pets. The animals are often put in cages that don't meet the creatures' basic needs, opponents say.

"Wildlife belongs in the wild. It's risky for everyone involved," said Kate Dylewsky of Born Free. "It's cruel to the animals to keep them in confinement, often isolated from members of their own species. And most people don't have knowledge or the resources to care for these animals properly."

Owners Just Want To Have Pets

Many exotic pet owners, breeders, private zoos and sanctuaries disagree. They say that state bans can hurt efforts to protect animals. Some argue that the states shouldn't meddle with an individual's decision about what kinds of pets to keep.

Good regulations could help protect these animals, said Lynn Culver, executive director of the Feline Conservation Federation. The group represents owners, breeders, private zoos and sanctuaries that keep wild cats.

However, Culver said laws banning people from owning exotic animals are wrong. Exotic animals need to be kept in captivity so they can breed, she said. "They are the offspring of animals that were taken out of the wild. We're morally obligated to manage them responsibly for future generations."

Federal laws forbid the sale and transportation of some exotic and wild animals, but don't generally address private ownership. That falls to the states, which take a variety of approaches.

Horrible Events Spur Action

Some state laws point out which species are banned or regulated. The Wisconsin proposal lists several types of exotic animals that would be considered dangerous. Others are more general, said David Favre, a professor at the Michigan State University College of Law.

“It usually takes some horrible event in a state, where people say, ‘How did you let this happen?’” Favre said. Only then do lawmakers act, he said.

That is exactly what occurred in Zanesville, Ohio. A suicidal man released more than 50 big cats, bears, primates and wolves in 2011. Police and animal control officers tried to use tranquilizers, but couldn’t control the situation. They were forced to kill most of the animals.

At the time, Ohio had no law dealing with dangerous exotic pets. After the Zanesville incident, owning exotic pets was banned, starting in 2012. Those who already owned such pets were allowed to keep them, but they had to apply for permits and meet safety and care standards.

"Hard To Have A Conversation"

The law in Connecticut was amended in 2009 to ban the private ownership of some primates. The amendment was adopted after a woman was seriously injured by her friend’s 200-pound pet chimp.

Wisconsin is one of five states without a law regulating the private ownership of dangerous exotic animals, according to Born Free. Fourteen states require licenses or permits. Twelve allow ownership of some exotic animals but prohibit others. And 19 have bans on a number of species.

But bills restricting or regulating exotic animal ownership often die in state governments. Lawmakers vote against them, or they never make it to a vote. This year, six measures failed to be passed — in Indiana, Kansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Virginia and Wyoming — according to Born Free.

“In some of these states, it’s very hard to have a conversation about it,” said Born Free’s Dylewsky.

Quiz

- 1 Which of these was NOT a result of the Zanesville incident?
- (A) Stricter laws were passed in Wisconsin.
 - (B) Exotic pet owners in Ohio are now monitored.
 - (C) Several animals were killed to protect the public.
 - (D) Owning exotic animals was banned.
- 2 According to the article, why have so many of the bills to regulate owning exotic animals failed?

1. *Because laws banning people from owning animals are wrong.*
2. *Because the laws do not always make it to a vote.*
3. *Because federal laws already handle the issue.*
4. *Because lawmakers vote against the laws.*

- (A) 3 and 4
 - (B) 1 and 2
 - (C) 1 and 4
 - (D) 2 and 4
- 3 Read the following sentence from the section "Wild Animals, Big Business".

The federal government largely leaves it to the states to regulate exotic animals. It is up to state lawmakers to tackle the problem.

Which answer choice helps explain the meaning of the word "largely" as used in the above sentence?

- (A) in a big way
- (B) sometimes
- (C) seldom
- (D) usually

- 4 Read the following selection from the section "Hard To Have A Conversation".

Wisconsin is one of five states without a law regulating the private ownership of dangerous exotic animals, according to Born Free. Fourteen states require licenses or permits.

Based on the context, which of the following is NOT a synonym for "regulating?"

- (A) monitoring
- (B) organizing
- (C) controlling
- (D) supervising