

Liked to Death – following **online wildlife suffering:**

**How social media, European consumers
and legal loopholes in the region are putting
our world's wildlife in crisis**



Acknowledgements

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Content warning: This document contains images of animals in situations where they are being mistreated.

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Children pet a six-week-old serval cat in Washington, DC.

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Introduction

Our world's wildlife is in crisis. Animals are facing unimaginable suffering, and many species are being driven to near extinction.

Habitat destruction for commercial gain and climate change are well-known culprits. But there is another, largely hidden cause of wild animal suffering — the exotic pet trade to which social media and European consumers are major contributors.

European demand and criminals drive this devastating industry which leads to millions of wild animals being snatched from their wild habitats every year; others are captive bred to fuel demand. If illegally sourced, the animals including mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians are then smuggled into Europe, with many perishing due to the cruel and inhumane transport conditions.

And on arrival at their new homes none of these animals have guarantees of happy endings. Their distress continues as most owners simply cannot give them the lives and freedom they would have in the wild.

The trade is not only devastating for animals; it destabilises ecosystems and undermines the rule of law. Urgent action is required to close the legal loopholes that support it, reduce demand, and strengthen enforcement.

European citizens are ready for change. According to a 2025 independent market and behavioural research commissioned by IFAW on a representative sample, 84% of those surveyed feel European wildlife protection laws need strengthening.

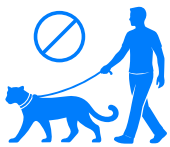
This report uncovers the role of social media, public concern, and the vital steps decision makers and each of us should take to end the suffering of wild animals inherent to trading and keeping them as pets.

▼ Northern Slow Loris (*Nycticebus bengalensis*) rescued from illegal wildlife trade, Endangered Primate Rescue Center, Cuc Phuong National Park, Vietnam.

“Online platforms must step up to prevent the trade from happening on their sites, and buyers and would-be buyers of these animals need to understand the untold damage and suffering that is caused by their demand. Global wildlife trafficking is estimated at US \$7–23 billion annually, making it one of the world’s largest black markets.”

Christian Plowman, wildlife cybercrime program manager, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)

Figure 1: Perceptions about wildlife, trafficking and the wild animal pet trade¹



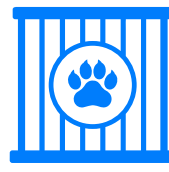
70% disagreed that wild animals make good pets



82% believe wildlife trafficking is a serious global problem that needs more attention



Only 1 in 3 people realise that Europe is a key hub for wildlife trafficking or that online platforms play a major role



3 in 4 say they know only a little or not much about wildlife trafficking



84% of those surveyed feel European wildlife protection laws need strengthening



Only 54% thought that as individuals, they could play a role in reducing wildlife trafficking



Photo: © Suzi Eszterhas

Behind the reels – wildlife under pressure

African grey parrots have become internet stars with huge fanbases across TikTok, YouTube and Instagram. Their singing, swearing and joke-telling antics, endlessly shared across social media, have earned them millions of followers and made them one of the most sought-after exotic pets in the world.²

And African greys are not alone in their animal celebrity status. They share their online fame with a host of other wild animals kept as exotic pets including serval and savannah cats who are rapidly rising in popularity due to social media. Owners proudly sharing footage on their feeds of these stunning animals – native to Sub-Saharan Africa – have prompted widespread demand.³

Concealing cruelty and suffering

Behind the online fun and pride of feeds from owners of wild animals kept as pets lie some grim facts. For example, servals and savannah cats are now among the five most frequently rescued exotic animals in Spain and across Europe. This is because their once delighted owners increasingly struggle to cope with the wild cat's natural instincts, strength and behaviour.⁴

And African grey parrots are victims of a cruel trade that has driven decades of poaching in West and Central Africa. Around 1.3 million wild African greys were traded from 1975 to 2015. The species was one of the most traded of all CITES-listed birds, representing 11% of all reported parrots in the wildlife trade.⁵

Wild-caught African greys have been protected from trade internationally in 2016 through their inclusion in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). This international agreement between governments aims to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten the survival of the species.

However, the issue persists. The illegal trade in African greys, and the legal, relentless breeding of them on commercial farms, continue to fuel the demand, facilitated by social media.⁶

DRC gives African greys national protection

Since 31 July 2025, African greys finally enjoy full legal protection under the national laws of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The poaching of

African grey parrots in the DRC has contributed significantly to the trade in these animals. It is now a criminal offence to capture, possess, kill and sell them. This national legislation complements the CITES listing. However, by the end of 2025, IFAW continued to observe illegal online trade in African greys to meet demand in Europe..

“It was unimaginable to people 50 years ago that this species [African grey parrot] could ever be threatened with extinction. Yet wild populations have collapsed in our lifetime in no small part due to the human desire to keep birds in cages.”

Rowan Martin,
World Parrot Trust

What makes a pet 'exotic'?

So-called exotic pets, also known as wild pets, are commonly understood as any animal of a species that is not domesticated and retains its wild characteristics, but which are nevertheless kept as pets. They may be imported – legally or illegally – bred, sold or kept as a pet for display, amusement and/or companionship. However, wild animals are adapted to a life in the wild and have highly specialised needs, including complex diets, environmental conditions, social structures, and space requirements. These needs are not only extremely difficult to meet in a domestic environment, but often impossible.

► African grey parrot nestlings for sale in market. Goma Town.



Europe – feeding the problem

Few people watching YouTube, Instagram and TikTok feeds know the true stories behind the seemingly funny or beautiful images of exotic pets and their owners. Wildlife crime, one of the most pressing conservation and animal welfare challenges of our time, is well hidden and little understood.

Also hidden is Europe's key role in perpetuating wildlife crime, the shocking cruelty involved and how European exotic pet ownership is driving many wildlife species to near extinction. Across Europe, the trafficking of live animals, plants, timber and derivatives is a multibillion-euro industry, threatening biodiversity and fuelling organised crime.

Facing the facts

There are an estimated 64 million exotic pets in Europe ranging from insects,

spiders, fish, reptiles and amphibians, and birds to mammals.⁷ Europe is one of the world's largest importers of wild animals, including illegally captured species. It is alarming that many of the animals brought to Europe are of illegal origin. A recent study indicates that the EU is among the main (re)exporters of live wild-caught non-CITES-listed reptile and amphibian species into the USA.⁸

In 2019, EU Member States reported imports of EUR 1.25bn worth of CITES-listed species. And in 2023 alone, EU enforcement agencies intercepted 600,000 illegally traded live animals (CITES-listed) from 574 different species.⁹

Using legal loopholes

Only a small fraction of internationally traded species is covered and protected by CITES or EU legislation. This leaves

significant loopholes that traffickers exploit. In fact, many species traded legally within Europe have been captured and exported in violation of the laws of their country of origin. These loopholes clearly undermine conservation efforts in countries that have introduced legislation to protect their wildlife.

Apart from Malta, there are no sanctions or penalties in the EU for trading in domestically protected species that have been caught in violation of a country's national legislation.¹⁰ Such omissions have allowed the EU to become a major hub for this criminal activity, and native populations of wildlife are being decimated to meet European demands.

- ▼ Spiny Tail Lizard (*Uromastyx acanthinurus*), individuals for the pet trade are checked in customs in regard to CITES and local law, France

Case study: Focus on Sri Lanka

How Europe threatens national conservation laws

Seizures during 2024 of animals from Sri Lanka, where legislation permits no exports of native wildlife, clearly illustrate how the EU is the source, destination and transit hub for endemic wildlife trafficking. They also indicate the disturbing role of European citizens as clients or even traffickers for stolen wildlife.¹¹

In August 2024, wildlife authorities in Sri Lanka arrested two Russian nationals with almost 200 endangered and endemic amphibians and reptiles in their luggage. The animals' likely destination was Europe's largest reptile fair in Hamm, Germany.¹²

And in May 2024, Sri Lankan authorities arrested two Italian nationals for catching 285 butterflies, dragonflies, beetles, and other insects in the Yala National Park. The offenders were attempting to smuggle them to Italy. In September 2024, they were fined 60 million Sri Lankan rupees (US\$200,000).¹³



“Of the 14 countries documented to be selling Sri Lankan reptiles, only three were non-European.”

Researchers Jordi Janssen & Anslém de Silva (2019)

“Wildlife traders are exploiting often well-meaning animal lovers causing untold harm on animal populations in the wild—treating nature as a free-for-all pet shop is unsustainable.

While sharing your home with a wild animal might seem innocent, it is still wildlife exploitation that is harmful for wild populations and biodiversity. The trade fuels demand, even when the animals are legally bred in captivity. This worrying trend needs confronting urgently for these animals to stand a fighting chance at survival.”

Matt Collis, senior director of policy for IFAW

Failing to tackle the trade – the EU

Since 2016, wildlife trafficking has become a priority for EU policymakers and law enforcement agencies under the [EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking](#). This has led to increased enforcement measures, cross-border investigations and prosecutions. But across the EU the number of cases and court convictions are still low.

Only about 10% of reported incidents of wildlife trafficking result in convictions, jail time, community service or fines⁷. And an even smaller number of these cases involve financial investigations to identify the illicit proceeds and money laundering offences.¹⁴

EU Wildlife Trade Regulations do not fully address this issue. Most species that are nationally protected, but not listed under CITES, can still be legally imported, exported, kept and traded within the EU.¹⁵

Selling cruelty – virtually

In Europe, wild animals illegally traded as pets are often sold by criminals through legal channels, such as pet stores, international fairs, gardening stores, licensed breeders, and zoos.¹⁶

However, most contacts with traders and offers take place online.¹⁷ This is because social media effectively operates as a virtual marketplace for the exotic pet trade. It connects followers of exotic pet reels, pictures, and feeds to buyers and sellers across borders. It is an easy medium for creating demand, advertising and for processing the consequent transactions. Furthermore, these platforms are characterised by their lack of regulation and oversight, allowing the illegal trade and poor practices to continue.¹⁸

IFAW has been working during the past 20 years to dismantle wildlife trafficking online. We collaborate with online platforms, sponsor investigations, and train enforcement authorities while also supporting the rescue and rehabilitation of confiscated animals and protecting the habitats they call home.

“The loopholes in the EU wildlife trade legislation, and therefore the low risk involved in smuggling non-CITES species, is an incentive for traffickers to target these species. The EU should criminalise the trade in any illegally sourced wildlife species, then strengthening law enforcement deterrence”.

Ilaria Di Silvestre, Director of Policy and Advocacy, Europe, for IFAW.

Flagging the crimes

In March 2025, IFAW gained an important weapon in the battle against wildlife crime in the EU. We became the first wildlife conservation organisation designated as a Trusted Flagger in the EU. This status was granted by the French Regulatory Authority for Audiovisual and Digital Communication (ARCOM) under the EU Digital Services Act (DSA). It allows us to directly flag illegal wildlife content to online platforms such as Facebook, Milanuncios, or TikTok. These platforms are then legally obliged to review the reported content immediately, take appropriate action – including removal when necessary – and inform us of the measures taken.

Between March and December 2025, IFAW reported 118 suspicious advertisements to five online platforms operating in the EU. Most of these cases (60%) involved listings for African grey parrots. The parrots were advertised without any proof of legality, such as a valid CITES certificate.

Overall, the results were encouraging: almost 75% of the reported listings were

removed after we submitted a Trusted Flagger notice. However, our work also exposed serious weaknesses in how platforms respond to wildlife crime: in one out of four cases, platforms either reviewed the notice but refused to take the content down, or they did not reply to us and took no visible action. In both situations, the offers stayed online – and in most cases, the animals were almost certainly sold.

Studies show European people ready for change

A total of 84% of Europeans support stricter laws to stop the global trade in wild animals, according to a 2025 IFAW study¹⁹ conducted by Brussels-based market research company Sapience¹. Additionally, 82% recognise wildlife trafficking as a serious global problem; based on their responses, 55% were classified as advocates for animal welfare. This means they strongly oppose wildlife trafficking, firmly support stricter laws, and reject the acceptability of trading or owning wild animals whether species are endangered or not. But despite such strong conviction, only one in three understood Europe’s role as a major hub for this trade. Most felt powerless, and only 22% of respondents believed they could make a difference.

Social media gives all European citizens the power to protect wild animals from wildlife crime and to put pressure on governments to introduce and enforce effective laws that protect them.

Another independent survey, commissioned by IFAW and conducted by YouGov in 2025¹⁹, covered 620 owners of wild animals as pets in the UK. It showed that a significant majority (68%) of them support stricter regulation like positive lists of allowed species, while only 11% oppose it. This challenges the narrative that pet owners are generally resistant to government regulation of their hobby. 79% of owners stated they would be unlikely to purchase a pet if they discovered it had been taken from the wild. 76% of respondents believe that wild animal pet markets contribute to wildlife trafficking. These statistics show that the trade in exotic pets is not only an animal welfare issue, but also a recognised driver of illegal wildlife crime in the eyes of consumers themselves.

◀ Ball Python (*Python regius*), individuals for the pet trade are checked in customs in regard to CITES and local law, France.





To end the suffering of millions of animals trapped in this cruel and unnecessary trade, IFAW — through our Liked to Death campaign — is calling for the following actions.

We want European citizens to...

- ▶ **Stop giving visibility by** liking, commenting, reposting and sharing images, reels and feeds that promote exotic pet ownership in any way – no matter how beautiful or fun the content is. Unscrupulous traders and criminals depend on people liking, sharing the images and following the sites to increase the demand for wild animal pets.
- ▶ **Resist** the temptation to buy wild animals as pets. Even if they seem appealing, exciting or even tame, they are still wild animals. Their journeys from the wild to captive ownership will inevitably involve cruelty, distress and suffering.
- ▶ **Spread** the word that if wild animals are sold as ‘captive bred’ it doesn’t mean that owning them is OK. This is because the animals are still wild — not domesticated — and suffer greatly living outside their natural habitats.
- ▶ **Notify** online platforms immediately when you observe potentially illegal wildlife content. All online platforms should have mechanisms in place to allow you to do this. And if the illegality is confirmed, they should take action to remove the advertisement.
- ▶ **Support IFAW campaigns and activities** and become the wildlife advocates our planet urgently needs.

With your help we will...

- ▶ **Put pressure on** European policy makers to close legal loopholes that enable wildlife trafficking and work with other countries that are trying to stop wildlife crime.
- ▶ **Focus** on fighting wildlife crime in the cyber sphere through our recognised Trusted Flagger status within the EU.
- ▶ **Reduce** consumer demand for wild animals as pets through awareness-raising and education campaigns.
- ▶ **Use** our resources, expertise and national and global networks to help protect wild animals confiscated from illegal trade. Our aim is to ensure they are identified by enforcement officers, expertly cared for, rehabilitated and released to the wild or safe havens wherever possible.
- ▶ **Forge** partnerships with communities, traditional leaders, governments, enforcement authorities and NGOs in countries where wild animals are sourced for trade through our conservation initiatives, like [Room to Roam](#). This is dedicated to reconnecting critical landscapes for wild animals and allowing them and people to coexist and flourish.

We want the EU policy makers to...

- ▶ **Support** CITES listing proposals from countries wanting to protect their native wildlife species and proactively seek trade restrictions or bans that complement national protection measures. The revised EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking launched in 2022 (a revision of the 2016 plan) offers a critical opportunity to close loopholes in current regulations.
- ▶ **Introduce** new EU and UK legislation that criminalises the importation, trade and possession of species protected in their country of origin, ensuring that wildlife stolen abroad cannot be sold legally in Europe.
- ▶ **Introduce** positive lists in the EU and the United Kingdom for species that may be kept and traded as pets. Such lists would make the rules clear to traders and consumers, creating fairness and easing law enforcement.
- ▶ **Improve** the EU monitoring system to accurately record species-specific data on all wildlife being imported, exported and moved between Member States.

▲ Frightened serval (*Leptailurus serval*) wild cat trapped in the cage meowing and growling, showing teeth.

Conclusion

Europe is at the heart of the global wildlife trade. As both a consumer market and a trafficking hub, its role is decisive in shaping the future of countless species. With stronger legislation, coordinated enforcement, and reduced consumer

demand, Europe can lead the way in dismantling wildlife crime

IFAW's comprehensive approach — combining policy influence, law enforcement support, public engagement,

rescue of confiscated animals, and conservation action — aim to create a future where animals and people thrive.

Better in the wild

African grey parrots

The African grey parrot is one of the most popular wild animals kept as pet in Europe, the USA and the Middle East because of its amazing ability to mimic human speech, other sounds and perform tricks.²⁰

Although captive-bred parrots now make up the majority of those in trade, illegal trafficking persists. Offenders frequently hide wild-caught individuals within shipments of other parrot species that are not legally protected.²¹

Despite such high demand there are many reasons, rarely explained on social media, why this intelligent animal should never be kept as a pet.

No domestic environment – no matter how large – can ever truly replicate an African grey's wild habitat. African greys are very

sociable and fly long distances in large flocks (up to groups of 100 birds in a single tree) in their rainforest habitats. Males and females also form long-term partnerships where they mate and rear chicks.

Suffering anxiety and stress

When taken out of this environment and kept as pets, African greys can suffer from depression and stress. This can lead to them self-harming by plucking out their feathers and behaving aggressively.

Social media reels glorify the strong bonds African greys can form with their owner. But these sensitive and clever birds can become very anxious and stressed when separated from them for any length of time.

Many owners complain about the mess African greys make when they eat. But it is natural for them to be very messy eaters. This behaviour is natural and important

– in the wild the parrots help regenerate the forest floor as they scatter fruits, nuts, seeds to the ground.

Ownership of an African grey is a lifetime commitment. Realistically, few owners are prepared for the fact that pets in captivity can live up to 60-70 years, or for the vet costs that are often incurred to keep them healthy in a domestic environment. In addition to a tendency towards depression, stress and anxiety, African greys living in captivity are also susceptible to physical illnesses. These include fungal infections, bacterial infections, nutritional insufficiency, malignant tumours, psittacine beak and feather disease, tapeworms, and bloodworms.²² Diseases such as the bird flu, salmonellosis and other bacterial and fungal infections can spread to people.

▼ Captive African grey parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) fledglings destined for wildlife trade, Goma town, Democratic Republic of Congo.





Photo: © TBC

Better in the wild

Serval cats

Serval cats live solitary lives in territories covering several kilometres in the grasslands of sub-Saharan Africa. They are instinctive roamers and hunters. This means that they cannot easily adapt to the restrictions of domestic life, even if they are purchased as cute kittens, as is so often seen on social media.

Serval kittens grow into powerful animals, weighing around 18 kg, with long legs, strong teeth and claws. They will leap around 2.7 metres high and nearly 4 metres forward to pounce on their unsuspecting prey; then they bite to kill them. A serval's bite is very strong — with a force of 172 Newtons compared to 56 Newtons for a domestic cat.

Servals are such good hunters that they have a higher success rate than lions hunting together. And they have an important role in the ecosystem. By hunting rodents and other small animals, they help to keep habitats balanced and healthy for many other species.

As servals enter adulthood even a seemingly big cage or enclosure will not be enough to mimic the freedom of their wild home where they might roam 2.4 kilometres during the day. So, their behaviour and frustration at confinement can become increasingly unmanageable and frightening for owners.

Many servals end up in sanctuaries after owners realise they cannot meet their needs — these cats retain wild instincts and are often destructive or aggressive in domestic settings.²³ 40 serval individuals were recorded in seizures between 2017 and 2023 in the EU, reflecting the continued demand for this species.²⁴

Hybrids' problems – savannah cats

Breeders have created and are using social media to sell 'savannah cats' – a cross (hybrid) between servals and domestic cats. But looking after these cats is not necessarily easier for owners as they too retain much of a serval's wild nature and power. Research in Australia, where savannah cats are banned, has shown they can pose risks to native wildlife if they escape. The study found the cats could thrive in 97% of habitats and threaten up to 90% of native species.²⁵

Savannah cat breeding has also been linked with poor breeding practices, prioritising profit over animal welfare and contributing to poor health and early mortality in kittens. And in some cases,²⁶ pure, illegally wild-caught servals are sold as savannah or are used to breed with domestic cats.²⁷

The legality of savannah cat ownership in Europe can be cloudy. It is completely banned in Belgium, for example. In some countries, however, the legality of keeping a Savannah cat depends on how many generations the animal is removed from the originally bred serval.



Photo: © Suzi Eszterhas

▲ Serval in poor condition rescued from a private keeper in the UK.

▲ Two week orphaned Serval kitten (Leptailurus / Felis serval) being fed milk by foster parent, Suzi Eszterhas. Tanzania, Africa. October 2006.

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▲ African Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) flock taking off, Lake Lobak / Lobeke National Park, Cameroon, July.

International Fund
for Animal Welfare

Liked to Death – following
online wildlife suffering:
How social media, European
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