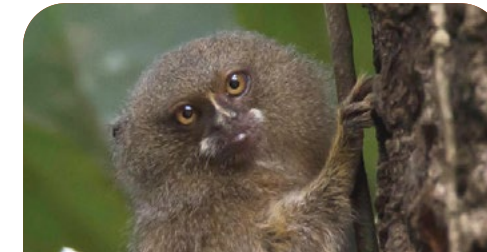




Primates
for
Purchase



The Surge
in Sales on
Social Media
in the US
2026



Acronyms

APHIS: US Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

AZA: Association of Zoos and Aquariums

CITES: Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora

ESA: Endangered Species Act

FOIA: Freedom of Information Act

GFAS: Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries

IUCN: International Union for Conservation of Nature

IFAW: International Fund for Animal Welfare

LEMIS: Law Enforcement Management Information System

NAPSA: North American Primate Sanctuary Alliance

UK: United Kingdom

US: United States

USCBP: US Customs and Border Protection

USDA: US Department of Agriculture

USFWS: US Fish and Wildlife Service

WWF: World Wildlife Fund

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1 Executive Summary



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This study documents the prolific sale of primates online directly between users in the United States, particularly on social media.

Primary research was conducted on four social media platforms and supplemented with stakeholder engagement, a review of relevant state and federal policy, and synthesis of seizure information obtained through media sources and personal correspondence. This snapshot report demonstrates the scale, risks, and challenges of the trade in live primates online in the US and includes recommendations for policy makers, enforcement agencies, digital platforms, and the public.



Risks of the Live Primate Trade Online



Conservation

Almost three-quarters of non-human primate species are classified as threatened by the IUCN Red List, and all species are listed on CITES Appendix I or II. Demand for the exotic pet trade is a major driver behind this exploitation. Declining wild populations pose a risk to both ecological stability and biodiversity.

estimated \$23 billion annual illicit wildlife market.



Welfare

Primates have highly complex social, behavioral, and environmental needs that are extremely difficult to meet outside of professionally managed, species-appropriate settings. They are often traumatically taken from their mothers at a young age from the wild, and also separated when bred in captivity, which has long-term psychological and physical effects. Additionally, smuggling methods are often cramped and unsanitary, resulting in high levels of illness and mortality.

into the wild. This wreaks havoc on local ecosystems and can result in devastating economic impacts on local economies. For example, Florida already has established breeding populations of invasive primates.



Disease Transmission

Due to genetic and physiological similarities between humans and non-human primates, the risk of pathogen transmission between the two is extremely high when they are kept in close contact. Wild caught primates are more likely to be carrying parasites or deadly viruses such as rabies, herpes B, Marburg, Ebola, HIV, and mpox, which can all be transmitted between non-human primates and humans. The traumatic conditions of capture and transport, as well as concealment methods that prevent veterinary inspection, increase this risk.



Illegality and Security

It can be difficult to distinguish legal primate trade from illicit sourcing due to the widespread laundering of wild caught individuals as captive bred. The illegal trade often converges with other organized crimes such as narcotics trafficking and is facilitated by transnational criminal networks, contributing to the



Invasiveness

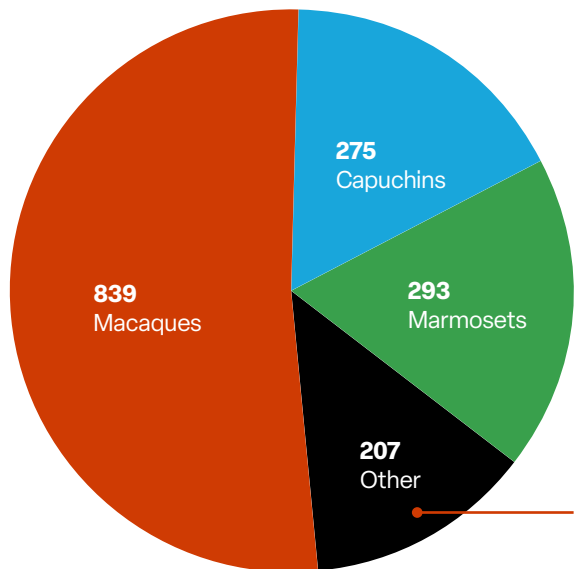
There have been well-documented cases of pet owners releasing unwanted animals



Key Data Findings

Primary Research

Between June 15, 2025, and August 1, 2025, the researchers identified **122 social media users** posting a total of **1,131 pieces of content** offering live primates in exchange for payment. These posts reflected a minimum of **1,614 individual primates** across 12 taxa*: **macaques**, **capuchins**, **marmosets**, spider monkeys, squirrel monkeys, tamarins, vervets, lemurs, bush babies, owl monkeys, chimpanzees and howler monkeys.



Spider monkeys, squirrel monkeys, tamarins, vervets, lemurs, bush babies, owl monkeys, chimpanzees and howler monkeys.

* Listed in order of prevalence.

Most frequently posted primate taxa



Macaques

Posts appeared in: **619**
Individuals featured:
 At least **839**
Prices: Ranged from \$250 to \$6,500, averaging **\$1,005**



Capuchins

Posts appeared in: **202**
Individuals featured:
 At least **275**
Prices: Ranged from \$300 to \$6,500 and averaged **\$859**



Marmosets

Posts appeared in: **159**
Individuals featured:
 At least **293**
Prices: Ranged widely from \$250 to \$6,500 and averaged **\$1,174**

“The illegal pet trade doesn’t just harm individual animals—it disrupts social structures and weakens already vulnerable populations. Each animal taken from the wild contributes to a broader cycle that fuels criminal activity and undermines conservation efforts. From an enforcement perspective, we are seeing the scale and complexity of this issue continue to grow, particularly in online spaces.”

— Nathan Smith, Assistant Chief of Special Operations with California Department of Fish and Wildlife Office of Law Enforcement



Location

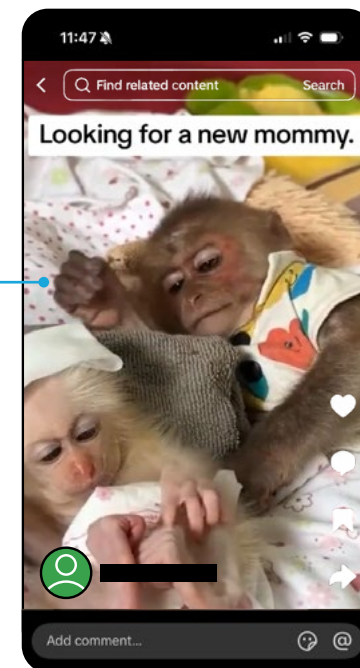
Of the US states where location was specified, sellers based in **Florida** had the highest number of sales (n=36), followed by **Texas** (n=34)



Effort

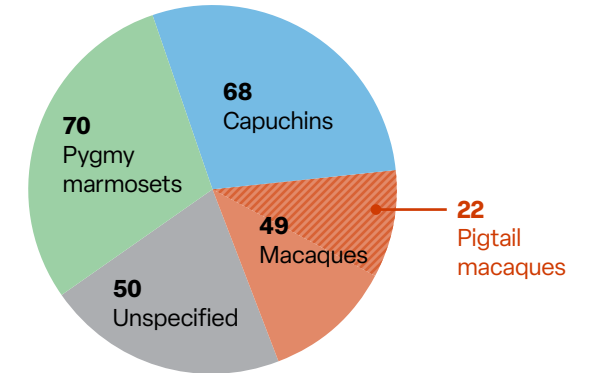
Level of effort was low for finding these sales. Simple search terms such as “**monkey adoption**” or “**baby monkey for adoption**” yielded results and additional searches.

Example of content identified where seller uses non-traditional commerce language to advertise live macaques.



MACAQUE: © CHRIS J RATCLIFFE / WWF-UK; CAPUCHIN: © DON GETTY; MARMOSET: © ADRIANO GAMBARINI / WWF-US

Research Conducted by Google Staff



As part of this research, Google staff volunteered time to search for primates for sale on YouTube. They identified **237 individual primates** for sale on YouTube through **154 videos** posted by **84 users**, with videos dated from January 2020-June 2025. Most of the individuals were pygmy marmosets (n=70), capuchins (n=68), and macaques (n=49), particularly pigtail macaques (n=22) when specified.



Recommendations



For Lawmakers

Captive Primate Safety Act

Support the [Captive Primate Safety Act](#) to address the prolific US trade in non-human primates and help close policy loopholes that enable primate exploitation and harm.

Wildlife Confiscations Network Act

Support the [Wildlife Confiscations Network Act](#) to codify all aspects of this successful law enforcement program and allow the network to expand nationwide, establishing a cooperative and coordinated confiscation response in partnership with local, state, and federal law enforcement.

State Policy

Strengthen **state-level laws** and regulations to restrict or prohibit the breeding, keeping, transport, and trade of non-human primates, complementing the Captive Primate Safety Act.

Strengthen Penalties

To reflect the seriousness of wildlife trafficking offenses and shift the current paradigm of 'low-risk, high-reward,' **revise sentencing guidelines and amend laws** to strengthen penalties and ensure that wildlife trafficking can be addressed using the full suite of legal authorities available to combat organized crime and target criminal networks.

Appropriations

Provide sufficient funding for law enforcement, including to cover the costs of transport, care, and veterinary expenses when placement assistance from professional animal care facilities is requested.



For Enforcement Agencies

Online primate investigations

Incorporate study findings regarding online tactics for primate sales into **training materials and investigative procedures**.

Company collaboration

Establish a **point of contact with social media platforms** where further information is needed to investigate online sales. The [Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online](#) could help to facilitate these connections.

Responsible placement for confiscated or surrendered primates

Utilize resources from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), North American Primate Sanctuary Alliance (NAPSA), and Wildlife Confiscations Network to **ensure seized wildlife receive the appropriate care** and do not end up in the illegal trade.



For Digital Platforms

Prohibited content policies

Online platforms should **prohibit the advertisement and sale of all primates** through commerce features as well as community standards.

Adjustments to automated detection filters

Companies managing online platforms should incorporate primate-specific commerce and rehoming **search terms and emojis** into **block filters** and should conduct a review of existing block filters to identify any gaps. For a full list of terms recommended for inclusion, companies can reach out to Endwildlifetraffickingonline@wwf.us.

Suggested text results

Adjust **suggested text search results** to remove language around price or with access to sale for primates. A second step could include messaging as a search result that

provides additional information about the species' conservation status, legal protections, and unsuitability as pets.

User awareness

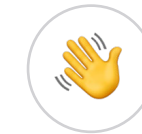
Engage platform users to **raise awareness** about the risks of primates in the pet trade, including through pop-up alerts and redirects linked to primate commerce terms. Companies can also encourage use of specified content reporting pathways.

Law enforcement proactive collaboration

Where indicators of more organized, criminal trade are evident, companies can **engage with law enforcement agencies** to share content for further investigation. In the US, relevant authorities include the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Engagement with the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online

Company members of the **Coalition** can reach out to their focal points for targeted primate enforcement tactics on the platform. Companies seeking to join the Coalition can learn more at <https://www.endwildlifetraffickingonline.org/>.



For the Public

Reduce the demand

Do not purchase primates as pets. Do not "like" or "share" social media posts featuring primates as pets—doing so increases the reach and engagement of these posts, allowing them to influence more users and normalize harmful human-wildlife interactions.

Do not purchase primates as pets. Do not "like" or "share" social media posts featuring primates as pets—doing so increases the reach and engagement of these posts, allowing them to influence more users and normalize harmful human-wildlife interactions.

Report Online Sales

If you see a primate for sale online, report it **directly to the company** through the platform's reporting feature or to the [USFWS Wildlife Crime Tips](#).

Spread the Word

Advocate for followers to report primate sales and never buy primates.

Never release captive exotic animals into the wild

Releasing a non-native animal can cause serious harm—to the animal, to native wildlife, and to people. **If you or someone you know can no longer care for an exotic pet,** responsible options will vary

widely depending on the species, but may include:

1. Contacting a local [AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium](#);
2. reaching out to a [sanctuary accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries](#);
3. contacting your local animal control agency;
4. reaching out to a local licensed wildlife rehabilitator or rescue organization experienced with that species; or
5. consulting with your state wildlife agency or state veterinarian, who may regulate exotic animal ownership and be equipped to provide guidance on legal surrender options.

2 Introduction



In the United States, a buyer doesn't need detective skills or back-alley connections to buy an illegal pet monkey. They only need one tap on their social media account.

Capuchins, macaques, marmosets, spider monkeys—these and many other primate species are advertised and sold through mainstream social media platforms and kept as pets across the US. With fragmented laws, the illicit laundering of wild-caught specimens as captive-bred, and robust demand for primates as pets perpetuated through popular culture and viral content, the impacts of this trade on wild populations and risks to human, ecological, and economic health are staggering.

Illegality and Security

Beyond contributing to global wildlife trafficking—an estimated \$23 billion-per-year¹ criminal enterprise—the non-human primate* trade is a growing driver of environmental related crime and profits in the US. Primates are increasingly smuggled into the US, including across the Mexican border² through organized criminal networks. Over an 18-month period between 2024-2025,³ almost 90 juvenile spider mon-

In a 2025 CBS story, US Fish and Wildlife Service Special Agent Jim Stinebaugh noted nearly

90

baby spider monkeys were confiscated at the southern US border over an 18-month period

keys were confiscated at the Texas-Mexico border. Wildlife trafficking often converges with other illicit networks such as drugs. In December 2025, an individual was sentenced⁴ for moving fentanyl pills from Mexico into New Mexico along with the smuggling of exotic wildlife.

In addition to threatening wild populations from which these animals may be taken, this trade poses significant risks of ecological invasion if a buyer no longer wants to keep the animal as a pet and releases it into the wild, which can significantly impact surrounding ecosystems and local economies. For example, collected and reported observations of nonnative primates in Florida submitted to the Nonnative Fish and Wildlife Program reveal that there are seven introduced species of nonnative primates in Florida: rhesus macaque, vervet monkey, ring-tailed lemur, marmoset, capuchin monkey, squirrel monkey, and Japanese macaque. Of

*For the purposes of this report, the term "primate/s" refers to non-human primates including monkeys, apes, lorises, and lemurs."



these seven introduced nonnative primates, two of the species including the rhesus macaque and vervet monkey have established populations as determined by the total number of reported incidents.

Conservation Concerns

As vital components of ecosystems, including as seed dispersers that help regenerate forest growth and contribute to pollination, healthy primate populations are critical to maintaining habitats and biodiversity. Yet globally, almost three quarters of primate species are now classified as threatened, in part due to illegal trade. A 2024 review⁵ of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List conservation status for primates with available data found that 94% have declining populations and 69% are listed as Vulnerable, Endangered, or Critically Endangered. Commercial hunting for meat and body parts and live capture are some of the most pernicious

1,614
primates were
identified for sale
over six weeks
with minimal
effort.

threats to primates, with primary drivers including the pet trade, biomedical research, traditional medicine products, and food. While some trade is legal in the US, the patchwork of federal, state, and local laws enables traffickers to exploit loopholes and operate illegal markets alongside the legal trade.

Welfare and Risks to Human Health

Primate trafficking poses significant risk of disease transmission to people and other wildlife. The close genetic similarity and shared biology of humans and non-human primates increase the risk of harmful pathogen exchange. Sourcing primates from the wild exacerbates this threat, as capture



Estimated cost of care for one infant spider monkey over a 30-year life span

is a violent and highly traumatic process that often involves the killing of adults to obtain infants, which are most desired for the pet trade. These animals are then smuggled in cramped, unsuitable conditions that, in addition to causing significant mortality, make disease transmission more likely. Because traffickers hide these animals from authorities, regulatory agencies are unable to inspect incoming animals for signs of illness. Sick primates that escape or are released may infect other species, resulting in pathogen mutations that can lead to dangerous outbreaks. The long-term psychological impacts of this process on the animals, along with prolonged isolation from others of their species, can contribute to increased risk to the primates and people who interact with them.⁶

Lack of Regulation

This prolific trade thrives in the US due in part to a patchwork of inconsistent state laws governing primate ownership and the absence of clear federal oversight of online wildlife trade. These policy shortcomings, combined with the operation of captive breeding facilities through which wild-caught primates may be laundered, make determining legality a critical challenge in the US. Additionally, “backyard breeders” may operate without proper licenses from

the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), which allow for further unregulated supply of live individuals.

When illegal primates are seized, they cannot be returned to the wild due to the potential to introduce disease to wild populations and uncertainty around their origins. Enforcement agencies struggle with the volume of seized individuals, the animals’ specialized needs, and limited availability of appropriate placement facilities. To address the growing burden of placement for seized animals, AZA and the USFWS launched the Wildlife Confiscations Network (the Network) in 2023 to provide coordinated support to law enforcement in one of the hotspot wildlife trafficking corridors in the US: Southern California.

Congress has taken an interest in this issue, and legislative reforms have been proposed to help confront the animal care challenges associated with primate trafficking and confiscations. The proposed [Wildlife Confiscations Network Act](#) would provide the legal framework and resources to enable expansion of the successful Wildlife Confiscations Network, currently operating as a pilot program in Southern California, to handle a greater volume of seized wildlife requiring professional care and long-term placement.⁷

Caring for primates requires both expertise and substantial resources. The estimated cost of care for one infant spider monkey over a 30-year life span is more than \$1 million.⁸ For an infant black-capped capuchin, lifetime care expenses may reach \$750,000.⁹

The [Captive Primate Safety Act](#), which would prohibit the import, export, transport, sale, or purchase of non-human primates, as well as their breeding and possession, outside of professional animal care settings, effectively protecting them from the US exotic pet trade.¹⁰

The Role of Online Platforms

Social media increases the ease of access to captive primates while reinforcing the perception that they make suitable pets that are legal to obtain and own. It also drives demand for new species not previously seen in trade. The use of digital platforms to share wildlife content not related to trade adds complexity, as company-led enforcement teams must differentiate between intent to sell versus share.

The majority of online sales occur directly between individuals through organic content, which includes user-generated posts or videos. These primate sales are openly accessible, rather than hidden in closed groups or encrypted chats. Direct contact is made through the comment section of posted content and often directed into private messaging features or to a phone number to complete the



transaction. While sellers may attempt to hide conversations or advertisements related to protected wildlife products such as elephant ivory, the sale of live animals like primates tends to be more overt. For those seeking to circumvent automated detection filters, common tactics include: limiting text description and instead adding information directly to visuals such as overlaid on videos; requesting private communication; using wording related to “re-home,” “rescue,” or “adopt” in place of typical sales language; substituting primate terms for emojis (🐵); or including hashtags that more commonly refer to interactions than sales.

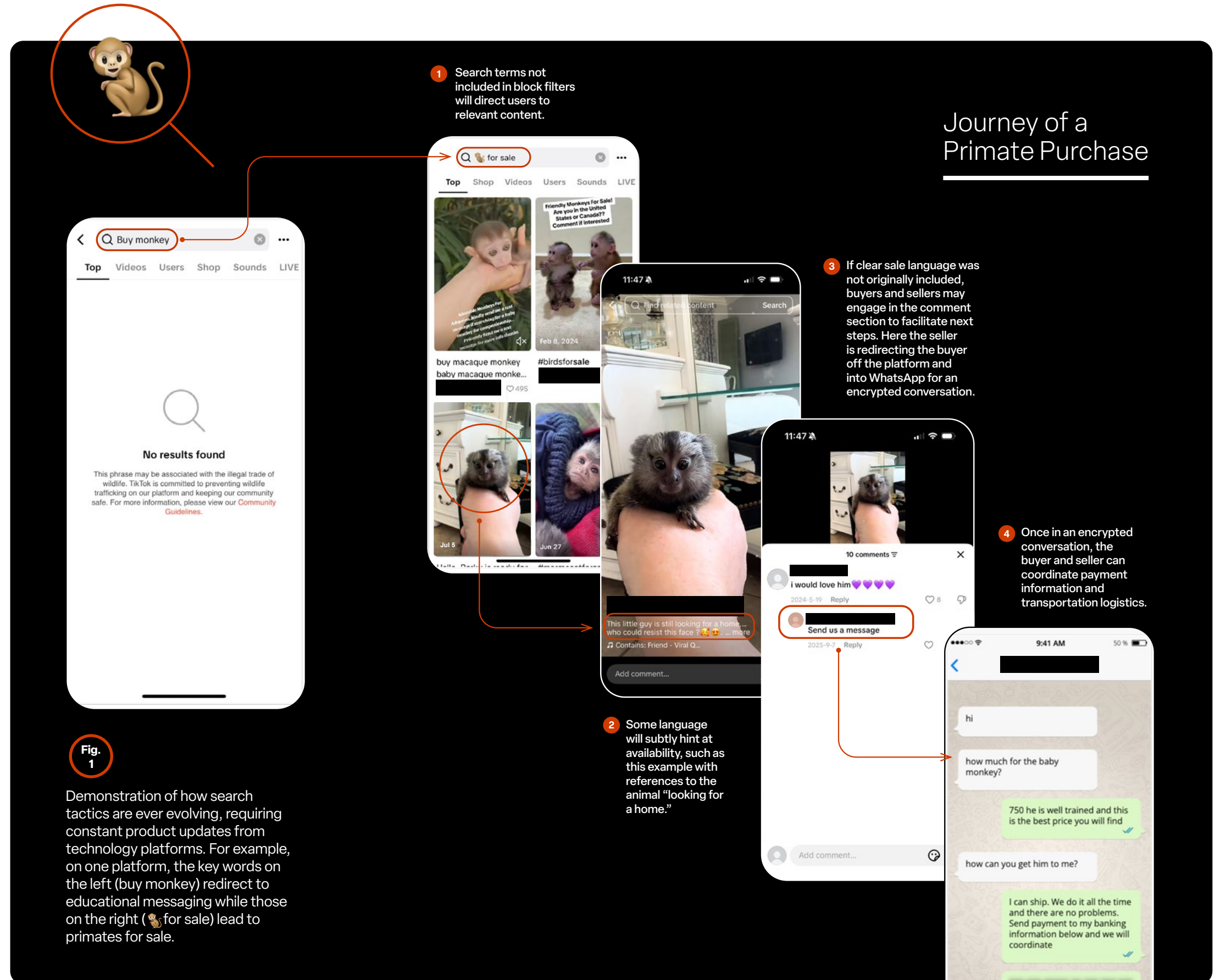
These consumer-to-consumer sales can occur directly between individuals without any form of certification or regulation required by the platforms. This lack of oversight means sellers need not prove the legal or sustainable origin of an animal, nor confirm that the animal can be legally owned in the buyer’s state or municipality. Buyers can obtain an animal without receiving reliable information on the species’ welfare needs, and without providing assurance that they are capable of housing and caring for the animal. Online sales may also involve inhumane transport of the animals through non-regulated shipments, which may result in sickness or death.

A June 2019–June 2020 study of online primate trade found 551 individuals from 14 different taxa for sale in the US. Marmosets, lemurs, capuchins, and squirrel monkeys were, in order, most commonly identified, with nearly 80% of individuals offered for sale under the age of one year. Among US states, Florida-based sellers offered the most primates for sale by far, followed by Tennessee, Texas, Missouri, and North Carolina. The median price of an individual primate was \$3,800, but prices varied widely by species.¹¹

Current Approaches

WWF and IFAW work with technology companies through the [Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online](#) to strengthen detection of and action against illegal trade in protected species through web-based platforms. However, the trade in primates is rampant, and gaps in US policy enable buyers and sellers to continue connecting online for direct consumer-to-consumer sales without significant repercussions.

This study provides an updated mapping of online primate trade in the US and explores opportunities for stakeholders to meaningfully support the conservation and welfare of primate species that are subject to online trade.





3 Species in Trade Snapshots

While the list of primate species in trade continues to evolve, here are several of the most frequently observed species offered for sale online in the US during the study period:

IUCN Conservation Status Scale

CR Critically Endangered

EN Endangered

VU Vulnerable

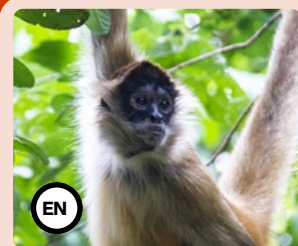
NT Near Threatened

LC Least Concern



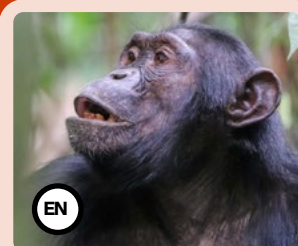
Black-and-Gold Howler Monkey
Alouatta caraya

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Not Listed
CITES Listing: App. II
Native Range and Habitat: Forests and savannas of Argentina (Chaco, Corrientes, Formosa, Misiones, Santa Fé), Bolivia, Brazil (Paraná, Piauí, Mato Grosso do Sul, Bahia, Brasília Distrito Federal, Minas Gerais, Maranhão, Pará, Rondônia, São Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul), and Paraguay



Black-Handed Spider Monkey
Ateles geoffroyi

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Endangered, *Ateles geoffroyi frontatus* and *Ateles geoffroyi panamensis*
CITES Listing: App. I, II
Native Range and Habitat: Forests of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico (Campeche, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo), Nicaragua, and Panama



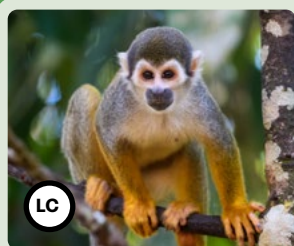
Chimpanzee
Pan troglodytes

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Endangered
CITES Listing: App. I
Native Range and Habitat: Tropical rainforest and lowland and mountain forests of Western and Central Africa



Common Marmoset
Callithrix jacchus

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Not Listed
CITES Listing: App. II
Native Range and Habitat: Various forests from extreme coastal to dry inland to rainforests in Brazil



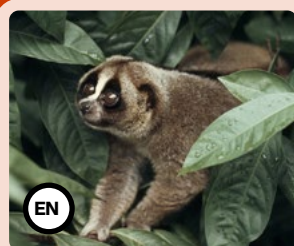
Common Squirrel Monkey
Saimiri sciureus

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Not Listed
CITES Listing: App. II
Native Range and Habitat: Forests of Brazil (Mato Grosso, Maranhão, Pará, Amapá, Amazonas, Tocantins, Roraima), French Guiana, Guyana, and Suriname



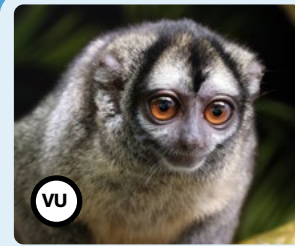
Cotton-Headed Tamarin
Oedipomidas/Saguinus oedipus

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Endangered
CITES Listing: App. I
Native Range and Habitat: Tropical and semi-dry forests of northwestern Colombia



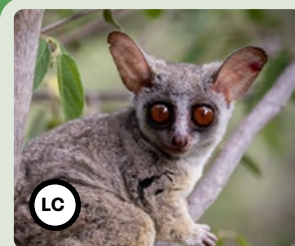
Greater Slow Loris
Nycticebus coucang

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Not Listed
CITES Listing: App. I
Native Range and Habitat: Tropical lowland forests of Indonesia, Malaysia, and southern Thailand, and Singapore



Nancy Ma's Night Monkey (Owl Monkey)
Aotus nancymae

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Not Listed
CITES Listing: App. II
Native Range and Habitat: Forests of Brazil (Amazonas), Colombia, and Peru



Northern Lesser Galago (Bush Baby)
Galago senegalensis

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Not Listed
CITES Listing: App. II
Native Range and Habitat: Forests and savannas across Western, Central, and Eastern Africa



Pygmy Marmoset
Cebuella pygmaea

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Not Listed
CITES Listing: App. II
Native Range and Habitat: Dense rainforests in the Amazon region of Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and northern Bolivia



Ring-Tailed Lemur
Lemur catta

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Endangered
CITES Listing: App. I
Native Range and Habitat: Forests, shrublands, rocky areas, caves, and subterranean habitats of Madagascar



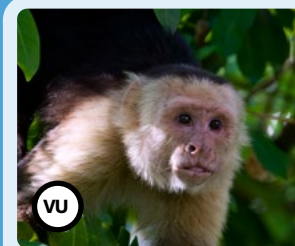
Southern Pigtail Macaque
Macaca nemestrina

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Not Listed
CITES Listing: App. II
Native Range and Habitat: Forests, shrublands, and terrestrial habitats of Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia (Kalimantan, Sumatera), Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, Sarawak), and Thailand



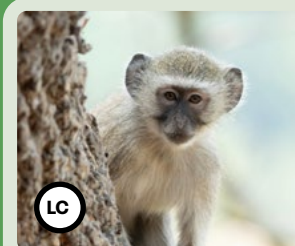
Tufted/Brown Capuchin
Sapajus apella

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Not Listed
CITES Listing: App. II
Native Range and Habitat: Forests and savannas of Bolivia, Brazil (Amazonas, Tocantins, Acre, Roraima, Amapá, Rondônia, Pará, Maranhão), mainland Colombia, mainland Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, and Venezuela



White-Faced Capuchin
Cebus capucinus

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Not Listed
CITES Listing: App. II
Native Range and Habitat: Forests and savannas of mainland Colombia, mainland Ecuador, and Panama



Vervet Monkey
Chlorocebus pygerythrus

Population Trend: ▼
ESA Protection Status: Not Listed
CITES Listing: App. II
Native Range and Habitat: Forests, savannas, shrublands, and terrestrial habitats of Eastern and Southern Africa

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4 Report Methods



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This study sources and analyzes primary data while incorporating observations made through stakeholder engagement, a review of media articles related to live primate seizures, and mapping of relevant policies at the state and federal levels.

Research methods included:

- 1 Primary data collection on social media platforms
- 2 Collaboration with technology companies to identify relevant content on their platforms
- 3 Interviews with expert representatives of US government agencies and relevant organizations
- 4 Review of media articles referencing primate seizures from July 2022-February 2026
- 5 Updated mapping of US policy for primate sales and ownership

Primary Data Collection Methodology

An independent researcher, formerly a USFWS special agent with extensive experience investigating global wildlife trafficking, conducted the primary data collection for this study. After scoping, the researcher selected Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube as primary sites for data collection due to the prevalence of primate trade activity on those platforms. A list of relevant search terms – informed by prior online trade research and consultation with experts at IFAW and WWF – was developed, including keywords, hashtags, and euphemisms known to be used in advertising live primates online. The following search terms, inclusive of the species that would be protected under the Captive Primate Safety Act, were used to carry out the searches online. Additional taxa (such as vervet monkey and owl monkey) were noted if they were encountered during the research.

Over six weeks, the researcher conducted daily searches across the four platforms for posts containing or implying offers to sell live primates. The researcher used a standardized data collection table designed to capture platform information, species involved, seller behavior, indicators of organized trade, and other variables needed to analyze the nature of online primate sales. Monitoring involved only open-source searches of publicly accessible content and when posts were vague (such as those implying availability but lacking a stated price), the researcher made an effort to contact the user directly to confirm intent to sell. Only posts confirmed to be offering live primates in exchange for monetary payment, either through a direct sale or an “adoption fee,” were included in the final dataset. Once all the information was recorded/collected, additional researchers analyzed all collected data to identify trends in species availability, platform usage, post frequency, and seller behavior, including indicators of organized or repeat activity. All surfaced content was reviewed by researchers, and content recommended for removal was shared directly with the platforms. The supporting researchers provided information to law enforcement officials as appropriate.

Tech Company Data Collection Methodology

Researchers engaged company partners Google, eBay, Mercado Libre and Pinterest to participate in data col-



Table A

Search terms used to identify primate sales across the four platforms

Category	Example search terms
General primate terms	monkey, primate, baby monkey
Taxa names	howler, spider, squirrel, loris/slow loris, macaque, lemur, marmoset, gibbon, capuchin, tamarin, java monkey, pigtailed, baboon, chimpanzee, gorilla, orangutan, tarsier, galagos
Spanish terms	mono, mono arana, titi, peresozo, chango/changuito, marmoseto, mono aullador, mono ardilla

lection. This strategy included two methodologies: (1) organizing an employee engagement “Cyber Spotter” event whereby researchers trained company staff to identify live primates and primate products on their platforms (Google and Mercado Libre) and (2) using a list of known search terms provided by the researchers to run an internal search query for live primates and products (eBay and Pinterest). All surfaced content was reviewed by the researchers and, where merited, recommended for removal from the relevant platform.* Products such as preserved skulls were included in these methodologies for a broader understanding of primate availability online in the US.

Stakeholder Outreach

Researchers engaged relevant stakeholders to obtain anecdotal insight into the primate trade online and ownership more broadly in the US. This included queries around primates intercepted in transit, placement of seized animals, subsequent investigations and prosecutions, inventory of seized products, and online investigations. Insights from these engagements have been incorporated throughout the study.

Media Review

The authors submitted a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for seizure data related to the import and export of primates through the Law Enforcement

Management Information System (LEMIS) database maintained by USFWS. However, this information was not received in time to be included in this report. Seizure information was captured from the CITES Trade Database where available between 2020 and 2025, along with media sources from July 2022-February 2026 to gain snapshot insight into which species were being traded in the US, how individuals were being transported to potential buyers and through which routes, and what the methods of concealment were.

Legislative Mapping

Researchers conducted a state-by-state policy review to better understand legality of captive primate ownership and sale. This information was overlaid with proposed federal legislation to highlight current policy gaps impacting the trade in ‘pet’ primates.

Limitations and Assumptions

- **Seizure Data:** In the absence of LEMIS data, the authors reviewed and summarized primate import data into the US from the CITES Trade Database and media sources referencing seizures of live primates. It is acknowledged that this provides only snapshot information and does not appropriately represent the scale and conditions of primates being imported into the US, either legally or illegally.
- **Pharmaceutical Testing Imports:** While live primates are imported into the US for pharmaceutical testing purposes, this study focused on animals being sold between individuals online for the pet trade.
- **Scams:** Scams continue to proliferate through online platforms, where buyers may proceed through an entire transaction and never receive the animal for which they pay. While this type of threat needs further research and action, for the purpose of this study, clear scams (n=45) were removed and the remaining data analyzed on the assumption that they represented legitimate offers for sale.
- **Location:** The focus of this study was primates for sale online in the US. However, the internet is global and unless a specific website is blocked in-country, the content may be accessed around the world. For primary research collected during this study, data was sorted as (1) clearly offered for sale in the US, (2) clearly offered for sale in another country though accessible to users in the US, or (3) offered for sale in an unknown location though is still accessible in the US.

* The identified content was recommended for removal, rather than shared with local law enforcement, as the products did not exhibit indicators of more organized criminal trade.



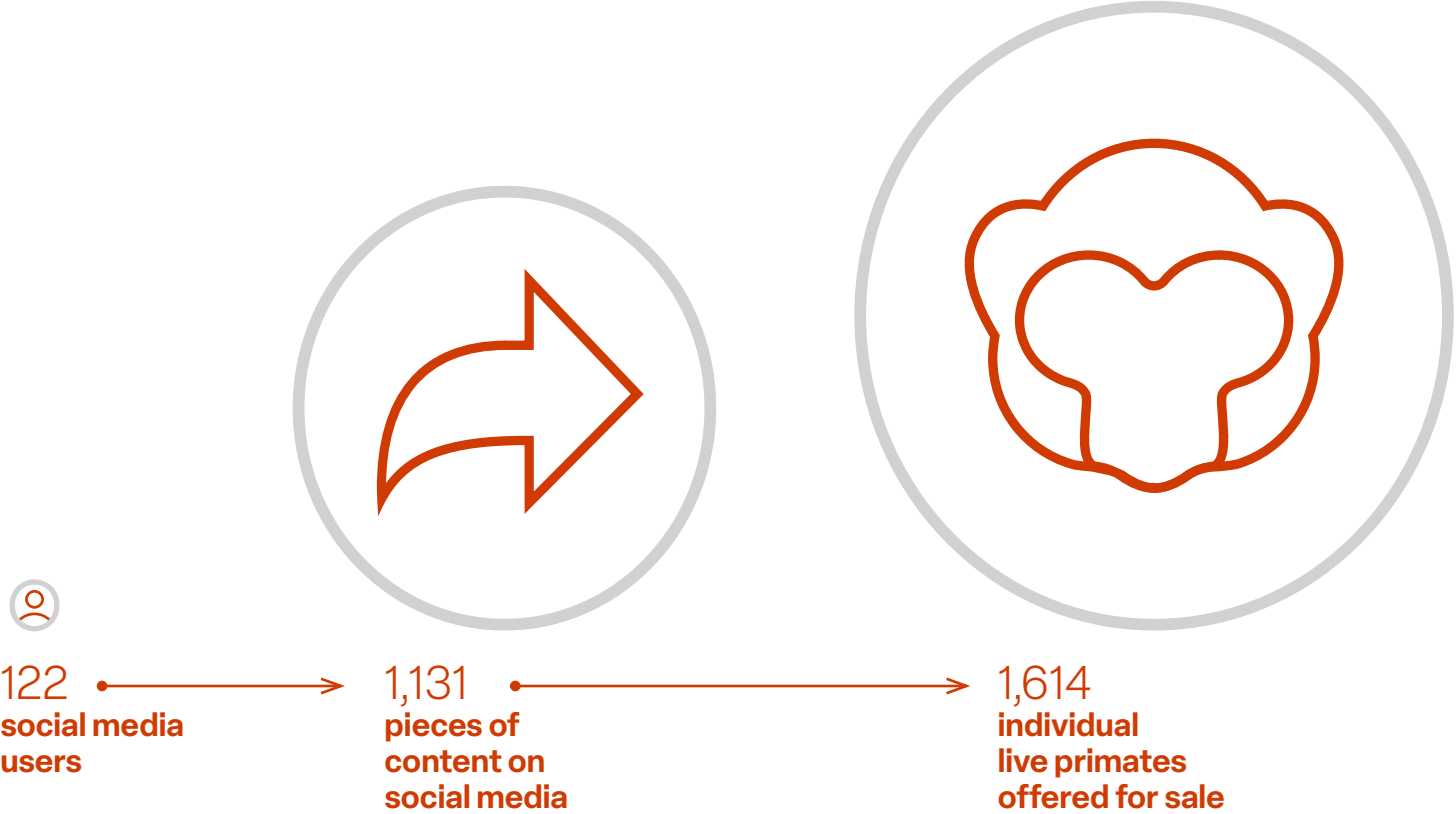
(1) left side: spider monkey at the Santa Ana Zoo and (2) spider monkey for sale online.



5 Research Findings



Primary Data Collection



Between June 15, 2025, and August 1, 2025, the researchers identified 122 social media users posting a total of 1,131 pieces of content offering 1,614 individual live primates in exchange for payment.

These posts reflected a minimum of 1,614 individual primates across 12 taxa (listed in order of prevalence): macaques, capuchins, marmosets, spider monkeys, squirrel monkeys, tamarins, vervets, lemurs, bush babies, owl monkeys, chimpanzees and howler monkeys. An additional 45 posts were identified as potential scams and were excluded from the total count. Despite these exclusions, the volume of posts identified during the study significantly underrepresents the true scale of online primate trafficking. The trade was prolific across all surveyed platforms, with the researcher able to identify content with minimal effort. Resource limitations prevented a more comprehensive inventory, and therefore the findings should be understood as a snapshot illustrating the widespread and ongoing presence of on-line advertisements offering live primates for sale.

Ease of Discovery and Seller Behavior
The level of effort required by researchers to identify posts offering live primates across Facebook, Insta-



gram, TikTok, and YouTube was low. Sellers made little effort to conceal their intent despite the companies prohibiting the sale of live and/or endangered animals on their platforms. Basic keyword searches consistently produced explicit offers for sale without the use of coded language. The most common tactic used to obscure sales involved describing transactions as “adoptions” or “rehoming.” Minimal follow-up with sellers revealed that these terms masked payments (often framed as fees for “permits,” “delivery,” or “supplies”) that effectively constituted sales. These euphemisms appeared strategically employed to bypass platform algorithms that detect explicit sales terminology, with prices reframed as “adoption fees.” Nearly half of sellers (41.07%) noted that they had supporting documentation or proof of legality for the animals, though it was not included in the listing. Without purchase or further engagement with the sellers there was no way to verify this.


Throughout the study period, all four platforms occasionally (though not consistently) flagged or suspended users who used explicitly commercial language such as “monkey for sale.” However, posts using alternative terms such as “available,” “adoption,” and “rehoming” remained unaffected. When users were suspended, they resurfaced quickly by altering terminology or creating new accounts. For example, one TikTok seller whose account was briefly suspended for using “for sale” language soon reappeared and continued offering to sell a baby golden lion tamarin, a species listed as ‘endangered’ pursuant to the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

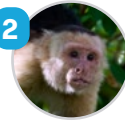



A large proportion of posts advertised infant primates. In addition to the ‘cute factor,’ juveniles taken from their mothers at an extremely young age are perceived as more likely to bond with humans, making them attractive to buyers. In addition, sellers often omitted prices and requested direct messaging to negotiate payments, which made verification of final sale amounts more difficult without relying on the sustained, covert communications tactics typically deployed by law enforcement.


Species Offered and Pricing Trends

The posts reflected significant species diversity and notable price variation. Key findings include:

- 

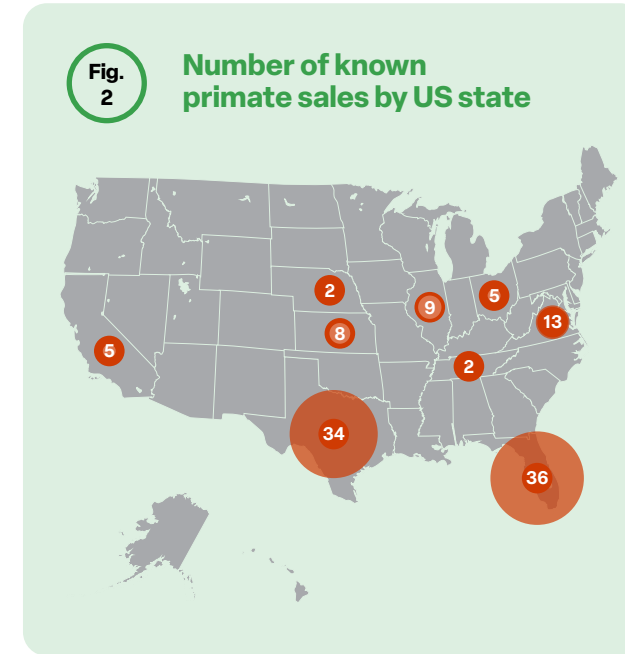
Macaques were the most frequently advertised, appearing in 619 posts involving at least 839 individual primates. Most of these individuals were pigtail macaques (n=622), followed by unidentified species of macaques (n=133), stump-tailed macaques (n=51), Java macaques (n=17), and bonnet macaques (n=16). Prices for macaques ranged from \$250 to \$6,500, averaging \$1,005, and posts were often associated with search terms such as “monkey adoption” and “baby monkey for adoption.”
- 

Capuchins were the second most common group, with 202 posts involving at least 275 individual primates. Prices ranged from \$300 to \$6,500 and averaged \$859. Search terms similar to those of the macaques were commonly used by sellers to advertise these animals.
- 

Marmosets were the third most common group, with 159 posts involving at least 293 individual primates. Prices ranged widely from \$250 to \$6,500 and averaged \$1,174.
- 

Spider monkeys were advertised in 98 posts representing at least 130 individual primates, with pricing spanning \$300 to \$6,500 and averaging \$757. Frequently used search terms included “spider monkey,” “monkey adoption,” and “baby monkey for adoption.”

Other primate taxa appeared less frequently but were offered for sale across all platforms. Squirrel monkeys were recorded in 23 posts involving at least 31 individuals, with prices averaging \$706 per animal. Tamarins appeared in 10 posts involving at least 19



individuals (including four golden lion tamarins), typically priced between \$350 and \$800, averaging \$494. Vervet monkeys were advertised in eight posts involving at least 14 individuals and were priced from \$250 to \$3,500 with an average price of \$1,160. Less commonly observed taxa included: lemurs, which appeared in four posts advertising ring-tailed lemurs, one priced at \$4,499; bush babies, with four posts referencing four individual primates, each listed for \$450; and owl monkeys, represented by a single post with limited information. Two chimpanzees were identified in separate posts, offered for \$3,500 and \$4,000, respectively and, a single howler monkey was listed for \$800 in Illinois.

These pricing patterns suggest influences including species rarity, ease of breeding, and geographic location. Most posts offered primates for sale from an unknown location (n=960), with 151 from a known US location determined from contextual information, an additional 21 from a known UK location, and one with unknown location outside of the US but available to US buyers.

Of the US states where location was specified, sellers based in Florida had the highest number of sales (n=36), followed by Texas (n=34), Virginia (n=13), Illinois (n=9), Kansas (n=8), California (n=5), Ohio (n=5), Tennessee (n=2), and Nebraska (n=2). Without prohibitive language around where the animals could or could not be shipped to, it was assumed that the primates offered for sale were available to anyone in the US.

Table B

Number of posts and individual primates identified for sale online

Taxon	No. Sale Posts	No. Individuals for sale	Known location	Unknown location
macaques	619	839	24	595
capuchins	202	275	22	180
marmoset	159	293	61	98
spider monkey	98	130	50	48
squirrel monkey	23	31	5	18
tamarin	10	19	2	8
vervet monkey	8	14	4	4
bush baby	4	4	0	4
lemur	4	4	3	1
chimpanzee	2	2	1	1
howler monkey	1	2	1	0
owl monkey	1	1	0	1
Total	1131	1614	173	958

“The Ohio Dangerous Wild Animal Act, which was signed into law on June 5, 2012, was enacted to strengthen public safety, set standards regarding the humane treatment of these animals, and ban private ownership. Today, few people maintain valid permits to legally own dangerous wild animals in Ohio, but that does not stop the illegal acquisition of such animals” — Dr. Dennis Summers, Ohio Department of Agriculture, State Veterinarian

RING-TAILED LEMURS: © NATUREL.COM / BERNARD CASTELIN/WWF; MACAQUE: © CHRIS J. BATZLIEF / WWF-UK; CAPUCHIN: © DON GETTY; MARMOSET: © ADRIANO GAMBARINI / WWF-US; SPIDER MONKEY: © SHUTTERSTOCK.COM / NATURE'S CHARM



Tech Company Data Collection Findings

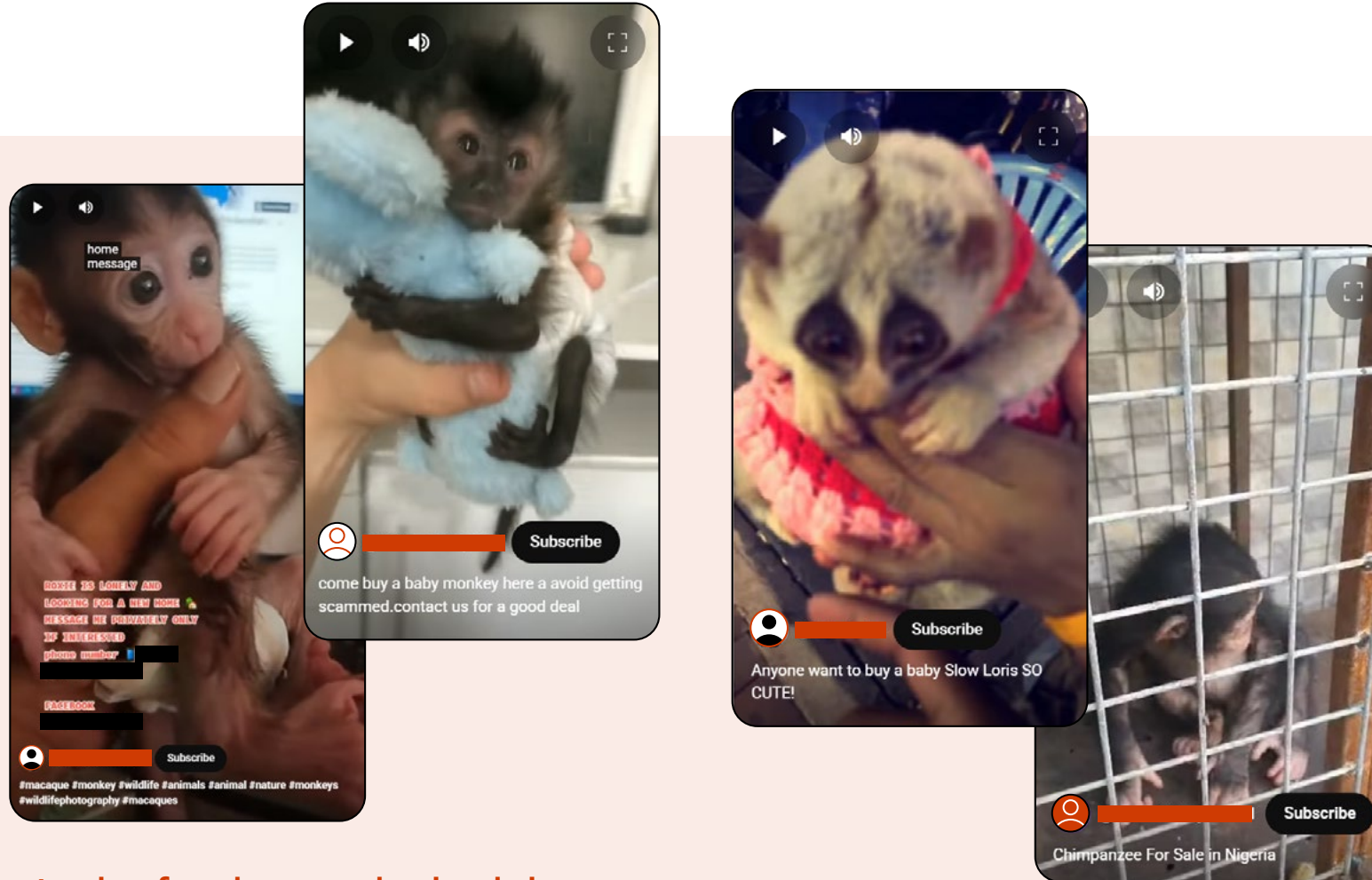


YouTube Collaboration

Google employees participated in a Cyber Spotter event to surface primate sales on YouTube in the US over one week in June 2025. A total of 237 individual primates were identified for sale through 154 videos posted by 84 users, with videos dated from January 2020-June 2025. Most of the individuals were pygmy marmosets (n=70), capuchins (n=68), and macaques (n=49), particularly pigtail macaques (n=22) when specified. Most individuals were offered for sale from an unknown location (n=106), with 61 from an unknown US state determined from contextual information, and an additional 45 with unknown locations but available to US buyers.

Not all users provided their location information, though of those that did, Tennessee had the highest number of sellers (n=18), followed by Virginia (n=15) and Texas (n=10), Florida (n=9), South Carolina (n=8), Massachusetts (n=7), and Missouri (n=7). Outside of the US, India was among the top locations, with 38 individuals for sale and available to US buyers. Two capuchins were offered for \$100 and \$500 by the same seller, while two pygmy marmosets were offered for \$860 and \$3000 by two different sellers. Price information was scarce for this dataset and should not be considered representative of all individuals for sale.

In response to the identified content, YouTube removed 28 channels for violating its Illegal and Regulated Goods and Services policy. Those that weren't removed did not violate YouTube's Community Guidelines.



“The trade of endangered animals is a driver of biodiversity loss, zoonotic diseases, and other forms of illicit crime. We have strict content policies prohibiting the sale of endangered species and are committed to removing content that violates our policies. We look forward to continuing to partner with WWF on future Cyber Spotter programs and other initiatives to combat this serious issue.”

— Cody Gardiner, Google

Table C

Top search terms that resulted in listings featuring primates for sale:

Search term used	No. individuals for sale
Capuchin sell 🐵	21
Capuchin for sale	10
Monkey for sale	6
Capuchin sell 🇺🇸	6
Chimpanzee for sale	5
Primate adopter	5

Other Platform Collaboration

Social media platforms are the leading medium for trading live primates online. However, to gather insights into other online commerce channels affecting primate trade, WWF and IFAW worked with several other digital platforms to conduct a backend search query using a set list of terms. The results showed that primate sales through such channels were negligible compared to the volume observed on social media platforms. Findings included:



eBay: Nine primate taxidermy items, primarily baboon and vervet monkeys, were found for sale on eBay, with one skull of an unknown species. The items were each listed from different sellers across nine US states and one Canadian province, with an average price of \$1,157. These listings were promptly removed, and eBay has made adjustments to its detection to address these examples.



Pinterest: Eleven live primates were found for sale in the US on Pinterest, and one post was found that promoted the ownership of primates. Most of the listings were for marmosets (n=5), followed by macaques (n=2) and capuchins (n=2), with one squirrel monkey offered for sale and one advertising general “monkeys for sale.” There were two repeat sellers and five additional unique sellers across various US states. Pricing data were limited, with marmosets ranging from \$1,500 to \$8,000 and one capuchin listed for \$2,500. Pinterest removed this content for violating its prohibited and regulated goods, services and activities policy.



Mercado Libre: Zero primate products or live animals for sale were identified on Mercado Libre's platforms. Given the evidence supporting the live sourcing of primates from the wild in Latin America into the US, this result encourages further research specifically on social media platforms that operate in the region to better understand how buyers and sellers are connecting, communicating (including through localized jargon), and coordinating logistics.



A juvenile spider monkey in transit after seized by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.



6 Regulation of Primates in the US

This prolific trade thrives in the US due to a patchwork of inconsistent state laws governing primate ownership and the absence of clear federal regulation of online wildlife trade. These policy shortcomings, combined with some captive breeding facilities through which wild-caught primates may be laundered, make determining legality a critical challenge in the US.

US Federal Policy

Endangered Species Act (ESA)¹²

Many species of primates are listed as either threatened or endangered pursuant to the ESA. It is illegal to sell, offer to sell, deliver, receive, carry, transport, or ship in interstate or foreign commerce any species listed as threatened or endangered. It is also a violation of the ESA to import or export a protected species in violation of CITES (see below). The most common application of the ESA to an online sale would be when the seller offers to sell or sells a threatened or endangered species across state lines or across an international border. Violations of the ESA are misdemeanors, meaning that the maximum penalty cannot exceed one year in jail and a maximum fine of \$100,000 for an individual.

Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES)

CITES is an international treaty signed by approximately 185 sovereign nations, including the US. All signatory countries agree to enforce the provisions of the Convention. The Convention allows for certain species to be listed in one of three appendices. Species listed in Appendix I are considered at risk of extinction and international movement requires permits from both the country of export and import. Generally, such permits are only issued for non-commercial purposes such as scientific research. Some primates, such as chimpanzees, are listed in Appendix I.

Species listed in Appendix II are considered at risk from unsustainable trade but may be traded in international commerce provided they are accompanied by an export permit issued by the country of export. All primates are listed in either Appendix I or Appendix II of CITES. It is possible

for a species to be listed in a CITES Appendix and not be listed as either threatened or endangered in the ESA. However, most primates listed in CITES Appendix I are also listed as either threatened or endangered in the ESA. CITES provisions are enforced in the US through the ESA enforcement. An online seller would violate CITES if they were shipping the animal across international boundaries (foreign commerce).

Lacey Act

There are two components of the Lacey Act that apply to online sales of wildlife. Firstly, it is unlawful to import, export, transport, sell, receive, acquire, or purchase any wildlife taken, transported, or sold in violation of any law, treaty, or regulation of the US. For example, if a live primate listed under Appendix II of CITES is imported into California without a CITES export permit, this would be a violation of federal law as enforced by the ESA. If the primate is then sold to someone in California, this subsequent sale would be a violation of the Lacey Act. Secondly, it is unlawful to import, export, transport, sell, receive, acquire, or purchase in interstate or foreign commerce, any wildlife taken, possessed, transported, or sold in violation of any law or regulation of any State. For example, if a live primate is kept as a pet in California, which is a violation of state law, and the primate is then sold and/or transported to a person in Nevada, the illegal possession in California 'triggers' a Lacey Act violation once the animal is sold or transported across state lines. The penalties for violating the Lacey Act can be severe, with the maximum penalty being a felony punishable by up to five years in prison and a maximum fine of \$250,000 for individuals.

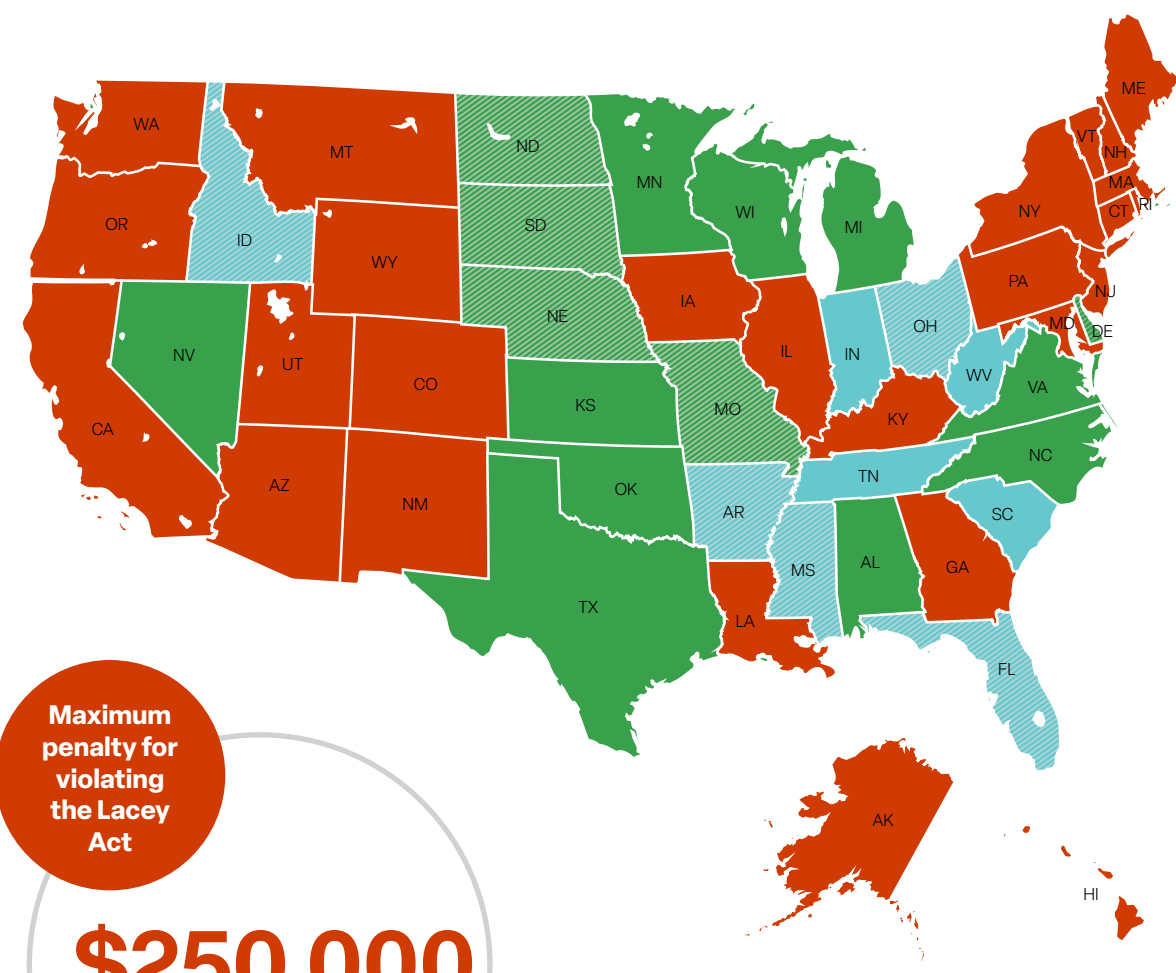
State-Level Regulation of Primate Ownership

State and local laws concerning possession of and trade in primates vary significantly, including by species and municipality, as do permitting requirements. It is also worth noting that state statutes and regulations change regularly. For example, there is pending legislation in Oklahoma that would restrict primate possession and trade.

Fig. 3

Map of the Legality of Primate Ownership by US State

- Legal
- Partial Ban
- Illegal
- Permit Required



15

states it is legal to own primates, with only 5 requiring permits

8

states have a partial ban, with 5 requiring permits

27

states it is illegal to own primates

Maximum penalty for violating the Lacey Act

\$250,000
Fine

5
Years in prison

7 US Primate Seizures and Placement



COURTESY OF MEGAN ROOK / OMAHA'S HENRY DOORLY ZOO

Over an 18-month period during 2023-2025, 100 primates from 38 cases were placed through the Wildlife Confiscations Network post-seizure.¹³

A spider monkey at Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo.

“The impact of this crime extends far beyond the animal to the veterinarians, caregivers, and conservation professionals who must shoulder the responsibility of lifelong care. In doing so, they routinely confront and manage the preventable medical conditions, psychological trauma, and enduring behavioral challenges inflicted upon wildlife by traffickers and their separation from their natal group. Over time, the cumulative burden placed on staff and institutions limits their capacity to serve other conservation priorities and strains financial and staff resources.”

—AZA's New World Primate Taxon Advisory Group

Illegally imported

As noted in the report assumptions, the researchers were unable to obtain LEMIS seizure data to incorporate into the study analysis. In the absence of these data, insights into US primate imports and exports for breeding, trading, or keeping as pets is limited. To help contextualize available data, the CITES Trade Database—one of the most comprehensive global datasets on legal wildlife trade—was reviewed. CITES data indicate that the US imports large numbers of live primates annually, the vast majority of which—particularly crab-eating macaques (*Macaca fascicularis*) and green monkeys (*Chlorocebus sabaeus*)—are associated with biomedical research and related uses. As such, legal international trade does not represent a meaningful pathway into the commercial pet trade, which is the focus of this report. The database provides limited insight into seizure or confiscation events.



Media Review

Through the media review, along with personal correspondence¹⁴ with US law enforcement agencies responsible for enforcing wildlife trade laws, researchers found that the rate of primate smuggling across the southern border from Mexico into the US has been steadily increasing.

Though seizures represent only a fraction of all primate smuggling incidents, most of which go undetected, seizure data is nonetheless informative. **Recent primate confiscations include:**



Three baby spider monkeys seized at the US–Mexico border

2023

Three infant spider monkeys, estimated about two months old and malnourished, were confiscated at the Calexico West Port of Entry and placed into quarantine before being cared for by San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance specialists. The monkeys have since been moved to a more permanent habitat with opportunities for socialization and to educate the public about wildlife trafficking.



Four endangered Mexican spider monkeys taken in by the Saint Louis Zoo

2025

Four young Mexican spider monkeys seized from smugglers near the US southern border through three separate confiscations were rehabilitated in Brownsville, Texas, and relocated to the Saint Louis Zoo, where they are thriving under professional care.



Baby spider monkey rescued during California methamphetamine bust

MAY 2025

A traffic stop in Vallejo, California, led to a search warrant at a suspect's home where deputies found a baby spider monkey along with large quantities of illegal drugs and rattlesnakes. The 18-month-old spider monkey, later named Violeta, was taken into care at the Oakland Zoo's veterinary hospital.



Baby spider monkey found in a luxury vehicle during a CHP traffic stop

DEC 2024

A California Highway Patrol officer discovered a roughly one-month-old spider monkey hidden in a vehicle during a traffic stop in Madera County. The endangered primate was taken into protective custody and transferred to the Oakland Zoo for proper care.



Spider monkey rescued in Texas neighborhood

JUNE 2025

A baby spider monkey wearing a heavily soiled diaper was found wandering a San Antonio street and was captured by Animal Care Services. The monkey was placed with primate specialists at a local sanctuary accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries (GFAS) for appropriate care.



Attempted smuggling of multiple spider monkeys at a US–Mexico border crossing

JAN 2025

Customs and Border Protection officers at the Juarez-Lincoln Bridge in Laredo, Texas, arrested a woman for attempting to smuggle five spider monkeys into the United States hidden inside a duffel bag.

Burden of Placement

Infant primates subjected to trafficking commonly suffer extreme stress and shock from violent capture and transport, severe nutritional deficiencies caused by improper care, long-term behavioral abnormalities linked to maternal separation and trauma, and chronic medical conditions attributable to substandard (pre-confiscation) conditions. Facilities receiving confiscated primates routinely document poor physical and psychological conditions directly linked to the animals' mistreatment prior to rescue. Such individuals are unable to return to the wild. The cost of providing responsible care includes specialized nutrition, complex habitat construction and maintenance, continuous veterinary treatment, behavioral health support, and highly trained professional staff required for daily management. This substantial burden is borne by animal care facilities—not by the traffickers whose actions created it.

Crime convergence, charges and sentencing from recent cases

Wildlife trafficking is one of the most profitable illicit activities, yet the associated penalties are far less harsh than those imposed for other transnational, organized criminal activities like drug trafficking. Additionally, wildlife trafficking prosecutions can be uniquely challenging given the capacity, resources, and evidence necessary to take such cases through the criminal justice process. However, in some instances wildlife crimes converge with other organized criminal activities, which can elevate the wildlife-related violations as priorities and strengthen the penalties imposed. In recognition of this connection, when Congress passed the END Wildlife Trafficking Act of 2016, it included a provision in the law to designate some large-scale wildlife trafficking violations (in excess of \$10,000) as predicate offenses to money laundering, elevating the seriousness of these crimes and the potential penalties that can result. Similar proposals to make wildlife trafficking offenses predicate offenses to Title 18 racketeering and smuggling statutes have also been considered.



“Primates require significant space and enrichment, including proper socialization with their own species. Often lacking these opportunities, frustration and behavioral issues arise such as biting, property damage, or harm to themselves. Additionally, people without adequate training don't provide proper food sources, leading to malnourishment and vitamin deficiencies resulting in bone deformities and failure to thrive.”

—Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife

Case Example

Lacey Act Sentencing for Primate Smuggling

TEXAS, 2025

In June 2025,¹⁵ an individual was apprehended during a traffic stop on a Texas interstate while smuggling two capuchin monkeys into the United States. After officers observed the monkeys in the back seat of the vehicle, the individual admitted she was transporting them from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, on behalf of a co-conspirator.

She served as the transporter in the trafficking scheme and subsequently pleaded guilty to violating the Lacey Act.

At the request of the USFWS, AZA submitted a victim impact statement to support sentencing. During court proceedings, the US Attorney highlighted key portions of AZA's letter, and the judge quoted from it when issuing the sentence. The court imposed six months in prison, a fine, one year probation, and community service.

The Wildlife Confiscations Network

As wildlife trafficking-related animal seizures have increased dramatically over the past decade, federal and state law enforcement agencies have faced a growing and often overlooked challenge: what to do with live animals after they are seized.

Confiscations frequently occur at major ports of entry and along international borders, and they involve a wide range of species that require specialized, professional care. Without ready access to appropriate placement options, enforcement actions can be delayed, animal welfare compromised, and long-term outcomes for seized wildlife put at risk.

To address this growing burden, AZA and the USFWS created the Wildlife Confiscations Network (the Network) through a cooperative agreement designed to provide a coordinated national response to the care and placement of live wildlife confiscated from illegal trade. The Network connects law enforcement agencies with vetted zoos, aquariums, sanctuaries, universities, and other qualified organizations that have the facilities, expertise, and professional staff needed to provide immediate triage and long-term care for confiscated animals.

The Network was formally launched in October 2023, providing support for federal wildlife law enforcement in Southern California, one of the country's most active wildlife trafficking corridors. It was designed to give law enforcement in that region rapid, reliable access to placement options when animals are confiscated. While its initial geographic focus remains Southern California, AZA and its partners now regularly field requests from law enforcement agencies across the United States and provide support wherever capacity allows.

100+

Number of confiscated animals that have been primates—almost all of them infant Mexican spider monkeys.

Since its launch, the Network has assisted law enforcement agencies with the care and/or placement of more than 5,000 confiscated animals across a wide range of taxonomic groups. More than 100 of these have been primates—almost all of them infant Mexican spider monkeys.

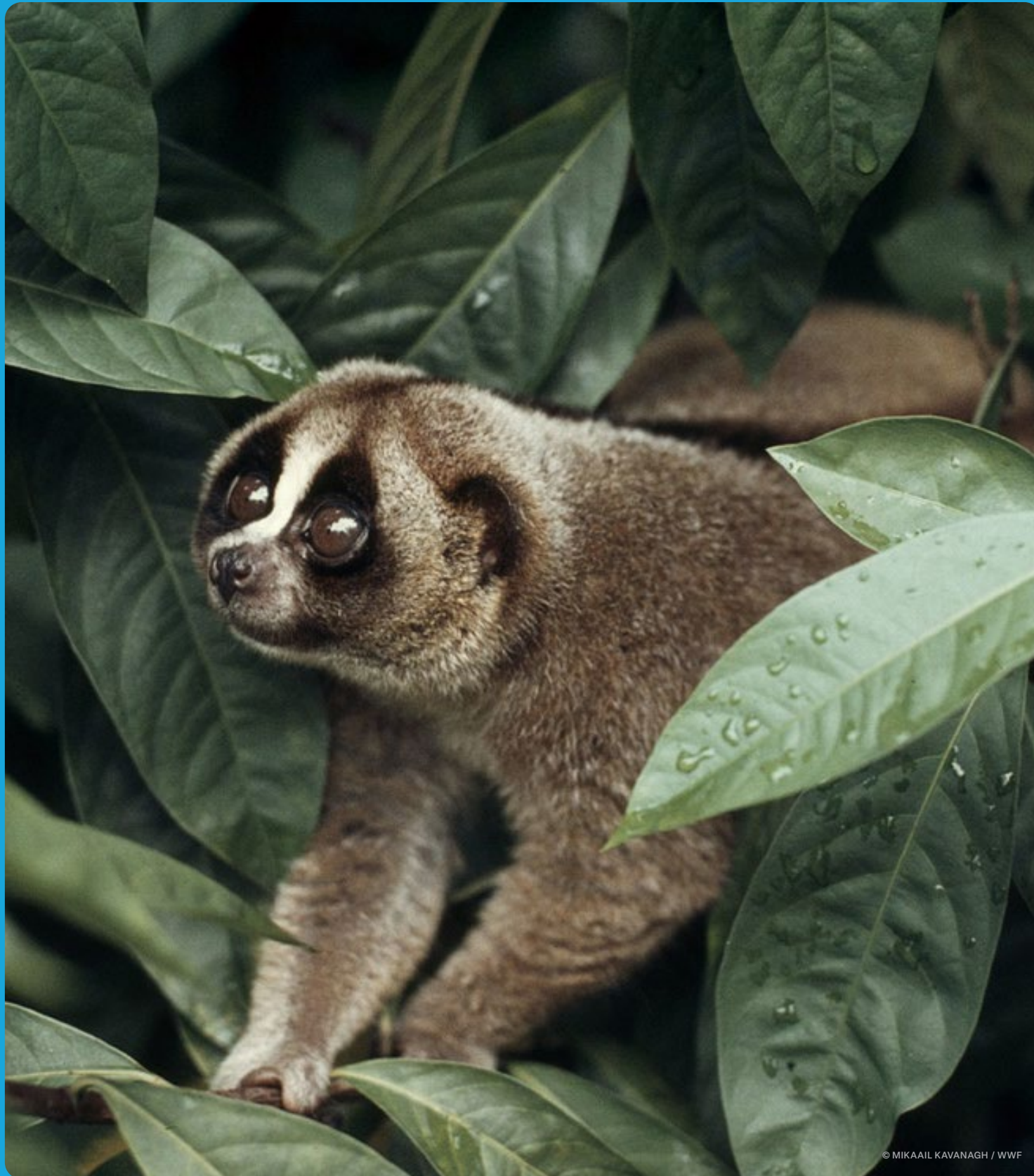
Through the Wildlife Confiscations Network, AZA and USFWS have created critical national infrastructure that reduces barriers to enforcement while improving outcomes for animals. By maintaining a list of pre-vetted facilities, developing standardized placement processes, and coordinating across agencies and care providers, the Network ensures that confiscated wildlife can be moved quickly into safe, professional care—allowing law enforcement to focus on disrupting criminal networks while safeguarding animal welfare.



COURTESY OF CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

8

Demand and Sourcing for Primates in the US



© MIKAAIL KAVANAGH / WWF



Promotion of Primates as Pets

In the US, a major driver of demand for live, non-human primates is the exotic pet trade. With a quick search on many social media platforms, the animals can be seen staged as if participating in human activities such as bathing, eating, and riding in cars. As popular culture has changed over time, various studies have looked at the impact of human interactions with primates being shown on popular platforms and viewers' perception of owning primates as pets. The studies found that viewing such content led to a higher likelihood of perceiving primates as suitable pets, even if the content was intended to depict research.^{16 17 18} This finding raises major concerns regarding the millions of social media posts that promote "pet" primate ownership. Indeed, studies have found that viewing videos of primates in such settings can increase viewers' desire to keep those species as pets, as evidenced by search trends.¹⁹

There is often widespread misinterpretation of animal behaviors seen in online videos. For example, a 2013 viral video showed a slow loris, a nocturnal species from Southeast Asia, being "tickled"—an image that appealed to viewers even though the animal's response was in fact one of distress. A subsequent study analyzing additional videos of slow lorises found that the content had more engagement by viewers if the animal demonstrated distress or was shown in daylight, even though this is an undesirable condition for a nocturnal animal.²⁰

Conservationists, primatologists, researchers, and veterinarians have extensively documented that primates do not make suitable pets given their complex social and nutritional needs, risk of harming humans from physical attacks or disease transmission, and concerns around sourcing from the wild.^{21 22 23 24} Despite this conclusion, estimates suggest there are over 15,000 primates kept as pets in the United States.²⁵

A national online survey²⁶ conducted by IFAW in 2025 aimed to better understand public sentiment regarding regulation of primates kept as pets. The survey results indicate strong public concern in the US regarding primate ownership and human-primate interactions. A notable portion of respondents reported either personal experience or familiarity with others who have interacted with primates, suggesting that primate encounters—whether through tourism, pet ownership, or online exposure are not uncommon.

“Humans cannot fulfill the social complexity and interaction primates need on a daily basis, especially in a very superficial environment, such as our homes. They are not domesticated, and we should not modify them by removing healthy teeth, so they are less dangerous to us. There is no need for this, and we should focus our effort to protect their natural spaces so they can live in a healthy environment with complex social interactions and complex environmental stimulation.”

— Marisa Bezjian, DVM, Associate Veterinarian, Zoo Miami

Despite this familiarity, the majority of respondents support a federal ban on keeping monkeys and chimpanzees as pets. Findings also show strong public backing for accountability in the online exotic animal trade. Most Americans believe that responsibility for verifying the legality of exotic pets sold online should lie not only with sellers, but also with buyers and the platforms that facilitate such transactions.

Sourcing to Meet Demand

Although a wide range of species appeared in the dataset, a substantial proportion of seller posts offered primates native to Central and South America

– including marmosets, capuchins, spider monkeys, tamarins, and squirrel monkeys – species that are both easier to smuggle into the US and establish captive breeding. There are numerous recent cases investigated by the USFWS and other law enforcement agencies that involve individuals caught smuggling those species into the US across the land border between the US and Mexico. Obtaining infants of these species and then smuggling them into the US is relatively easy compared with doing so with other primate species found in other parts of the world.

Macaques are native across Asia and sometimes range as far west as Afghanistan, (Barbary macaques are found in North Africa), while vervet and green monkeys, as well as chimpanzees, are native to central and southern Africa. Lemurs are found only on the island of Madagascar. These species would be considerably more difficult to smuggle from the wild into the US undetected. Accordingly, advertisements marketing these species for sale are likely to be scams or involve the offspring of long-ago imported animals. Chimps and many lemurs are listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, which makes obtaining them for sale in the pet trade more difficult and costly relative to other primate species.

Risks of Invasiveness from Released and Escaped Primates

As with other exotic pets and nonnative species introduced into the pet trade, there is substantial risk of ecological disturbance if a captive primate is released or escapes. Over the past six decades, invasive species have inflicted more than \$1.22 trillion in economic damage across the US.²⁷

Florida faces heightened exposure to invasive species threats as its warm, subtropical environment allows certain nonnative, tropical species to become established and spread rapidly. Seven species of nonnative primates have been introduced to Florida, and two appear to have established breeding populations, including rhesus macaques and vervet monkeys. Rhesus macaques pose the greatest ecological and public health threat. Rhesus macaques were introduced in the 1930s through intentional release to increase tourism, and later release event was meant to provide stock for biomedical research. The population continues to grow and expand into other regions of Florida, adversely impacting native bird populations due to egg depredation.²⁸ Potentially pathogenic *E. Coli* has been found in areas where the macaques have established populations, and they are known to carry herpes B virus, which can be transmitted to and cause fatality among humans.²⁹



Invasive species
have inflicted
\$1.22T
in economic damage
across the US.



Case Study

The “Chimp Crazy” Story — A Cautionary Tale About Unregulated Primates

The legal saga of **Tonia Haddix**,³⁰ an exotic animal broker featured in the HBO docuseries *Chimp Crazy*, highlights the dangers of unregulated primate possession and the challenges authorities face when individuals disregard laws intended to protect both animals and the public. Haddix repeatedly violated court orders and federal law by concealing chimpanzees in her home, even after being legally barred from owning primates.

Federal prosecutors documented how Haddix falsely claimed that a chimpanzee named Tonka had died and been cremated, yet the animal was later found alive and caged in her basement during a court-ordered search — forcing federal marshals to intervene and transfer Tonka to a qualified sanctuary. When agents later searched her Camden County, Missouri

property in July 2025, they found another live chimpanzee hidden on-site, in violation of bond conditions and state registration requirements.

US District Judge Stephen Clark agreed with prosecutors that Haddix’s repeated defiance of court orders and disregard for legal safeguards posed a serious risk, and she was remanded to custody pending sentencing. Ultimately, Haddix was sentenced to 46 months in federal prison for perjury, obstruction of justice, and related offenses tied to her concealment and misreporting of chimpanzees in her care.³¹

Such cases underscore how individuals who ignore laws governing primate ownership can not only compromise animal welfare — by keeping highly intelligent, social animals in inappropriate conditions — but also engage in sustained deception and legal obstruction that burden enforcement and care systems alike.

Haddix isn’t the only recent popular culture figure to be charged. **Bhagavan ‘Doc’ Antle** from the popular Netflix series ‘Tiger King’ was recently sentenced to 12 months in prison for illegally purchasing and selling endangered wildlife, including chimpanzees, cheetahs, lions, and tigers. In addition, his charges included smuggling people across the Mexico-US border and using money laundering techniques to conceal the crimes.³²



9 Recommendations



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The following recommendations aim to address the rampant trade of primates online in the US:

Orgs who can help

Association of Zoos & Aquariums

Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online

North American Primate Sanctuary Alliance

Wildlife Confiscations Network



For Lawmakers

Captive Primate Safety Act

Support the [Captive Primate Safety Act](#) to address the prolific US trade in non-human primates and help close policy loopholes that enable primate exploitation and harm.

Wildlife Confiscations Network Act

Support the [Wildlife Confiscations Network Act](#) to codify all aspects of this successful law enforcement program and allow the network to expand nationwide, establishing a cooperative and coordinated confiscation response in partnership with local, state, and federal law enforcement.

State policy

Strengthen **state-level laws** and regulations to restrict or prohibit the breeding, keeping, transport,

and trade of non-human primates, complementing the Captive Primate Safety Act.

Strengthen Penalties

To reflect the seriousness of wildlife trafficking offenses and shift the current paradigm of 'low-risk, high-reward,' **revise sentencing guidelines and amend laws** to strengthen penalties and ensure that wildlife trafficking can be addressed using the full suite of legal authorities available to combat organized crime and target criminal networks.

Appropriations

Provide sufficient funding for law enforcement including to cover the costs of transport, care, and veterinary expenses when placement assistance from professional animal care facilities is requested.



For Enforcement Agencies

Online primate investigations

Incorporate study findings regarding online tactics for primate sales into **training materials** and **investigative procedures**.

Company collaboration

Establish a **point of contact at social media platforms** where further information is needed to investigate online sales. The [Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online](#) could help to facilitate these connections.

Responsible placement for confiscated or surrendered primates

Utilize resources from the AZA, North American Primate Sanctuary Alliance (NAPSA), and Wildlife Confiscations Network to **ensure seized wildlife receive the appropriate care** and do not end up in the illegal trade.



For Digital Platforms

Prohibited content policies

Online platforms should **prohibit the advertisement and sale of all primates** through commerce features as well as community standards due to the associated conservation, legality, welfare, economic and public health risks. These policies should be accessible and digestible to a general audience.

Due to the prevalence of language around rehoming and adopting primates as a workaround for current live animal sales policies, it is important that this specific language be included in updated policies.

Adjustments to automated detection filters

Companies managing online platforms should incorporate primate-specific commerce and rehoming **search terms** and **emojis** into **block filters** and should conduct a review of existing block filters to identify any gaps. For a full list of terms recommended for inclusion, companies can reach out to [Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online](#).

Suggested text results

Adjust **suggested text search results**, such as those seen in Figure 4, to remove language around price or with access to sale. A second step could include messaging as a search result that provides additional information about

the species' conservation status, legal protections, and unsuitability as pets.

User awareness

Engage platform users to **raise awareness** about the risks of primates in the pet trade, including through pop-up alerts and redirects linked to primate commerce terms. Companies can also encourage use of specified content reporting pathways.

Law enforcement proactive collaboration

Where indicators of more organized, criminal trade are evident, companies can **engage with law enforcement agencies** to share content for further investigation. In the US, relevant authorities include the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Engagement with the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online

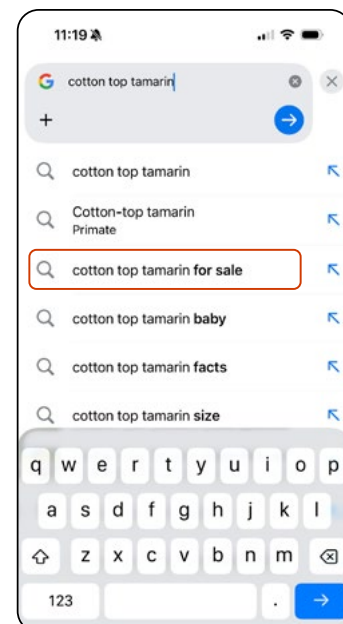
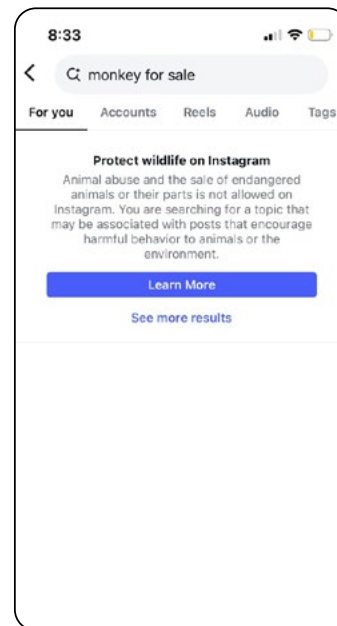
Company members of the **Coalition** can reach out to their focal points for targeted primate enforcement tactics on the platform. Companies seeking to join the Coalition can learn more [here](#).

Fig. 4

Example of suggested text including sale language with primate searches.

Fig. 5

Example of a pop-up alert to provide information about prohibited content policies for wildlife.



For the Public

Reduce the demand

Do not purchase primates as pets. Do not “like” or “share” social media posts featuring primates as pets—doing so increases the reach and engagement of these posts, allowing them to influence more users and normalize harmful human-wildlife interactions.

Report Online Sales

If you see a primate for sale online, **report it directly to the company** through the platform's reporting feature or to the [USFWS Wildlife Crime Tips](#).

Spread the Word

Advocate for followers to report primate sales and never buy primates.

Never release captive exotic animals into the wild

Releasing a non-native animal can cause serious harm — to the animal, to native wildlife, and to people. Exotic pets are often unable to survive on their own, and they can spread disease, disrupt ecosystems, and create public safety risks. Even well-intentioned releases can have devastating consequences. **If you or someone you know can no longer care for an exotic pet**, responsible options will vary widely depending on the species, but may include:

1. Contact a local [AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium](#) for guidance or referrals. These professionals are often familiar with regional resources and regulatory requirements and can help point you in the right direction.
2. Reach out to a [sanctuary accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries](#).
3. Contact your local animal control agency for advice.
4. They can help identify which government entities

5. Reach out to a local licensed wildlife rehabilitator or rescue organization experienced with that species.
6. Consult with your state wildlife agency or state veterinarian, who may regulate exotic animal ownership and be equipped to provide guidance on legal surrender options.



10 Conclusion

The findings from this study underscore the continued, widespread use of social media platforms to facilitate live primate sales in the US.



The dominance of short-form video content on these platforms enhances the appeal of primates by portraying juveniles clothed in diapers or pajamas, with forward-facing, “human-like” features that create an illusion of suitability as docile, loving, and playful pets. These representations obscure the substantial welfare harms embedded in the primate trade.

The availability of primates for sale online poses significant risks not only to animal welfare and the survival of primate species in the wild, but also to biodiversity, economic stability, and public health. The ease with which users can purchase primates, combined with minimal platform oversight and persistent seller evasion, contributes to ongoing exploitation of wildlife and reinforces the urgent need for stronger oversight and coordinated intervention.

There is an urgent need for strengthened laws, regulations, and sentencing terms along with cross-sector collaboration to reduce the exploitation of primates as pets in the US.

Authors and Acknowledgments

About the Authors



AZA

Founded in 1924, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, animal welfare, education, science, and recreation. AZA is setting the global gold standard, accrediting more than 250 of the top zoos, aquariums, and related facilities in 12 countries. Look for the AZA accreditation logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you, and a better future for all living things. The AZA is a leader in saving species and your link to helping animals all over the world. To learn more, visit www.aza.org.



IFAW

The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) is a global non-profit helping animals and people thrive together. We are experts and everyday people, working across seas, oceans, and in more than 40 countries around the world. We rescue, rehabilitate, and release animals, and we restore and protect their natural habitats. The problems we're up against are urgent and complicated. To solve them, we match fresh thinking with bold action. We partner with local communities, governments, non-governmental organizations, and businesses. Together, we pioneer new and innovative ways to help all species flourish. See how at ifaw.org



WWF

For 65 years, WWF has worked to help people and nature thrive. As the world's leading conservation organization, WWF works in 100 countries. At every level, we collaborate with people around the world to develop and deliver innovative solutions that protect communities, wildlife, and the places in which they live. WWF with local communities to ensure they drive the decisions around the natural resources they depend upon; transform markets and policies toward sustainability; and protect and restore species and their habitats. Our efforts ensure that the value of nature is reflected in decision-making from a local to a global scale. WWF connects cutting-edge conservation science with the collective power of our partners in the field, more than 1 million supporters in the United States and 5 million globally, and our partnerships with communities, companies, and governments.

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Mapping Primate Seizures*

Between 2020-2025

State Law Regarding Private Primate Ownership

- Legal
- Partial Ban
- Illegal
- Permit Required

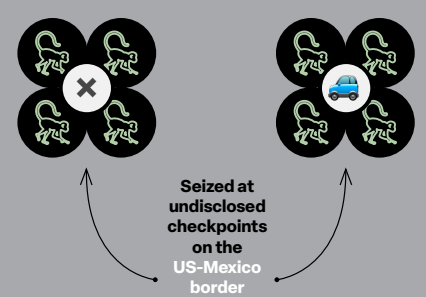
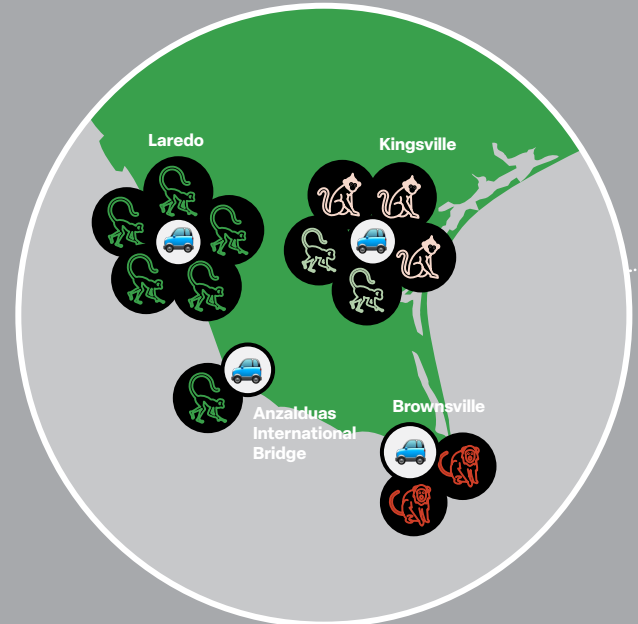
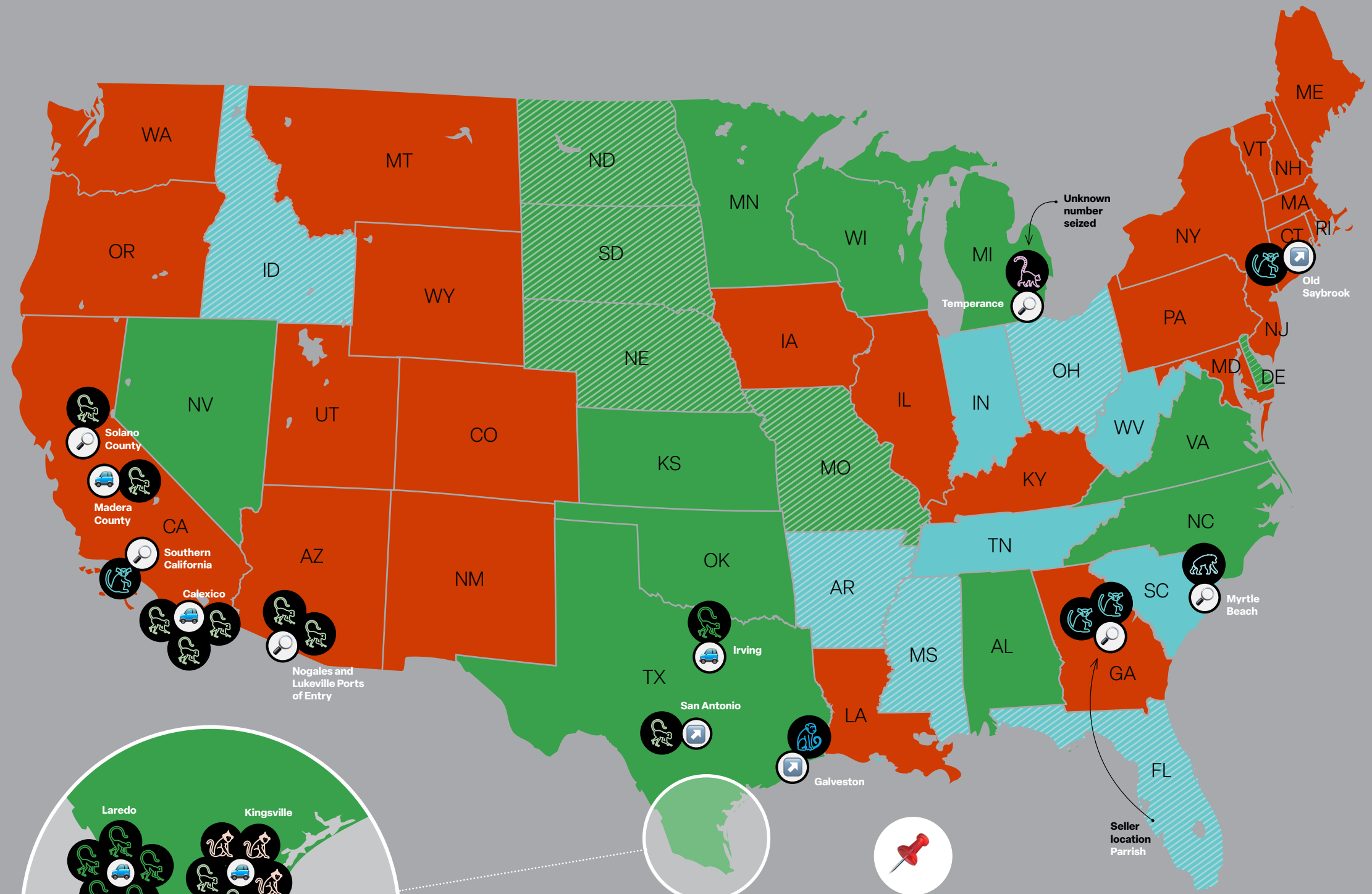
Seizure Method

-  Traffic Stop
-  Found (Escaped)
-  Investigation
-  Border Inspection

Primates Species

with Native Range & IUCN Conservation Status

- | | |
|---|---|
|  Capuchin
Central/South America
Vulnerable |  Ring-Tailed Lemur
Madagascar
Endangered |
|  Chimpanzee
Western/Central Africa
Endangered |  Squirrel Monkey
South America
Least Concern |
|  Howler Monkey
South America
Near-threatened |  Spider monkey
Central/South America
Endangered |
|  Marmoset
South America
Vulnerable |  Infant Spider Monkey |



Where do they end up?

While seizure data highlights the scale and flow of wildlife trafficking, it tells only part of the story. Confiscated animals often need immediate care near the point of seizure, but facilities in border regions are not always equipped for long-term, species-specific care at the current volume. Through the Wildlife Confiscations Network, law enforcement agencies coordinate with qualified facilities across the country to ensure these animals can be transferred into appropriate professional care. Since launching in October 2023, the Network has helped place more than 100 primates into professional care facilities across the United States following initial emergency response.

* This graphic was produced with seizure data collected through media releases and correspondence with law enforcement agencies and responding organizations. It does not reflect all instances of illicit primate trade in the US over the last five years and should be considered illustrative.

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COURTESY OF SANTA ANA ZOO