

CASC Working Group on Improving Companion Animal Welfare in the UK

- Working group established comprising the widest diversity of opinion, experience and expertise – welfare organisations, veterinary bodies, hobbyist groups and zoological garden representatives
- Remit to look at favoured options to improve the welfare of companion animals excluding cats, dogs and horses
- Working group conducted by online virtual meetings and extensive inter-sessional sharing of information and opinions via e-mail
- Desired outcome to present suggestions to Government of what actions would best give pragmatic and proportionate results to improve animal welfare and what would likely be less constructive

CASC Working Group on Improving Companion Animal Welfare in the UK

- At the front-end of the deliberations, each group member was asked to outline their priorities in terms of improving companion animal welfare. Almost every participant stated ***increased education to keepers*** would be the single biggest contributor and this emphasis did not shift through the remainder of the months the working group operated
- The working group was also 100% unified in believing that veterinary schools must substantially increase the amount of training that students receive on so-called exotic animal welfare and treatment especially given the substantial shift towards the keeping of these species versus traditional pets like cats and dogs
- All working group members acknowledged that the keeping of companion animals including exotics is an acceptable and indeed laudable activity but that welfare needs to be a paramount consideration; group members differed to some extent on how significant or otherwise welfare problems are in this sector versus cats and dogs
- All working group members also acknowledged the vast amount of experience and expertise held by specialist hobbyists in a wide variety of animal taxa and that any government initiatives or legislation should not deter the keeping and breeding of non-domesticated species by those able and willing to keep species to an acceptable standard.
- It was highlighted that for very many species – especially among amphibian, fish, reptile and bird taxa – the vast bulk of successful breeding (including of highly endangered species) takes place in the facilities of private hobbyists as opposed to the excellent work achieved in zoos.

CASC Working Group on Improving Companion Animal Welfare in the UK

- An area of detailed discussions pertained to the utility or otherwise of Negative or Positive Lists for the keeping and sale of companion animals. A Negative List being one that lists the species that cannot be kept (unless an exemption is granted) whilst a so-called Positive List details the species that can be kept with all other species prohibited
- The U.K. – like almost all countries around the world – have favoured Negative Lists as being more proportionate, enforceable and pragmatic. However, in recent years, many following an animal rights agenda have pushed for the introduction of Positive Lists
- Almost all in the working group remain fervently opposed to any Positive List whatsoever being introduced but it should be noted that a couple of members could see potential utility of a Positive List if introduced in a more limited fashion. The minority believed there may be utility in a Positive List for the general public purchasing exotic animals but accepted that finding a way to differentiate between general pet buyers and those hobbyists with experience and expertise would be a challenge
- Overall, the working group concluded that in recent years the pet trade has substantially upped its game and have demonstrably self-regulated in several areas – for example, voluntarily ceasing almost all trade to the general public of large pythons and boas, Green Iguanas and Chinese Water Dragons, seen as problematic for less experienced keepers. Such self-regulation should be encouraged by Government

CASC Working Group on Improving Companion Animal Welfare in the UK

- The pet trade has expanded the access to the public of educational materials for pet owners (for example the Pet Charity's Pet Know How portal that provides detailed Care Sheets) and the working group urged for this to be further expanded and encouraged by Government
- In many ways, much of the pet trade are already practising a traffic light system on sale to the general public (as opposed to sales to experienced specialists) – green for good 'starter- species, amber for those demonstrating a level of experience and red only sold to experienced hobbyists. Some working group members favoured formalising these arrangements if the practicalities could be sorted
- Returning to Negative Lists versus Positive Lists. The working group universally agreed that Negative Lists have been demonstrated to work and, when proportionate, get buy-in from keepers (for example, the widespread compliance of keepers in the U.K. no longer breeding Raccoons since they were placed on the Negative List of Invasive Species)
- A few countries have tried to implement **Positive Lists** but these have proven to simply not work. Keepers refuse to stop keeping and breeding their chosen species and simply go 'underground' to the **detriment of animal welfare** as they can no longer receive veterinary treatment. Enforcement is practically impossible – especially when governments and local authorities are financially constrained – as the working group heard from the experience of the introduction of a reptile Positive List in the Flemish region of Belgium where no prosecutions have been seen despite widespread non-compliance.
- Further, Positive Lists have been easy to legally challenge on either procedural and/or human rights basis – in The Netherlands three attempts by the government to introduce a Positive List for mammals has been successfully challenged in the courts as was the Flemish reptile list which the high court has recently set aside in abeyance

CASC Working Group on Improving Companion Animal Welfare in the UK

- The strong opinion of almost all the working group participants was that Positive Lists are irreparably harmful to animal welfare, are wholly disproportionate to any perceived 'problem', are entirely unenforceable and unscientific and would actually 'work' in a perverse manner by removing the right to keep more challenging species (kept exclusively by experienced hobbyists) whilst allowing through logistical necessity the keeping of very common pet species like Bearded Dragons that can prove just as challenging
- Positive Lists were seen to be deeply damaging to the huge efforts made by specialist hobbyists in the *ex situ* breeding and conservation of very many species. As examples, within the Citizen Conservation initiative the critically endangered Rio Pescado Stubfoot Toad is being preserved almost solely by captive-breeding by private hobbyists here and in the EU, whilst a Scottish hobbyist is likely breeding more of the critically endangered Egyptian Tortoise than all European zoos added together
- The working group concluded that the UK has more than sufficient regulation in place to appropriately cater for good companion animal welfare (primarily through the Animal Welfare Act and the regulations on the Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) and, rather than looking at introducing additional regulation it would be more meaningful to both enforce the current legislation and, where necessary update or amend existing legislation

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Conclusions & Recommendations

- Initiatives by the pet industry at self-regulation should be stepped-up and actively encouraged and endorsed by Government
- Government should seek to enforce current animal welfare and trade legislation before looking at introducing new legislation and, where appropriate, amend or update existing legislation
- Government should actively encourage the veterinary organisations and schools to increase the amount of time veterinary students spend on exotic animal medicine and husbandry
- Government should work with direct stakeholders to improve access to educational material for prospective pet owners
- Government should reject any lobbying from those with an ideological opposition to the keeping of pet animals for the introduction of Positive Lists. Conversely, Government should maintain the decades long commitment to proven, proportionate and enforceable Negative Lists
- If demonstrated to be a practical possibility, Government might seek to work with industry to establish a proportionate traffic light system for sale of companion animals to general pet buyers