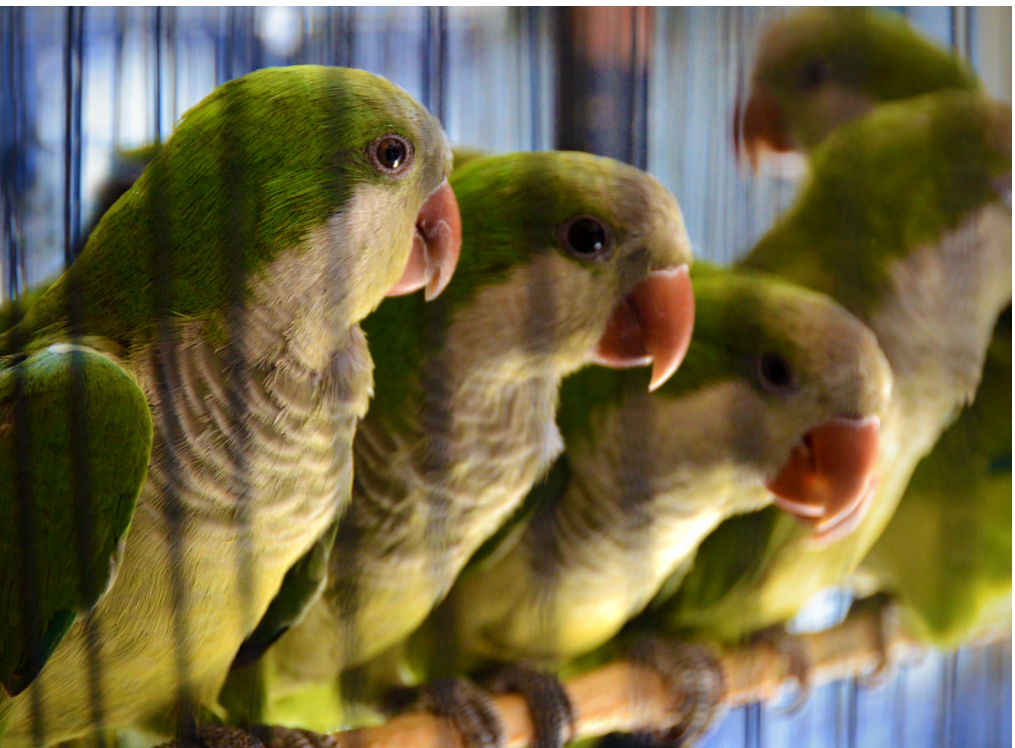
WORLD ANIMAL PROTECTION

Banning Retail Sales of Wild Animals

A Toolkit for Animal Advocates



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Why Local Change Matters

Changing the law is one of the most powerful ways you can protect animals, and it starts with animal advocates like you fighting to make your communities a kinder place. At the city and county level, your voice is more likely to be heard, and you can make a meaningful difference. Your impact isn't limited to your own neighborhood. Local laws ripple outward, eventually changing state and federal law and ultimately protecting millions. For instance, in 2011, West Hollywood, California, became the first city in the United States to ban the sale of fur, followed by Berkeley, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Just eight years later, California enacted a statewide fur sale ban, and multiple states are poised to follow suit. Local change matters, which is why we need your help!

Introduction

Every year, wild animals, including turtles, lizards, snakes, parrots, monkeys, and otters, are removed from their homes in the wild or intensively bred in captivity and sold as "pets." **The wildlife trade is responsible for the suffering of millions of animals and is fueling our biodiversity crisis.** Some aspects of the trade are legal, and some are illegal. But the result is the same – animals suffer.

Virtually all animals supplied to pet stores are sourced from mills where animals are bred with little regard for their welfare, or from companies that import wild animals. Veterinary care is often inadequate or absent, and sanitation is poor. Many mills house thousands, or even tens of thousands of animals. Overcrowded reptiles and amphibians are forced to fight for limited food and water, sometimes fatally injured in the process. Parrots are trapped in scorching hot barns or exposed to the freezing cold. Dead animals are just seen as the cost of doing business.

In response, local and state governments are increasingly adopting retail pet sale bans – laws that ban the sale of animals in pet stores. Most retail pet sale bans apply only to dogs, cats, and sometimes rabbits. These bans are helping shut down the puppy mill industry both by limiting demand and signaling to consumers that puppies shouldn't be purchased.

In 2006, Albuquerque, New Mexico, became the first city in the United States to prohibit the sale of dogs and cats in pet stores. Fifteen years later, hundreds of cities and multiple states have enacted similar laws. **But wild animals, such as birds, reptiles, and amphibians, have largely been left out.**

In 2017, Cambridge, Massachusetts, passed the first comprehensive retail sales ban in the US. The law prohibits the sale of birds, amphibians, reptiles, arachnids, and mammals in pet stores unless the animal comes from a shelter or rescue. It now serves as a model for the rest of the nation. In 2025, West Hollywood took a step further, banning the retail sale of birds, amphibians, reptiles, arachnids, mammals, fishes, and hermit crabs.

Tips for Using the Toolkit

This toolkit aims to empower animal advocates to mobilize their communities to pass a retail pet sales ban, like the Cambridge ordinance. It emphasizes wild animals. There are numerous resources and guides online that discuss puppy mills. If you live in a community with a ban on the retail sale of dogs and cats, use this toolkit to push your legislators to take the next step. If you live in a community without an existing ban, supplement this toolkit with one that focuses on dogs.

The arguments in this toolkit focus on animals commonly sold in stores. Though it's less common, there are stores that sell rarer wild animals such as coatimundis or monkeys. If such a store exists in your community, research the care needs of those species and the health and safety risks they pose to humans. This will strengthen your arguments when speaking with legislators.

Some communities don't have any pet stores that sell animals. This shouldn't stop you from considering proposing a ban on retail pet sales. Animal protection laws communicate a community's values to residents and beyond. Furthermore, sometimes local governments don't want to be "first." It can be easier to pass a retail pet sale ban if neighboring communities have already adopted one. Your community could serve as an example.

World Animal Protection helps wild animal advocates in their community and beyond. Our impact together is far greater than what any single person or organization could achieve. Please contact our Senior Campaigns Manager, Liz Cabrera Holtz, at lizcabreraholtz@worldanimalprotection.us with questions or comments so we can help you or just to let us know about your work.

Understanding the Issue

Below are introductions to the issues associated with the retail sale of animals and with keeping wild animals as "pets." The information will help you speak authoritatively about the negative impacts of the pet trade, which animals are commonly captured or bred to be sold as pets, and how the pet trade is affecting local communities. Factsheets with more detailed information designed for legislators are included at the end of the toolkit.

Animals Impacted

Wild animals are routinely sold as "pets" across the United States. Major pet store chains sell birds, spiders, hermit crabs, reptiles, amphibians, small mammals, and many kinds of fishes. A small number of pet stores also sell rarer animals such as foxes, sugar gliders, kinkajous, coatimundis, and even monkeys.

Wild Animals Suffer in Captivity

It might be easier to understand why wild animals like monkeys, kinkajous, or tigers belong in the wild. But reptiles, amphibians, fishes, and birds also have complex inner lives, even if their facial expressions or vocalizations are not as easily understood by humans. These animals are sentient beings who feel pain and a wide range of emotions, including anxiety, fear, pleasure, and excitement. For example, studies have documented that green iguanas have an emotional response to the stressful experience of being handled and that crocodiles play with objects.

In captivity, wild animals are unable to fully engage in their natural behaviors, such as exploring, living in family structures, foraging, or – for some species – even regulating their body temperature. It's not possible to recreate the freedom and space that these animals experience in the wild. This causes severe psychological and physical suffering.

Quaker parakeets (also known as monk parakeets) are small green parrots native to South America. Escaped or abandoned Quaker parakeets have established free-living populations worldwide, including in parts of the United States. Several states actually prohibit keeping Quaker parakeets because they can damage infrastructure, such as electrical lines. They weigh between 3 and 5 ounces and live between 20 and 30 years. They are known for their ability to mimic human speech and sounds. Like all parrots, Quaker parakeets are very social and nest colonially, making it very difficult to meet their basic needs in captivity.

For example, birds kept as "pets" are often held in cages or rooms, whereas in the wild, they can fly for miles. Frustrated, highly stressed, and isolated from their own species, many birds exhibit stereotypic behaviors such as ripping out their own feathers, pacing, and obsessively pecking cage bars.

Wild animals require specialized, oftentimes expensive, care. Many amphibians and reptiles need artificial heat and light to survive. Terrariums and tanks might provide the bare minimum to keep these animals alive, but they are thousands of times smaller than an animal's habitat in the world.

The pet industry markets small wild animals as "beginner pets" or good for small children. In reality, all wild animals require more complex care than a dog or cat.

The Pet Industry Fuels the Destructive Wildlife Trade

The wildlife trade is a multibillion-dollar industry that threatens animals both in the United States and abroad. It's driving the decline—and the extinction—of many animals. Most wild animals sold in pet stores come from mills, huge commercial breeding facilities. Animals also come from companies that import animals taken from the wild. Either way, captive breeding for the pet trade is fueling the extinction crisis.

It seems like breeding wild animals could help conservation. But the opposite is true; anytime a wild animal is sold as a "pet," wild animals suffer. That's because selling wild animals as "pets" drives demand for more wild animals everywhere. This demand creates incentives to poach animals from the wild. Further, some animals, particularly reptiles, are labeled as "captive-bred" but actually illegally caught in the wild, laundered through reptile farms, and then legally sold in the United States.

"Wildlife inspectors will open up a box and find a bunch of beat up, scarred tortoises that are 20 or 30 years old, with permits saying they were bred in captivity in 2016. But they're forced by their supervisors to stamp 'clear' on the permit." — Senior specialist at the United States Fish and Wildlife Service

Animals Suffer in Mills

Virtually all animals sold in pet stores come from cruel mills where large numbers of birds, reptiles, amphibians, small mammals, and fishes are bred in unsanitary, crowded conditions before being shipped in crates and boxes to pet stores. The industry's goal is to produce as many animals as cheaply as possible. Mortality rates are high and built into the business model.

Prior to reaching pet stores or the US, many wild animals also die in transit. They are packed into small containers or crates, without sufficient oxygen, and are unable to move. Many animals suffocate,

The red-eared slider, named for the small red stripe on the sides of their head, is one of the most popular turtles in the pet trade. Their lifespan is between 20 and 30 years, and their natural range extends from West Virginia to New Mexico. They live in freshwater habitats like swamps and streams.

Red-eared sliders bask on logs or rocks for much of the day and sleep underwater at night. The terrariums offered for sale at the largest pet store chains range from 20 to 75 gallons. Even a 500-gallon terrarium (which costs thousands of dollars) is a tiny amount of space compared to a pond or stream.

starve, or are crushed to death. Wild-caught animals may be injured during capture, experience stressful handling, and endure the trauma of being taken from their home.

In bird mills, eggs and newborn birds are usually taken from their parents to induce reproduction. Removing babies from their parents so young is not only cruel, but hand-reared birds can develop socialization problems and, if handled by inexperienced staff, may starve or be injured if hand-fed improperly.

Inadequate or Non-Existent Legal Protections for Animals in Mills

The Animal Welfare Act (AWA) is the main federal animal protection law in the United States. It is administered by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). The law regulates animals used in research and exhibition (like in circuses and zoos) and some commercial animal breeders, such as puppy mills and dealers. Unfortunately, the law provides minimal protection for animals, is chronically underenforced, and excludes numerous species, including reptiles, amphibians, and fishes.

USDA-licensed mills have long track records of poor animal care. The federal government usually does nothing when it inspects a facility with violations. This is why there are an estimated 10,000 puppy mills across the country.

A first-of-its-kind undercover investigation by World Animal Protection at three USDA-licensed bird mills revealed how parrots are produced for pet stores: thousands of birds held in small, filth-encrusted cages–deprived of the ability to fly or feel the sun on their wings.

"These bird mills I filmed are not outliers. All of the places that I went to are USDA-licensed, government-regulated. Essentially, these places are operating legally and [largely] in compliance, so when it comes to bird mills...that's as good as a place can get." – Pete Paxton, undercover investigator who visited three USDA-licensed bird mills in 2025

Retail Pet Sales Push Animals into Shelters

More than a million animals are killed in US shelters annually. Selling animals in pet stores pushes even more animals into shelters, at taxpayers' expense. Many people who purchase wild animals are overwhelmed by the care they require or are unprepared for the lifelong commitment – some wild animal species live for decades. Sanctuaries, shelters, and rescues are flooded with surrender requests. It's also much harder to find new adoptive homes for wild animals than for dogs and cats, meaning animals stay in the system longer.

Wild Animals Kept as "Pets" Disrupt Ecosystems

Not every animal is relinquished to a shelter or sanctuary. Many animals are abandoned outside into unfamiliar habitats not designed to support them. Some animals die quickly, killed by predators, exposure, or starvation. But other animals will adapt and breed, altering the ecosystem and threatening the survival of native species. Non-native animals can introduce new diseases and compete for resources such as food and habitat. For example, red-eared sliders, crowd out native turtle species, expose people to salmonella, and create harmful algal blooms in waterways.

"Frankly, I wish we would have prohibited [red-eared sliders] in the pet trade 15 years ago." – Thomas French, former Assistant Director of Massachusett's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program

Wildlife Trade Threatens Public Health

The wildlife trade is a serious public health risk. More than 70% of emerging infectious diseases originate in wildlife. Animals in the pet trade are exposed to many stressors, such as overcrowding, abnormal social groupings, and artificial lighting. This stress weakens their immune systems, making them more likely to get sick and spread disease.

Reptiles, amphibians, and other small mammals are a common source of Salmonella infection in humans. Salmonella exists in the digestive tracts of healthy reptiles and amphibians, but it can cause severe illness or death, especially in certain groups such as pregnant individuals, young children, and the elderly. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) urges families with children under the age of five not to keep reptiles, amphibians, or rodents. Yet the pet industry markets these species to small children.

The US banned the sale of turtles smaller than 4 inches in length in 1975 to decrease Salmonella outbreaks. People frequently purchased these tiny turtles for children who are prone to putting them in their mouths and are less likely to wash their hands. But Salmonella infections from reptiles and amphibians remain a problem. In addition to turtles, bearded dragons, geckos, and African dwarf frogs are just a few of the species sold in stores that also spread Salmonella.

"Reptile-associated Salmonella infections are more likely to be associated with invasive disease, more commonly lead to hospitalization, and more frequently involve infants than do other Salmonella infections." –Reptiles, Amphibians, and Human Salmonella Infection: A Population-Based, Case-Control Study

Ball pythons live in the grasslands and savannas of East and West Africa. Their name refers to their tendency to curl up into a tight ball when stressed. They are nocturnal. They shelter in burrows during the day and come out at night to hunt or look for a mate. Sold by Petco and PetSmart, ball pythons are the emblem of the pet trade. They are the most traded live animal legally exported from Africa. West Africa has exported more than three million ball pythons since 1975. Misconceptions about ball pythons' care needs have made them popular "pets." But they're far from "low-maintenance," and many ball pythons are abandoned outside by their frustrated guardians.

Take Action: Advocating for Animals at the Local Level

Now that you have a better understanding of the issue, it's time to learn how to advocate for a ban on the sale of animals in pet stores.

Gather Information About Your Community

Key Questions

- Are there pet stores selling animals in your community? If so, which species? Make a list of stores with addresses, species sold, and any other pertinent information. Finally, search online (including social media and review sites like Yelp) for complaints about the conditions animals are kept in.
- Are there local groups working on animal protection issues in your community? These groups are natural allies to your campaign and could help amplify your message. Keep a list of potential groups to reach out to. Even if the group isn't interested in this ordinance, you could also learn from them by asking about their successes and obstacles to help inform your work.
- Research which city or county councilmembers might be interested in sponsoring animal protection legislation. Find out which legislators have introduced animal protection legislation before and how each legislator voted on the bill.
- Does your city or county already have a law prohibiting the sale of dogs and cats in pet stores? You could argue that a comprehensive retail sales ban is simply building on the same principles. Also, it's important to note that some states (including Ohio, Texas, and Arizona) don't allow cities and counties to pass bans.

Persuading Legislators

Understanding the Legislative Process

The process of passing a bill varies from community to community. Generally, an ordinance is introduced by a city or county legislator, usually called a council member or commissioner. After the ordinance is introduced, a committee may review the bill and hold a hearing. In other communities, the full council may review it immediately. Information about the process may be available on your city's website, or you could attend council meetings in person or online (many meetings are streamed to the public and available for viewing later) to get a feel for the procedure.

Meeting with Legislators

You need to find a council member who will introduce the ordinance. Start by setting up a meeting. Email their office to schedule a meeting (either in-person or online). Explain why you're requesting the meeting and identify yourself as a constituent. Attach a factsheet about retail bans.

Remember that legislators are elected to represent their constituents' interests and should be receptive (or at least polite!) to hearing your ideas and suggestions. You may meet with a member of the legislator's staff instead of the legislator. That's normal. It's the staff member's job to take notes and report back.

Tips:

- Be prepared with a short agenda and your top talking points.
- Dress professionally and be polite.
- Be ready to answer these questions:
    - Why does your community need a retail pet sale ban?
    - What will the ordinance's impact be on local businesses? How many stores in your city or county sell animals? Are they national chains or small businesses?
    - Do any neighboring communities have retail pet sale bans?
    - Who in the community supports a retail pet sale ban?
- If you're asked questions that you don't know the answer to, don't try to answer them. Say that you will find the answer and get back to them.
- Afterward, send an email thanking the legislator for meeting with you. Answer any outstanding questions and restate any promises or commitments that the legislator made. For example, if the legislator said that they would ask a staff member to look into the issue, reiterate that and state that you will follow up soon.

Mobilizing Your Community

It's important to demonstrate that the community supports a comprehensive retail ban. Grassroots advocacy is the term for organizing the public to contact their government officials on a particular issue. Below are tactics to help you reach as many people as possible.

Coalition Building

A coalition is a group of individuals and organizations working toward a common goal. A strong coalition demonstrates that the ordinance has a strong backing and that different stakeholders' viewpoints are being heard. Potential coalition members include animal advocacy groups, rescue groups, public health and

environmental protection organizations, animal shelters, sanctuaries, pet stores that do not sell animals, and faith-based groups.

Raising Awareness

Use social media and traditional media to educate your community about your campaign and the problems with selling animals in stores and your campaign.

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor in the local paper are a great way to raise awareness about an issue and catch the attention of local officials. These letters are short, often less than 200 words. Find your local papers' submission guidelines before starting. Always use your own words instead of copying and pasting something you read online. Use the information in this toolkit to start telling your own story. Keep the letter local by connecting it to what's happening in your community.

Media

If the ordinance is introduced or the campaign gains steam, contact local media to let them know. Send a brief email to local papers that outlines the issue, the ordinance, and your campaign. When speaking with journalists, stick to your core points. This is your chance to showcase your strongest arguments, and the best way to ensure they are publicized is by staying on message. Jot down the top three arguments you want to focus on (your "talking points") and stick to them. Short, clear statements are most likely to be picked up as quotes or soundbites.

Social Media

Use social media to inform the community about your campaign, educate people about the problems with the retail sale of animals, and engage with elected officials. Ask community members to contact and tag their elected officials on X, Facebook, and Instagram in support of the ordinance. Do not attack or post negative comments about legislators. It reflects poorly on your campaign and makes people not want to work with you. Stick to the issues.

After the Ordinance is Introduced

Lobbying Legislators

You should plan to meet with – or at least contact – every council member to explain why this ordinance is important. Follow the same meeting tips listed above. Be sure to bring factsheets and a copy of the proposed ordinance in addition to sending them beforehand.

Action Alerts

Once the ordinance is introduced, you need to get as many community members as possible to contact legislators in support. One of the most efficient ways to do this is to email an "action alert." You've likely received an action alert from a nonprofit before. It's simply an email that asks you to do something (like call or email a legislator) in support of a bill.

Action alerts from nonprofits are usually automated – you enter your address and click a button to send a message to legislators. While you likely won't have the ability to create an automated alert, personalized outreach to legislators carries more weight, so don't let that stop you.

Next is a sample action alert for reference that you could adapt to use for your local retail pet sale ban:

Dear Smithville Community Members,

The Smithville City Council is considering an ordinance that would protect hundreds of animals in our community from suffering. Ordinance XYZ would prohibit the sale of animals in pet stores, helping shut down inhumane commercial breeding facilities (also known as "mills") and the destructive wildlife trade. We need as many Smithville residents as possible to contact the city council and tell legislators that you support Ordinance XYZ.

Please follow these steps to help:

1. *Contact councilmembers by sending an email to council@smithville.gov. Try to edit the message below so they don't all look the same.*

Dear Smithville City Council,

I live in Smithville, and I encourage you to vote YES on Ordinance XYZ, banning the retail sale of animals in Smithville.

Virtually all animals sold in stores in Smithville come from commercial breeding facilities ("mills") that churn out animals quickly without regard for their welfare. Our community cares about protecting animals, and our laws should reflect that. Please vote YES on Ordinance XYZ.

Thank you ,

[NAME]

[YOUR ADDRESS}

2. *Forward this email to other Smithville residents and ask them to email the council.*

Send this localized email to anyone you think might be supportive, as well as to coalition members for them to send to their lists. But only include people who actually live in the community. Emails or communications from people who don't live (and vote!) in the area frustrate legislators and hurt your efforts. Also, share the alert on social media.

Letters of Support

Experts are an exception to the rule that only community members may contact legislators. Veterinarians, shelter directors, and animal or environmental protection organizations should also send letters to the council.

Testimony

Once an ordinance is introduced, it will be discussed during at least one council meeting. Plan to testify along with other coalition members. Organize your testimony in advance so you and other advocates can lay out your strongest arguments and avoid repeating points. For example, someone can speak about the cruel breeding industry, someone else can speak about public health, and someone else can speak about the impact of abandoned wild animals on the environment.

Anticipate difficult questions and make sure they're addressed in someone's testimony. Opponents will likely argue that they only source their animals from "reputable" sources or "approved" vendors, or that the industry is already regulated by the federal government. Rebuttals to these claims are available in the fact sheets at the end of the toolkit.

Conclusion

Don't be discouraged if your efforts don't result in an ordinance. Simply meeting with legislators and raising this issue is valuable. It helps move the needle and lays the groundwork for future change. Good luck, and please keep us posted on your work!

Have questions? Don't hesitate to reach out to us at lizcabreraholtz@worldanimalprotection.us if you need more information or want help.

Appendix A

Limits on Local Legislatures and Preemption Laws

The power of local governments to regulate certain issues varies by state. Generally, cities and counties can only exercise powers granted to them by the state government. Additionally, the pet store and commercial dog breeding industries lobby state legislatures to enact preemption laws. Preemption laws take away the power of counties and cities to pass certain laws. Cities and counties in Arizona and Ohio cannot pass comprehensive retail bans, for example. It's a good sign if you live in a state where communities have already enacted retail pet sale bans. Learn which cities and states have retail pet sale bans.

Appendix B

Model Ordinances: Cambridge, Massachusetts and West Hollywood, California

In 2017, Cambridge, Massachusetts prohibited the retail sale of most animals sold in pet stores, specifically mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and arachnids. In 2025, West Hollywood took a step forward and prohibited the retail sale of mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, arachnids, fishes, and hermit crabs. Several other cities, including Washington DC, have enacted similar laws.

Share the Cambridge and West Hollywood language with legislators as a starting point for your community's ordinance.

- Cambridge, Massachusetts, Chapter 6.20 Restrictions on the Sale of Animals in Pet Shops
- West Hollywood, California, Chapter 9.50 Retail Sale of Live Animals

Fact Sheets

The following fact sheets can be used with legislators, which you may copy or edit to make your own.

- Prevent Animal Cruelty, Protect Biodiversity, and Promote Resilient Shelters Through Comprehensive Retail Pet Sales Bans
- Protect Biodiversity Through Comprehensive Retail Pet Sales Bans
- Protect Public Health Through Comprehensive Retail Pet Sales Bans
- Banning the Retail Sale of Small Mammals
- Banning the Retail Sale of Birds
- Banning the Retail Sale of Reptiles and Amphibians
- Banning the Retail Sale of Fishes
- Mills and Dealers in Photos