



May 7, 2023

Re: Opposition to "Exotic and Wild Animals" Ban

Richmond City Council Members,

The United States Association of Reptile Keepers (USARK) appreciates the opportunity to submit this comment and provide information to Richmond lawmakers. We were contacted by a member regarding the proposed amendments to Chapter 4, Article IV, Division 3 of the Code of the City of Richmond.

We want you to be aware of the importance of working with legitimate experts who can provide a factual education when writing an ordinance. We fully agree that anyone keeping animals in a manner which threatens public safety, agriculture, animal welfare, or the environment should be punished. We support common-sense laws and regulations which penalize irresponsible individuals. However, we do not support measures of collective punishment which cast an overreaching net. It is unfair for those keeping animals responsibly to be chastised.

USARK will gladly provide any additional material requested and answer any questions with information supported by legitimate science and valid statistics. Threats to public safety and the local environment are very often misrepresented. Any concern to the health, safety, and welfare of the citizens of Richmond is best addressed by means other than a ban. Bans are actually counterproductive and create a myriad of unintended consequences rather than providing any remedy.

Cases of neglect and recklessness are rare, especially when compared to the many millions of these animals exist as pets. However, each unfortunate case, including the recent venomous snake bite to a snake keeper in Richmond, gives a black eye to the reptile keeping community, and animal rights groups (organizations seeking to remove all animals from our lives) readily present false propaganda stating that all reptile and other exotic animal owners are irresponsible and could never adequately provide for such pets. This simply is not true, and it is no more accurate than it would be to make the same assertion about dogs or cats.

Rather than bans, we would suggest common-sense laws including punishment for those who are violating sound animal welfare practices or keeping animals in insecure enclosures. USARK will gladly assist with draft language for ban alternatives.

Venom, Venomous, and Poisonous Reptiles and Amphibians

The simple rule when discussing toxins is that "poisons are ingested, while venoms are injected." Poisons can be inhaled, consumed, or absorbed through the skin. Venoms are injected with a bite or a sting. Therefore, it is generally true to say that certain species of snakes are "venomous," rather than "poisonous." Not all snakes are venomous (most are



nonvenomous), and not all venoms or poisons are alike in their medical significance. When regulating venomous snakes, the term “medically significant venomous” has become common in the last few years.

True venomous snakes are classified in the families Elapidae, Viperidae, and Atractaspididae. Where “venomous” becomes tricky to define is in the discussion of what are termed “rear-fang” or “rear-fanged” species of snakes. These snakes do not all fit neatly into one contiguous category, and there is significant variation of the medical significance of the venom, or protovenom, between the various rear-fanged species. Some rear-fanged species do have medically significant venom. Others have a much weaker venom that may be less potent than a honeybee sting, causing mild pain and swelling at the site of the bite, or even no effect at all.

There are several species of the latter, non-medically significant type that are commonly kept as pets. One such species that is very popular among reptile keepers, is the western hognose snake (*Heterodon nasicus*). Western hognose snakes in particular have been kept by hobbyists for a few decades and bred through multiple generations under human care.

Regardless of their toxicity, the husbandry for venomous reptiles is well-understood. Secure, escape-proof caging is readily available, as are specialized tools for working with these animals. Many responsible keepers maintain these animals and banning them will only force that practice underground. Penalties for anyone found not to be in compliance is sensible. An outright ban is not. Again, we can assist with draft language for venomous snakes.

Regarding “poisonous amphibians,” many people believe that poisonous dart frogs pose a threat to humans. While this is true for wild poison dart frogs in their native countries, this does not apply to frogs kept in captivity. It is actually the insects they eat in the wild that provide them their toxicity and captive dart frogs do not possess the toxicity (poison) that their wild counterparts do because they have different diets. Poison dart frogs are commonly bred and kept under human care so please do not ban these species under false pretenses and misinformation.

Crocodylians

Crocodylians, being alligators, crocodiles, and caiman, are certainly commonplace when animal bans are discussed. We will not delve too much into this subject. We did recently write an ordinance for a major U.S. city and will gladly provide alternatives to a full ban.

We agree that crocodylians and venomous snakes should not be owned by most people, but those who do so responsibly should have an avenue for ownership. Virginia does have a state law regarding crocodylians. In lieu of a ban, Richmond could simply require registration and proof of the special state permit for crocodylians.



The Risk of Salmonellosis and Other Zoonotic Diseases

According to data collected by the CDC, only 0.2% of non-human sources of salmonellosis came from reptiles. Of all *Salmonella* infections in 2009 (both human and non-human sources), 0.03% came from reptiles. Chickens, turkeys, pigs, cows, and horses are all much greater causes of nonhuman source salmonellosis than reptiles. *Salmonella* from captive reptiles is not an issue as long as simple everyday hygiene practices (i.e., hand washing) are performed.

With 5% of U.S. households (about five million) keeping reptiles, and additional millions of households keeping other “exotic” pets, there would be a severe epidemic if diseases were easily transferred to humans. It is a rare occurrence when someone is unsanitary or does not sufficiently supervise young children, allowing the transfer of zoonoses.

Domesticated dogs and cats are responsible for far more zoonotic diseases, including salmonellosis, than pet reptiles, but the solution remains the same. Simple, common-sense hygiene practices eliminate the threats. We are not going to ban household cats because someone cleans his cat litter box in the kitchen sink and gets sick.

Of note, only some mammals can contract or spread the rabies virus. Reptiles, amphibians, birds, and fish cannot contract nor spread rabies.

Public and First Responder Risks

Regarding public safety and reptiles in captivity in the United States, there has never been a case of a member of the general public being either killed or seriously injured by an escaped reptile in the many decades of reptile keeping in the United States. While the concern expressed over any risks to first responders is understandable (we absolutely want those dedicated individuals to be safe), in reality, those risks amount to nothing more than sensationalized propaganda from radical anti-reptile and animal rights groups.

Briefly, snakes have very primitive respiratory systems. They only utilize one lung, and smoke inhalation will kill them quickly. While those uneducated regarding snakes believe they like it hot, this is highly inaccurate. Especially regarding the species commonly kept in captivity, including the larger constrictors, heat just a few degrees higher than their preferred temperatures can kill them quickly. These same issues apply for arachnids as they will perish very quickly in fires.

Herps are ectothermic (often referred to using the elementary term cold-blooded), meaning they cannot regulate their own body temperatures. This also means they cannot cool themselves down utilizing the same process mammals possess. Excess heat and smoke from a fire will kill any herps in that household much sooner than any mammals. Even if not dead, herps will become listless quite rapidly. There are several stories and even photos available of firefighters carrying snakes and other reptiles from fires without incident. There is at least one



story of a firefighter administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a Burmese python removed from a fire.

Conclusion

USARK would like to thank you for taking the time to review this document. Please consider that most reptiles, amphibians, tarantulas, and other non-domesticated pets are easily maintained in captivity and only those owners violating animal welfare laws or risking public safety should be punished. It is unfair to punish responsible citizens. We hate to see bad government practices such as collective punishment in Richmond.

Please contact USARK and myself with any questions or concerns. We will gladly help however possible. Have a good day.

/s/ Phil Goss
President of USARK, president@usark.org

More about USARK

USARK is a registered 501(c)(6) non-profit national advocacy group protecting the freedom of Americans to responsibly keep reptiles and amphibians. We would like to reiterate that we represent responsible keepers and agree that those violating proper animal welfare practices or public safety measures should be punished.

USARK is a science, education, and conservation based non-profit membership organization. We represent pet owners, conservationists, business owners, veterinarians, and scientists who work with reptiles and amphibians. USARK is dedicated to species conservation through responsible captive propagation and endorses a Keepers' Code of Ethics. USARK regularly provides science-based training to government agencies and officials at the federal, state and local levels. Our voice is critical when it comes to forming government policy as too often this arena is dominated by those who seek to end all forms of animal ownership.

Below is the Virginia state law regarding "exotic animals." There is also legislation that passed in 2020 as Senate Bill 1030 that bans public contact with many of these animals.

4VAC15-30-40. Importation requirements, possession, and sale of nonnative (exotic) animals.

A. Permit required. A special permit is required and may be issued by the department, if consistent with the department's fish and wildlife management program, to import, possess, or sell those nonnative (exotic) animals listed in the following table and in 4VAC15-20-210 that the board finds and declares to be predatory or undesirable within the meaning and intent of § 29.1-542 of the Code of Virginia, in that their introduction into the Commonwealth will be detrimental to the native fish and wildlife resources of Virginia.

AMPHIBIANS			
Order	Family	Genus/Species	Common Name
Anura	Bufo	Rhinella marina	Cane toad*

	Pipidae	Hymenochirus spp. Pseudohymenochirus merlini	African dwarf frog
		Xenopus spp.	Tongueless or African clawed frog
Caudata	Ambystomatidae	All species, except Ambystoma mexicanum	All mole salamanders, except Mexican axolotl

BIRDS

Order	Family	Genus/Species	Common Name
Psittaciformes	Psittacidae	Myiopsitta monachus	Monk parakeet*
Anseriformes	Anatidae	Cygnus olor	Mute swan

FISH

Order	Family	Genus/Species	Common Name		
Cypriniformes	Catostomidae	Catostomus microps	Modoc sucker		
		Catostomus santaanae	Santa Ana sucker		
		Catostomus warnerensis	Warner sucker		
		Ictiobus bubalus	Smallmouth* buffalo		
		I. cyprinellus	Bigmouth* buffalo		
		I. niger	Black buffalo*		
		Characidae	Pygopristis spp. Pygocentrus spp. Rooseveltiella spp. Serrasalmo spp. Serrasalmus spp. Taddyella spp.	Piranhas	
			Cobitidae	Misgurnus anguillicaudatus	Oriental weatherfish
			Cyprinidae	Aristichthys nobilis	Bighead carp*
		Chrosomus saylori		Laurel dace	
	Ctenopharyngodon idella	Grass carp or white amur			
	Cyprinella caerulea	Blue shiner			
	Cyprinella formosa	Beautiful shiner			
	Cyprinella lutrensis	Red shiner			
	Hypophthalmichthys molitrix	Silver carp*			
	Mylopharyngodon piceus	Black carp*			
	Notropis albizonatus	Palezone shiner			
	Notropis cahabae	Cahaba shiner			
	Notropis girardi	Arkansas River shiner			
	Notropis mekistocholas	Cape Fear shiner			
	Notropis simus pecosensis	Pecos bluntnose shiner			
	Notropis topeka (= tristis)	Topeka shiner			
	Phoxinus cumberlandensis	Blackside dace			
Rhinichthys osculus lethoporus	Independence Valley speckled dace				
Rhinichthys osculus nevadensis	Ash Meadows speckled dace				
Rhinichthys osculus oligoporus	Clover Valley speckled dace				
Rhinichthys osculus ssp.	Foskett speckled dace				
Rhinichthys osculus thermalis	Kendall Warm Springs dace				
Scardinius erythrophthalmus	Rudd				
Tinca tinca	Tench*				
Cyprinodontiformes	Poeciliidae	Gambusia gaigei	Big Bend gambusia		
		Gambusia georgei	San Marcos gambusia		
		Gambusia heterochir	Clear Creek gambusia		
		Gambusia nobilis	Pecos gambusia		
		Poeciliopsis occidentalis	Gila topminnow		
Gasterosteiformes	Gasterosteidae	Gasterosteus aculeatus williamsoni	Unarmored threespine stickleback		

Gobiesociformes	Gobiidae	Proterorhinus marmoratus Neogobius melanostomus	Tubenose goby Round goby
Perciformes	Centrarchidae	Micropterus henshalli	Alabama bass
	Channidae	Channa spp. Parachanna spp.	Snakeheads
	Cichlidae	Tilapia spp.	Tilapia
		Gymnocephalus cernuum	Ruffe*
	Elassomatidae	Elassoma alabamae	Spring pygmy sunfish
	Percidae	Crystallaria cincotta	Diamond darter
		Etheostoma chermocki	Vermillion darter
		Etheostoma boschungii	Slackwater darter
		Etheostoma chienense	Relict darter
		Etheostoma etowahae	Etowah darter
		Etheostoma fonticola	Fountain darter
		Etheostoma moorei	Yellowcheek darter
		Etheostoma nianguae	Niangua darter
		Etheostoma nuchale	Watercress darter
Etheostoma okaloosae		Okaloosa darter	
Etheostoma phytophilum		Rush darter	
Etheostoma rubrum		Bayou darter	
Etheostoma scottii	Cherokee darter		
Etheostoma sp.	Bluemask (= jewel) darter		
Etheostoma susanae	Cumberland darter		
Etheostoma wapiti	Boulder darter		
Percina antesella	Amber darter		
Percina aurolineata	Goldline darter		
Percina jenkinsi	Conasauga logperch		
Percina pantherina	Leopard darter		
Percina tanasi	Snail darter		
Scorpaeniformes	Cottidae	Cottus sp.	Grotto sculpin
		Cottus paulus (= pygmaeus)	Pygmy sculpin
Siluriformes	Clariidae	All species	Air-breathing catfish
	Ictaluridae	Noturus baileyi	Smoky madtom
		Noturus crypticus	Chucky madtom
		Noturus placidus	Neosho madtom
		Noturus stanauli	Pygmy madtom
Noturus trautmani	Scioto madtom		
Synbranchiformes	Synbranchidae	Monopterus albus	Swamp eel

MAMMALS

Order	Family	Genus/Species	Common Name
Artiodactyla	Suidae	All Species	Pigs or Hogs*
	Cervidae	All Species	Deer*
Carnivora	Canidae	All Species	Wild Dogs,* Wolves, Coyotes or Coyote hybrids, Jackals and Foxes
		Ursidae	All Species
	Procyonidae	All Species	Raccoons and* Relatives
	Mustelidae	All Species	Weasels, Badgers,* Skunks and Otters
		(except <i>Mustela putorius furo</i>)	Ferret
	Viverridae	All Species	Civets, Genets,* Lingsangs, Mongooses, and Fossas

	Herpestidae	All Species	Mongoose*
	Hyaenidae	All Species	Hyenas and Aardwolves*
	Felidae	All Species	Cats*
Chiroptera		All Species	Bats*
Lagomorpha	Lepridae	<i>Brachylagus idahoensis</i>	Pygmy rabbit
		<i>Lepus europeaeus</i>	European hare
		<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	European rabbit
		<i>Sylvilagus bachmani riparius</i>	Riparian brush rabbit
		<i>Sylvilagus palustris hefneri</i>	Lower Keys marsh rabbit
Rodentia		All species native to Africa	All species native to Africa
	Dipodidae	<i>Zapus hudsonius preblei</i>	Preble's meadow jumping mouse
	Muridae	<i>Microtus californicus scirpensis</i>	Amargosa vole
		<i>Microtus mexicanus hualpaiensis</i>	Hualapai Mexican vole
		<i>Microtus pennsylvanicus dukecampbelli</i>	Florida salt marsh vole
		<i>Neotoma floridana smalli</i>	Key Largo woodrat
		<i>Neotoma fuscipes riparia</i>	Riparian (= San Joaquin Valley) woodrat
		<i>Oryzomys palustris natator</i>	Rice rat
		<i>Peromyscus gossypinus allapaticola</i>	Key Largo cotton mouse
		<i>Peromyscus polionotus allophrys</i>	Choctawhatchee beach mouse
		<i>Peromyscus polionotus ammobates</i>	Alabama beach mouse
		<i>Peromyscus polionotus niveiventris</i>	Southeastern beach mouse
		<i>Peromyscus polionotus peninsularis</i>	St. Andrew beach mouse
		<i>Peromyscus polionotus phasma</i>	Anastasia Island beach mouse
		<i>Peromyscus polionotus trissyllepsis</i>	Perdido Key beach mouse
		<i>Reithrodontomys raviventris</i>	Salt marsh harvest mouse
	Heteromyidae	<i>Dipodomys heermanni morroensis</i>	Morro Bay kangaroo rat
		<i>Dipodomys ingens</i>	Giant kangaroo rat
		<i>Dipodomys merriami parvus</i>	San Bernadino Merriam's kangaroo rat
		<i>Dipodomys nitratoides exilis</i>	Fresno kangaroo rat
		<i>Dipodomys nitratoides nitratoides</i>	Tipton kangaroo rat
		<i>Dipodomys stephensi</i> (including <i>D. cascus</i>)	Stephens' kangaroo rat
		<i>Perognathus longimembris pacificus</i>	Pacific pocket mouse
	Sciuridae	<i>Cynomys</i> spp.	Prairie dogs
		<i>Spermophilus brunneus brunneus</i>	Northern Idaho ground squirrel
		<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus grahamensis</i>	Mount Graham red squirrel
Soricomorpha	Soricidae	<i>Sorex ornatus relictus</i>	Buena Vista Lake ornate shrew

MOLLUSKS

Order	Family	Genus/Species	Common Name
Neotaenioglossa	Hydrobiidae	<i>Potamopyrgus antipodarum</i>	New Zealand mudsnail
Veneroida	Dreissenidae	<i>Dreissena bugensis</i>	Quagga mussel
		<i>Dreissena bugensis</i>	Quagga mussel

REPTILES

Order	Family	Genus/Species	Common Name
Crocodylia	Alligatoridae	All species	Alligators, caimans*
	Crocodylidae	All species	Crocodiles*
	Gavialidae	All species	Gavials*
Squamata	Colubridae	<i>Boiga irregularis</i>	Brown tree snake*

J. All other nonnative (exotic) animals. All other nonnative (exotic) animals not listed in subsection A of this section may be possessed, purchased, and sold; provided, that such animals shall be subject to all applicable local, state, and federal laws and regulations, including those that apply to threatened/endangered species, and further provided, that such animals shall not be liberated within the Commonwealth.

Statutory Authority

§§ 29.1-103, 29.1-501, and 29.1-502 of the Code of Virginia.