

Curbing mass extinction and the collapse of natural ecosystems requires better social understandings of our relationships to animals

*As the sixth mass extinction event rages, animal species are disappearing from their native ecosystems at unprecedented levels. Anthropogenic habitat destruction in conjunction with economically incentivized poaching and smuggling operations has created a double bind through which wild animals are removed faster than they can adapt to emerging conditions. The illegal global wildlife trade and exotic pet industrial complex play active roles in this process – yet, remain underexplored phenomena in the social sciences. **Calvin Edward** argues if we are to avoid the collapse of precious ecosystems, social scientists have a key role to play in exposing the systems of inequality and exploitation that underlie exotic pet ownership.*

In January 2022, passengers aboard the London underground were startled to find that they were sharing their train car with an unusual guest: [a pink-toed tarantula, still confined to its plastic carrying container](#). This particular species of tarantula heralds from Central and South America as well as the Southern Caribbean Islands and are popular exotic house pets among tarantula enthusiasts. The creature was promptly seized from the train and taken to the South Essex Wildlife Hospital. Rescue officials involved in the case believed the tarantula was abandoned by its owner – who could no longer bear the responsibility that comes with owning this kind of exotic pet. Just a few months earlier, police answering a disturbance call in West Sussex were stunned to find [live sharks at a residential home, swimming endlessly around a Christmas tree in an 8-foot indoor swimming pool](#). These exotic animals stand in stark contrast to the seemingly mundane urban settings they are found within. For casual observers, reports of tarantulas on the train or sharks in swimming pools might come across as highly unusual, yet quaint occurrences. However, stories such as these are indicative of more destructive trends arising out of the lucrative illegal wildlife trade and exotic pet industrial complex.

To better understand how many exotic pets come into their own as living commodities, we must look at the latticework of informal labour networks that perpetuate the illegal wildlife trade. Although domestic breeding programs exist within consumer capitals, a majority of exotic pet animals [begin their lives as wild animals and are made into pets](#) along both legal and illicit, [decentralized networks of international transit](#). At the time of writing, rare and exotic animals are [the third-most trafficked commodity world-wide, with exotic pet industries constituting a significant portion of demand](#). As journalist [Ben Davies](#) and other [conservation researchers](#) have detailed, the wildlife trade is both driven and expedited by economic necessity under postcolonial relations. Poachers are not syndicated, professional hunters, they are oftentimes farmers, housewives, and day laborers in countries ravaged under colonial histories. Some purposefully embark on hunting expeditions or form poaching groups to chase high-reward bounties on sought-after animals, while many others are simply opportunists.



In their attempts to escape poverty, the precariat laborers of postcolonial countries are emptying out the ecological systems they depend upon. [Biodiversity is increasingly fleeting in formerly rich ecological spaces](#) and, as a result, [potential bounties to be collected on certain high-reward species lower each year](#). Mature animals that fetch high prices on black markets – such as large cats, bears, or primates are killed to be butchered and sold as pelts, medicines, and meats. Meanwhile, their offspring are [caged and smuggled both domestically and internationally for wealthy consumers as pets](#). As the material conditions worsen, exotic wildlife poaching and smuggling may become an increasingly tempting economic security net to fall back on. All the while, the animals themselves are finding new homes as exotic pets in countries like [the US](#), [Russia](#), [China](#), [the UK](#), and more.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has helped draw attention to the illegal wildlife trade on two fronts: the [deadly potential of zoonotic disease outbreaks](#) and the erosion of [financial stability leading to further wildlife trafficking](#). The Independent [recently highlighted](#) the uphill battle that Mexico’s environmental protection agency [PROFEPA](#) (The Federal Office for Environmental Protection) faces in quelling exotic animal smuggling during the pandemic. According to PROFEPA’s reports, the agency confiscated roughly 5,000 protected species from smugglers in 2019; in 2020, the number was near 33,000. A *660 percent rise* in animals seized alone.

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Despite its [geographic pervasiveness and destructive tendencies](#), the global wildlife trade (much less the ownership of trafficked animals as pets) has been scantily examined by the social sciences. With an upswell in popular interest around the trade amidst the pandemic, there has never been a better time for social science researchers to begin directing a critical gaze toward the phenomenon. Utilizing the analytic toolsets available across disciplinary specialties, the social sciences are uniquely well-equipped to produce more impactful findings that can be used as the foundations for more equitable ecological protection policies. In peeling back layers of complex entanglements that undergird illegal wildlife trafficking, it may be possible to produce better understandings as to how the trade flourishes from and contributes toward rampant ecological degradation and deteriorating conditions for those most vulnerable. First, however, we must recognize the importance of the issue at hand.

In his 1968 classic sci-fi novel, [Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep](#), Philip K. Dick imagines a future in which Earth can no longer ecologically sustain nonhuman life, rendering all remaining animals as commodities – bought, sold, bred, and traded as exotic pets. Under rampant anthropogenic environmental deterioration, “[empty forest syndrome](#)” now plagues the few remaining vestiges of biodiverse-rich spaces across the planet and Dick’s bleak depiction of a future without wild animals appears more foretelling than fictional. Such a fate is not deterministic, however. There is still time to impede the global wildlife trade and, by association, the sixth mass extinction event. First, the social sciences – from anthropology to economics and everything in-between – must begin to direct a more critical analytic lens upon the systems and processes which produce bizarre exotic pet encounters like tarantulas on the tube or sharks in swimming pools.

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