

Dilemma concerning live wildlife rescued in China

The theme of the United Nation's World Environment Day this year—Go Wild for Life—focuses on efforts to counter illegal wildlife trade, especially through law enforcement. However, the treatment of “rescued” animals is also crucial. Animal suffering, or premature death after rescue, undermines animal welfare goals.

In China, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) guidelines (1) on the appropriate treatment of live rescued animals are not well known by government authorities, and the euthanasia of rescued wildlife is not permitted (2). Consequently, indigenous and exotic animals are either held in captivity indefinitely at animal rescue centers or released to the wild after discretionary quarantine and rehabilitation (3), the standards of which vary substantially.

In Yunnan Province alone, about 18,000 wild animals are seized annually (4). Accessing rare Chinese language records detailing the confiscations of live animals from 2010 to 2015 (5), we estimated that fewer than 30% of 12,473 native reptiles (14 species) were released to the wild (6). The rest went to poor, crowded sanctuaries and even into the pet or food trade (7). Of these native species, 2000 individuals likely originated from neighboring countries (5). Of 155 native birds (20 species) all were released, but 886 exotic birds (10 species) were kept in sanctuaries until they die. Of 156 native mammals (primarily primates, Asiatic bears, and pangolins) almost all remain in captivity, often in appalling enclosures (8). Even charismatic exotic species tend not to be repatriated; none of five Asiatic elephants rescued in 2005 has been returned to Myanmar. Standards of animal housing and veterinary care are unregulated in China, and discretionary releases often involve unfamiliar release sites without follow-up on survival.

China urgently needs welfare legislation to protect rescued wildlife. Rescued animals should be released responsibly, and standards of care and record keeping should be improved.

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