



While animal rights groups always claim that the pet and exotic animal trade are the reasons so many species are threatened, endangered or nearly extinct, this article shares another side of the story. Human expansion, urban sprawl, development, deforestation and industrial/agricultural growth are by far the primary factors for the sixth great extinction we're currently witnessing. Animals collected for food markets and traditional medicine (both nearly always outside of the U.S.) are other huge contributors to the decline of many species.

Animal rights groups also spread the lie that all or nearly all herps in the pet trade are wild caught. HSUS and the ASPCA (which both have information on their websites stating that no one should own ANY exotic animal or non-traditional pet, which includes all herps) both use this misinformation, giving no legitimacy or recognition to the great strides made in captive breeding and husbandry of these animals.

Article: The Controversy of Conservation: Can Commercial Breeding Save a Species?

Habitat loss is regularly identified as the biggest threat to wildlife throughout the world. Conservationists cite destruction, fragmentation and degradation as a result of the increasing human population as categories of the extermination of various species. Despite its roots as an environmental science, wildlife conservation efforts provoke plenty of controversy. The captive breeding model is a prime example, where a species is bred within a controlled environment such as a preserve. A growing subset of this is commercial breeding. I invited Stephen L. Angeli of Horridum Angeli Reptiles, the sole licensed breeder and broker of venomous reptiles in the state of California and all-around venomous lizard authority to sit down and talk with me about his vision of animal conservation. For years he's been a commercial breeder of reptiles from the genus *Heloderma* - commonly known for the "beaded lizard" and "Gila monster." For those that aren't familiar with captive breeding, the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute has some excellent resources on the science of preserving endangered species. This includes more information on the species that are currently being bred in captivity, some with the intention of being released into the wild, given that the natural habitat of the species hasn't been destroyed and is sufficiently protected.

Interviewing a reptile breeder comes with a culture that's rather unique. Despite a sometimes gruesome public image, venomous or "hot" snakes and other reptiles are often quite apt as 'pets' due to the simplicity of care when compared to some of the more exotic mammals kept by qualified (and unqualified) civilians. While there exist plenty of hard-to-keep reptiles, the amount of care required compared to exotic mammals - big cats such like lions or tigers, for example, is minimal.

The import and export of reptiles has become increasingly complicated in the United States since the 1970s passing of CITES, a law which restricts the trade of protected and endangered species. While many reptile breeders such as Angeli are glad that these animals are being rigorously protected, he's hesitant to categorize the current situation as a total win due to the state of habitat destruction and how reptile breeders like himself "could act as a resource for these animals as breeding program implementers."

An example of how smuggling altered the availability of animals (and how common it is/has been) one needs to look no further than the bearded dragon, a common animal in pet stores across the

United States to this day. Bearded dragons were “introduced as pets to the US during the 1990s...even though Australia, from the 1960s onward...banned the sale of its wildlife to the pet trade.” Given the context of how Americans likely obtained these animals illegally and his experience through a long career in exotics (coupled with an eye on conservation), Angeli claims that “a lot of people are led to believe that it’s animal smugglers that are pushing animals to the endangered species list, which is very rarely the case.” Using *Heloderma* as his primary example, “their place on the ‘Least Concern’ spectrum of CITES isn’t the whole story. You see, these lizards spend over 90% of their lives underground or in shelters and the assumption becomes what we can’t see isn’t there. Don’t misunderstand me, *H. charlesbogerti* [currently a subspecies of *Heloderma*] is one of the rarest reptiles in the world and there are supposedly less than 200 worldwide, but I’m not sold on these approximations. The other subspecies are doing far better than what’s being depicted when their commercial availability is factored in. Private breeding programs have largely destroyed the poaching of the Mexican and Rio Fuerte beaded lizards as well as the Gila monster. Instead of a long-winded and often futile search in the desert that may result in finding an aggressive, dull-colored lizard that’s clearly been through Hell and back from under a rock, it’s far more affordable and legally viable to get the designer version from someone like me. Animals from *Heloderma* [beaded lizard] and *Pogona* [bearded dragon] are booming due to their popularity in the trade. They certainly aren’t the only ones, either.”

This isn’t all, Angeli mentions that conflicting interests don’t just plague remote locations in Central and South America, but here in the United States and that it’s not nearly as obvious and clear-cut as the general public thinks. “There was a Walmart Supercenter built in St. George, Utah years ago, right on top of a major Gila monster habitat. Suffice to say, they’re largely gone, showing up randomly throughout the region - and little thought was put into addressing that, likely due to poor planning and plenty of corporate lobbying. It didn’t even make the mainstream news. Of course boycotting certain products and companies that operate in various countries can be helpful in keeping yourself informed and perhaps curbing some of the destruction of the habitats of these protected animals. But remember, it’s excruciating to boycott some of these organizations, just look at Nestle for an example of how hard it can be.”

Looking forward, Angeli is hoping to work on a new conservation project that is projected to begin in 2016,

“...these beautiful, pitch-black beaded lizards, *H. alvarezii*, have been non-existent in the reptile trade outside of places like Zoo Atlanta. I have a contact at a South American preserve with an entire colony that may be willing to send a few pairs to me once we get the paperwork and permits taken care of. This would be the first known [and legal] instance of commercial breeding for this subspecies in the states and my goal is to breed a lot of them, bring them to the market and offer the preserve a stake in all future sales stemming from the project. The benefit to them is that the proceeds could go toward the allocation of more land for further animal preservation. The kind of money this will generate given the rare nature of *alvarezii* will purchase quite a bit of land in Mexico. I wish I could do something like this for *charlesbogerti* as well, I’d jump at the opportunity and do it for free, just to help get them off the endangered species list.”

When asked for his final thoughts, Angeli insists that our readers understand that “above all else, animal preserves and commercial breeding can and should complement one another. The rate that habitats are disappearing or becoming unlivable for so many animals throughout the world needs to be addressed and I believe that encouraging a program like my *alvarezii* project with other animals [when appropriate and through respected experts] could be a key component in both a deeper

understanding of the animals themselves and a viable success rate that's measurable by both marketplace success and the allocation of preserves through those commercial efforts. We could do something like what was done with [Florida] alligators and [Australia] saltwater crocodiles. By allowing permitted professionals to do what they do best, breed animals, poaching and habitat loss cease to threaten the continued existence of the species in what is clearly a very complicated process to change. I can understand how this might not seem ideal to some people at first blush, but it may be essential to the survival of these animals. Every day we're destroying their homes to make way for more agriculture or, as I said before, something as 'simple' as building like a Walmart Supercenter on previously undeveloped land. We have to have a realistic strategy in place before it's too late."

Article via <http://www.clearlyveg.com/.../controversy-conservation...>

Photo: Chiapan beaded lizard (*Heloderma alvarezii*) by Lachesis95 via GoogleImages

