

So You Want an Exotic Cat?

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Think again!

For those in the zoo community, it is not uncommon to hear someone exclaim, "I want one!". Young and old alike are mesmerized by the beautiful cats and their seemingly identical behavior to our cuddly kitties at home. There are, however, some pretty extreme differences that make having an exotic cat as a pet a very bad idea.

Food for Thought

The average grocery bill for a family of four in the US is just shy of \$500 a month. The average monthly bill for an adult tiger can START at \$500 a month. That is more than \$7000 per year! Add in the amount you would have to pay for shipping food from a specialty store and it's even more money.

Exotic cats may have a similar body design to their domestic counterparts, but they require specific nutrients to keep them healthy and regular old Friskies just won't cut it. And if you are thinking a smaller exotic cat would be better, even they could cost over \$300 per month in food alone. Not to mention that most people get squeamish when it comes to the whole prey items that are essential to their diet (i.e. rabbits, goats, etc.).

Is There a Doctor in the House?

Generally speaking, domestic cats need a physical every year. This exam consists of loading them into a kennel and bringing them to the vet. A few shots later and it's time to go home. Rarely does the appointment require the animal to be sedated and it usually costs us under \$100. Celebration then ensues for having a healthy pet for another year.

If it were that simple for exotic cats, zoo vets around the world would rejoice. Doing a physical on an exotic cat is much more involved and tricky. First, imagine trying to get a cougar to stand still for an accurate temperature or vaccination. What if the vets need an x-ray or ultrasound? Do you think that lion is going to sit calmly while you take its blood?

Physicals with exotic cats often need to be done under sedation which requires more equipment, time, expertise and money. A simple wellness exam could add up to thousands of dollars. And what happens if that wellness exam shows that something is wrong? Taking proper care of exotic cats in those situations could easily reach the cost of a new car.

Additionally, there are very few veterinarians out there with the experience needed, making proper medical care difficult to come by outside a zoo setting.

And You Thought YOUR Cats Were Messy!

There are many different types of poop. The worst, by far, is generally thought to be produced by carnivores. I know what you are thinking; “My cat box at home doesn’t smell that bad,” or “Even if it smells, it’s not that much.” On the contrary! We already covered that exotic cats require different food than ‘Fluffy.’ Well, that means their poop smells different, worse...a LOT worse. And they don’t really do the whole litter box thing. They are more of a ‘poop where the mood strikes’ kind of animal. Same thing is true when it comes to urinating, scratching, marking, biting and so on. All exotic cats should have the nickname “Destroyer,” because that’s what they do. And while it may be fun to watch that leopard annihilate a (\$300+) industrial strength toy at the zoo, you probably wouldn’t feel the same about your favorite chair.

They Are Still Wild

Exotic cats have some of the cutest babies in the world. Just looking at a little spotted lion, or fuzzy tiger is enough to make most people blurt a stream of “oohs” and “ahhs.” Even veteran animal keepers are susceptible. However, exotic cats transform into little predators much faster than most people think. Hand-raising **doesn’t** change this process. Some exotic cats can grow to very large sizes as well, making it even more difficult to house them. Unfortunately this often leads to them cooped up in tiny cages once they become adults. Today’s zoos have the means to create exhibit spaces personalized to the animal’s needs to create the best environment possible outside the wild. This is simply not possible to do in your back yard.

Domestic animals took thousands of generations of selective breeding to get to ‘pet’ status. Even so, they still have their wild instincts and very easily demonstrate them in situations of stress or need. Exotic cats have never been bred to be domestic. They are predators, and while they may seem like they are tame, or even lovable, that can change in an instant.

Is That Caracal Locally Sourced?

One thing to think about in looking at the exotic cat trade is sourcing. The exotic pet trade is a \$15 billion dollar business in the United States alone, with breeders and dealers selling animals over the Internet or in trade magazines. Millions of animals are forced into the exotic pet trade every year for the purpose of becoming someone's pet. Breeding for physical characteristics has also increased as people desire to have hybrids, which only further degrades the important genetic material in exotic cats. The breeding system in accredited zoos is intricate and deliberate, focusing on the continued health of the species’ genetics instead of consumer

demands. Visiting and supporting local accredited facilities helps them to continue their work and hopefully save many of the exotic cats you love from extinction.

The exotic cats that are found in accredited zoos act as animal ambassadors for their species. They are amazing representations of the wildlife found around the world and we are meant to fall in love with them. Passion inspires action and that is what these cats desperately need. The action required in this case is not acquiring them as pets but being an advocate for their species. In passing on the message of wild cat conservation to your friends and family, you become an ambassador in your own right.