



Prevalence of Exotic Pet Ownership and Access to Veterinary Services

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Abstract

Background: There has been increasing concern expressed about the welfare of exotic pets worldwide. An online survey of pet owners conducted between July and August 2020 provides the first empirical data for Ireland. In this pilot study we aim to characterise exotic pet ownership, the challenges and benefits of keeping exotic pets, and access to veterinary services from the pet owner's perspective.

Results: Using an online survey this study gathered evidence from 93 respondents comprising 83 domestic and 32 exotic pet owners within the staff ($n = \sim 3600$ FTE) at University College Dublin, the largest third level institution in Ireland. The prevalence of exotic pet ownership was determined to be 34.4% of households with more than 10% owning only exotic pets. Half of exotic pet owners indicated they had not accessed veterinary services in the past with 45% indicating a lack of local veterinary clinics specialising in their exotic species. Commonly reported benefits of exotic pet ownership included that the pet was friendly, affectionate, or easy-going and that the pet was calming to the owner.

Conclusions: This pilot study contains important implications for veterinary education to support the veterinary community with providing services to the exotic pet owning community. Policy issues with exotic pet ownership also need to be considered and further research into the proposed strategies to support the health and welfare of exotic pets should be carried out such as the introduction of white lists and guidelines on responsible pet ownership.

Background

The prevalence of exotic pet ownership has been widely accepted to be increasing across most of the world¹⁻⁵. However, no study looking at the prevalence of exotic pet ownership in the Republic of Ireland has previously been conducted to the authors' knowledge. Additionally, concerns related to the welfare of exotic pets in general have been noted⁶, but few studies⁷ have been conducted to investigate their access to veterinary services in other countries and none have been conducted within the Republic of Ireland. There is no generally accepted definition of an exotic pet across national or international veterinary bodies⁸⁻¹⁰. For the purposes of this study, an exotic pet was defined as a household animal/pet that is not a dog, cat, rabbit, hamster, gerbil, guinea pig, mouse, rat, or ferret. Exotic pets were also broken down into the categories of small exotic mammals (<20kg) (SEM), large exotic mammals (>20kg) (LEM), birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and invertebrates.

Methods

An online survey was designed using SurveyMonkey[®] to explore the prevalence of exotic pet ownership and to examine exotic pets' access to veterinary services in Ireland. The nature of the survey qualified it for an exemption from full ethic approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee at UCD (LS-E-20-80-Hanlon).

Data were exported from SurveyMonkey[®] into Microsoft Excel (2013). R version 3.6.1 and R Studio version 1.2.1335 were used for data cleaning and transformation, data visualisation, generating descriptive statistics, and for all statistical analyses. Pearson's chi-squared test and Fisher's exact test were used to test for significant differences in the frequencies of responses between independent cohorts.

Results

A total of 104 individuals accessed the survey of which 93 (89.4%) completed at least the first section. Respondents comprised 61 (65.6%) domestic only pet owners, 10 (10.8%) exotics only pet owners, and 22 (23.7%) pet owners who owned both domestic and exotic pets. Full details of the prevalence of pet ownership can be seen in Table 1 (below).

Half of exotic pet owners indicated they had not accessed veterinary services for their pet in the past year with 45% indicating a lack of local veterinary clinics specialising in their exotic species.

The most commonly cited benefits of exotic pet ownership were that the pet was friendly, affectionate, or easy-going ($n = 8$), that the pet was calming to the owner ($n = 7$), and that exotic pet ownership offered a different view on animals ($n = 6$). The most commonly cited challenge was identifying and providing for the specific needs of each species ($n = 13$), followed by finding an experience veterinary practitioner in exotic medicine ($n = 5$).

Policy suggestions to support improved health and welfare of exotic pets included a call for increased availability of educational materials, a centralised database of veterinary practitioners experienced in treating different exotic species, and testing and licensure of exotic pet owners.

Discussion

This pilot study demonstrates that exotic pet ownership is relatively common at a reported prevalence of 34.4%. However, the level at which they're accessing veterinary services (50% in 2019) is much lower than is currently considered best practice^{11,12}, which presents a unique challenge for veterinary professionals.

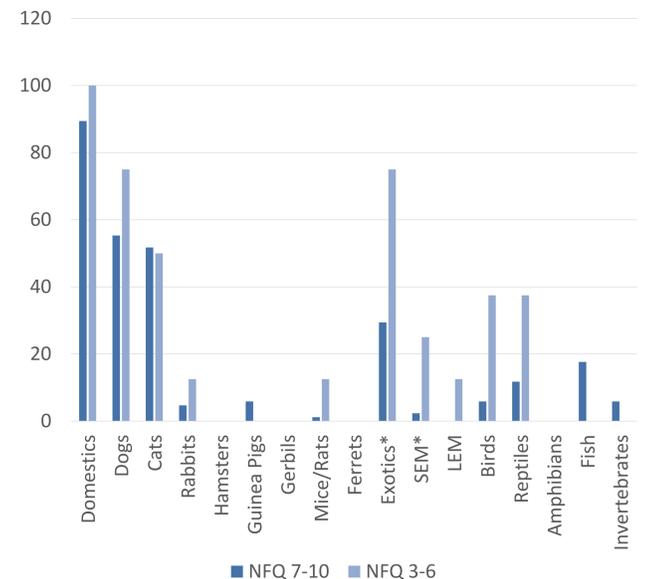


Figure 1. Prevalence of domestic and exotic pet ownership by highest level of educational attainment per household, NQF 7-10 ($n=85$) and NQF 3-6 ($n=8$). Significant results were found for exotic pet ownership overall ($p=0.01535$) and small exotic mammals (SEM) ($p=0.03589$).

Category	Prevalence	Category	Prevalence
Domestics (overall)	89.24%	Exotics (overall)	34.41%
Dogs	56.99%	SEM	5.38%
Cats	51.61%	LEM	1.08%
Rabbits	5.37%	Birds	8.60%
Hamsters	0.00%	Reptiles	13.98%
Guinea Pigs	5.37%	Amphibians	0.00%
Gerbils	0.00%	Fish	16.13%
Mice/Rats	2.15%	Invertebrates	5.37%
Ferrets	0.00%	-	-

Table 1. Prevalence of domestic and exotic pet ownership in Ireland broken down by category.

Conclusions

One third of respondents owned an exotic pet. This has implications for veterinary education to support the veterinary community with providing services to the exotic pet owning community. The development of guidelines on responsible ownership of exotic pets and codes of practice on animal care are required to address owner concerns and policy issues should be considered.

Additionally, research into the proposed strategies to support the health and welfare of exotic pets are required to examine their impact on pet owners, the veterinary profession, and the welfare of the animals involved.

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