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# Wild animal bill elicits mixed reaction

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NORWALK

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Special to The Hour

Wednesday night, the General Assembly unanimously passed a scaled down version of the bill designed to ban a wide range of wild and exotic animals.

House Bill 6552: An act banning the possession of potentially dangerous animals and the importation, possession and liberation of wild animals now bans only large primates. It includes a provision allowing the state DEP to restrict the ownership of other exotic and wild animals in the future if it holds public hearings beforehand.

The original bill was much more ambitious and would have made it illegal to own 23 categories of animals including various types of cats, primates, ferrets, bears, iguanas, snakes, scorpions and tarantulas. But, concerns about small monkeys, ferrets, professional circus animals and other proposals not directly connected to animal ownership threatened to kill the bill until next session.

Some local residents are still concerned over the fate of their pets.

"Legislation frequently seems to sprout out of a knee jerk response to some event and the need to satisfy some politician's public relations agenda that is not necessarily consistent with the larger needs of society," said Norwalk resident Jim Meany, who has adopted a variety of exotic creatures over the years including a green iguana, a bearded dragon, a ball python, assorted parrots and a finch. "In reality, often the law abiding are the only ones who abide the laws. Regardless of whatever legislation is or is not imposed, some will keep illegal or inappropriate pets."

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal and the Department of Environmental Protection had called for the law following a violent pet chimpanzee attack in Stamford that left a woman blind and without hands. A 2004 law required permits for wild animals, but the DEP had grandfathered in the 200-pound chimp who was shot and killed by police last February following the attack.

The DEP has identified 24 smaller monkeys currently owned by 11 families in the state that will be allowed as an exemption to the new law.

"Their owners have had these animals for years without incident and have shown they know how to care for them," said Rep. Richard Roy, D-Milford, co-chair of the Environmental Committee.

Roy had argued that the bill must exempt zoos, nature centers, museums and research facilities, and that animals transported to a veterinarian or elsewhere must be in a crate or cage.

"Basically, we just wanted people with knowledge of the law and experience in animal husbandry to keep exotic pets," Roy added. "Birds were not included in the ban, we also didn't think that ferrets or monkeys under 35 pounds should be targeted, and animals in traveling circuses required U.S. Agriculture Department certification to come to the state."

Other proposed amendments that bogged down the bill's passage concerned legalizing bow hunting on Sundays, penalties for hunting while intoxicated and the revival of a proposal from earlier in the session banning cruel leg-hold animal traps that still faces opposition from the trapping industry.

So was a scaled down version of the bill better than no bill at all?

"I do not find that most people know how to care for their pet exotic properly," said Dr. Nicholas Sitinas VMD, Dipl. Avian Specialty Avian and Exotic Pet Referral Center at South Wilton Veterinary Group. "This is usually because they did not research and were not told how to care for them properly at the onset. Also as opposed to traditional dog and cat pets that frequently visit their doctor for wellness care, such as annual vaccinations, most exotic pet owners do not."

Dr. Sitinas treats most non-traditional pets that are brought in for treatment including birds, rabbits, reptiles, small mammals, some zoo animals and aquarium exhibit species including amphibians and fish. His practice is also one of the few locally that treat wildlife.

"I have over the years treated pets including falcons, alligators, monkeys, kangaroos, wild cats, skunks, tarantulas and other strange creatures," he said. "Each species will behave differently in illness and in health and I need to know whether a behavior is normal or abnormal. Each species has different biological data and widely varying anatomy so the zoo or the exotics veterinarian needs to be able to know what the norm is when interpreting blood test results or X-rays."

Dr. Sitinas discourages people from adopting certain species due to risk to both owner and critter.

"Thanks to our laws in Connecticut, most exotic pets legally available for sale can be considered safe to humans," he said. "There are no scorpions, tarantulas venomous snakes, apes or wild cats available in our stores. What is available is generally harmless -- whether they make a good pet or not is a different story. Where a guinea pig or a cockatiel makes a wonderful exotic pet for a young child, an old world chameleon will probably die a slow death. The reason being that the care involved to properly feed and house a chameleon and keep it healthy is far beyond the capabilities of many adults let alone a young child."

Dr. Sitinas does not recommend owning illegal pets of any kind and is especially against the keeping of pets that pose a danger to humans -- such as wild cats, alligators, scorpions and venomous snakes. He also opposes the keeping of monkeys or apes.

"Thanks to the black market, the Internet and more lenient laws in other states illegal animals cross our borders daily," Dr. Sitinas said and adds that he doesn't think people should keep wildlife as it is "cruel and destructive."

So, what if Dr. Sitinas had written the bill?

"One that would ban some but not all non-domesticated animals," he says. "Dangerous animals and wild caught animals should not be kept by the general public. Special permits and exceptions should be given for some researchers, scientists, serious hobbyists, and some exhibitors as these serve a greater public service and have benefit to us all."

Dr. Sitinas also thinks that the law should require some informed consent and evidence that the individual purchasing the animal has a clear understanding of its needs as well as the ability to provide for those needs.

"Mathilda, my ball python, made her way to me after being rescued off the streets of Stamford and came to me covered with burns, possibly from not getting out from under an oil burner quickly enough," says Meany. "With Dr. Sitinas' excellent assistance we nursed her back to health. She is a beautiful animal."

Meany is concerned that future changes to the law might discourage people from adopting animals in need.

"Extremely qualified pet keepers might be prevented from providing homes for animals that might otherwise go homeless or need to be destroyed as a result," he says. "Even animals within a species vary tremendously in temperament, so to say that one or another species is illegal does not solve the problem either."

Meany spends several hours a day feeding, cleaning cages and performing other functions necessary to insure that his brood is safe and healthy.

"They have special husbandry needs that can include specialized lighting for the reptiles so that they can properly metabolize Vitamin D3 and maintain the proper calcium balance within their bodies," Meany explains.

Judy Hoyt of Norwalk recently lost her job at a veterinary hospital and is now finding it difficult to care for her throng of ferrets.

"When they get sick, treatments are very expensive," says Hoyt, who has rescued 36 ferrets from uncertain fates. "I've gotten calls from pet stores when somebody abandoned them, and sometimes people call me with hurt or sick ferrets."

Hoyt, who currently provides a home to 13 ferrets, says they are the sweetest of all pets. She is relieved that the new bill did not include a ban on ferrets.

"I guess maybe the lawmakers thought of them as exotic because they are not indigenous to this area, but they have been bred as pets for hundreds of years and get along great with people and other pets like dogs and cats," says Hoyt. "There is also commercial food made especially for ferrets, who are carnivores."

Additionally, Hoyt says ferrets are extremely entertaining.

"They are very playful and will do anything to make you laugh," she said. "Ferrets will never turn on you either -- but they are not cheap to own because they are bred and therefore susceptible to a variety of illnesses."

So, as far as the state is concerned, Hoyt can still keep her lively litter.

Bill 6552 needs the signature of Gov. M. Jodi Rell to become law.