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New law puts bite on owners of exotic pets

The owners of hundreds of exotic pets face heavy fines, jail, and the seizure and destruction of their animals when a new law governing non-native animals from frogs and snakes to tigers comes into effect April 1.

BY VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 16, 2010



The owners of hundreds of exotic pets face heavy fines, jail, and the seizure and destruction of their animals when a new law governing non-native animals from frogs and snakes to tigers comes into effect April 1.

People who already owned any of the 1,200 animals listed under the Controlled Alien Species Regulation of the Wildlife Act before March 16, 2009, can obtain a free permit from the provincial government provided they can adequately house and care for the animal.

But keeping a cheetah, rhino, a black crested gibbon or any of the assorted frog, cat and reptile species on the government's list without a permit could cost you a fine of up to \$100,000 and one year in prison. And that's for a first-time offender. Breeding or releasing such an animal into the wild could run you up to \$250,000 and two years in prison.

Environment Ministry staff have received only a few dozen applications for possession permits and have not issued a single permit so far, according to Environment Minister Barry Penner. Alberta has

issued 1,200 permits under similar regulations and ministry staff in B.C. believe there are at least as many animals on this province's alien species list resident in B.C.

"Come April 1, if you have one of these alien species you could get a visit from a conservation officer or the police," said Penner.

Pet owners who cannot get the required permit will have little option but to have their animals put down or face stiff penalties, according to reptile rescuer Mike Hopcraft.

The legislation was drafted after Tania Dumstrey-Soos was mauled by a Siberian tiger in 100 Mile House in 2007. Dumstrey-Soos died while two of her children looked on and family members attempted to revive her. The animal was one of three tigers being housed at a private zoo.

"When it became popular or cool for some people to keep dangerous or poisonous animals we felt that for public safety we needed to amend the Wildlife Act to give us the authority to control that," said Penner. The regulation is effectively a prohibition on breeding listed species and a ban on any further imports of those creatures, Penner said.

Hopcraft expects that a large number of animals will have to be put down once the law comes into full effect. Hopcraft, known as The Reptile Guy, keeps about 80 reptiles, about 20 of which are on the alien species list. He is already fielding inquiries from owners of exotic pets who have been refused permits.

Hopcraft says the act only allows him 90 days to find a home for any exotic pet he rescues after April 1. If he fails, the animal must be euthanized, he said. "That's an animal that has never hurt anyone that has to be put down."

A Vancouver homeowner who has owned a 3.2-metre (10.5-foot) albino Burmese python for years was refused a permit, but not because he can't keep it properly. He was refused because the City of Vancouver prohibits large pythons and he could not obtain an exemption even though he had owned the snake before the city's bylaw was passed, said Hopcraft. "Now that they know that he has this snake in Vancouver, he has to get rid of it," said Hopcraft, who is making arrangements to take the snake, having just found a home for a similar reptile after four months of searching.

Rather than face fines, some people may simply release their pets into the wild if they cannot obtain permits, he said. Abbotsford-area newspapers have received reports that a shed skin from a 1.8-metre (six-foot) long python was found in a local park.

The Vancouver SPCA took in 25 unwanted exotic pets during a recent 12-month period.

Hopcraft finances his animal rescue work by taking his reptiles to schools and public events and doing educational presentations. "This law affects me probably more than anybody in this province," said Hopcraft, 27. The Abbotsford resident is now seeking accreditation from the Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums and a commercial site in order to keep his menagerie. The move will cost "tens of thousands of dollars."

"I've been doing this out of my home for years, but now I am faced with finding another space so that I can continue my work. I have to become a zoo or I can't do my rescue work."

He is in negotiations to rent a property in Chilliwack to house his animals and headquarter his rescue operation.

Hopcraft is hosting a fundraiser birthday party for Mac the ring-tailed lemur at his home this Sunday from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. at 32129 Timms Ave., Abbotsford. He will have lots of reptiles, insects and exotic mammals to meet and touch. Admission by donation.

rshore@vancouver.sun.com

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