

Government of Flanders

Strategy, international policy and animal welfare division

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Flemish Animal Welfare Council - OPINION GUIDANCE 28/11/2018

Positive list for reptiles

1 WORKING GROUP PARTICIPANTS

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- Tom Hellebuyck Working group chairperson, Ghent University

Working group members:

- Thomas Merckx Ani-Zoo
- Frank Pasmans Ghent University
- Michel Vandenbosch GAIA (Global Action in the Interest of Animals)
- Jozef Mennes National Council for Animal Fanciers
- Hugo Claessen Andibel
- Patrick Verhelle TERRA (Belgian association for terrarium and herpetology)
- Raoul Van Damme University of Antwerp
- Jeroen Speybroeck Research Institute for Nature and Forest, Natuurpunt Amphibian Hyla and reptile working group
- Dries Damiaens Natuurhulpcentrum Opglabbeek Reptile shelter

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- Dieter Everaert Veterinarian

Secretary of Flemish Council for Animal Welfare:

- Ester Peeters

Animal Welfare Service:

- Eric Van Tilburgh
- Jeroen De Bodt
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2 MEETING DATES

12/01/2018, 23/04/2018, 17/09/2018

3 SUMMARY OF MEETING FINDINGS

3.1 CONTEXT

- Over the past decades, a large and increasing number of reptile species have been kept in captivity. Although the management needs for a considerable number of species can be relatively easily met, others have specific requirements in terms of care in captivity.
- By analogy with other domestic animals, lack of knowledge and impulse buying, amongst other things, have a negative impact on the welfare of reptiles in captivity. The trade is also offered animals that have been captured from the wild as well as species that are only suitable for the more experienced reptile keeper. In addition, problems related to, amongst other things, housing standards in large-scale collections and infectious diseases, have manifested in popular species. The epidemiology and pathogenesis of such infectious diseases appears to be linked to the commercial and private trade in these species, which are bred in large numbers and sold across borders.
- The ease with which a large number of species are successfully kept and bred is unquestionably the result of years of dedication, primarily from hobbyists, with the emphasis on creating as natural an environment as possible and allowing as natural a behaviour as possible for the specie(s) kept.
- The routine breeding of certain species can partly be considered as proof of this, and has made the import of reptiles captured from the wild unnecessary or redundant (at least for a portion of the reptile species kept). The expertise gained with certain species over the years is a valuable source of information for breeding programs in zoological collections and may also be of considerable value for conservation programs. Such input from the hobby sector is invaluable and, in order to safeguard it, the dynamic nature and, amongst other things, the granting of exceptions to those with the requisite knowledge or expertise, is essential.

3.2 HISTORY

- The Animal Welfare Act of 1986 states that the Government of Flanders can establish lists of species or animal categories. Animals that do not belong to this list may not be kept. A similar list for mammals was drawn up in 2009.
- Numerous initiatives for drafting a positive list for reptiles have already taken place. In 2004 and 2005, two independent initiatives were initiated for the development of the list in Flanders and Wallonia. Criteria were defined by independent working groups. In 2005, the Animal Welfare Service set up a working group comprising scientific experts in order to further discuss these proposals. The following scientific criteria was formulated:
 - easy to keep
 - poses no danger to humans
 - poses no danger to nature upon escape
 - sufficient documentation available
 - hatchlings known
- The working group's meetings resulted in a list containing 161 species, which was approved by the Zoos Committee, yet was never made official. Upon presenting the proposal to various associations, counter proposals were submitted in which the number of species on the list varied between 69 and 1226 species. Ultimately, a consensus was no longer possible. A few years later, the various proposals were reviewed by the Animal Welfare Service. Following the Animal Welfare Service's regionalisation in 2015, Minister Weyts announced in his policy memorandum that he wished to restrict the keeping of reptiles.

Meanwhile, the 'Conseil wallon du Bien-être animal' was working on a list. The Flemish Animal Welfare Council advised the Minister to wait for that list and use it as a basis.

3.3 OPERATION

- The EMBL "Reptile Database" was referred to on a taxonomic basis. This contains more than 11,000 species, and is frequently supplemented and revised according to new data and scientific research. During the working group's first meeting, it was decided to appoint a coordinator per order (*Sauria*, *Serpentes* and *Testudines*). The various orders were discussed within expert groups. The results from these expert groups were subsequently discussed in the plenary working group meetings and a decision taken on the definitive inclusion or deletion of reptiles (species) in the proposed positive list.
- According to the working group, the creation of an ideal positive list per animal class is not possible. However, the current proposal does provide a solid foundation which can be enhanced in the future in order to continuously promote the welfare of captive reptiles. The list's dynamic nature is central to this and an equally important aspect of the current proposal.
- Crucial hereby is both a periodic review, in which species can be added or removed from the list, and the possibility of applying for accreditation and exception for a reptile species that is not included in the positive list (please refer to [appendix III](#)). The list's dynamic nature is essential owing to (and subject to)

trends that occur in the reptile trade and hobby sector, as well as prevailing welfare issues, the problem of invasive species and the ongoing input of all stakeholders (animal protection, nature protection, shelters and rescue centres, scientists, traders, hobbyists, veterinarians, etc.).

- The positive list of reptiles included in the current proposal contains species that can theoretically be kept without any prior knowledge, and is the result of testing the nearly 11,000 currently known reptile species (<http://www.reptile-database.org/db-info/SpeciesStat.html>) against a series of criteria drawn up by the working group.

3.4 THE BENEFIT OF A LIST

- The working group is of the opinion that a positive list of reptiles does not provide a solution to all the welfare problems affecting reptiles kept in captivity. As is the case with more conventional domestic animals, welfare problems typically manifest as often and sometimes more frequently with easy-to-keep and popular reptile species. Nevertheless, the proposed positive list of reptiles can make an important contribution to improving the welfare of reptiles in captivity. As well as putting an end to the trade in reptiles captured from the wild in Flanders, the list may have an important influence on the issue of invasive exotics (cf species decision) and contribute to the transparency, traceability and controllability of reptile species kept in captivity in Flanders.
- There has been a partial shift in the public that keeps reptiles during the past decades. Reptiles are increasingly kept as individual domestic animals, with owners willing to go to significant lengths to maximise the well-being of their pet. Accurate information can rapidly be consulted for a large number of species, and the trade has access to an extremely comprehensive range of supplies. There is also increasing accessibility for those reptile keepers seeking expertise and veterinary assistance. Reptile veterinary medicine has been integrated into veterinary medicine for years, is constantly evolving and, as in other disciplines, specialist training can be pursued.
- The existence of a positive list of reptiles can form a legal basis that contributes to the uniformity of the way in which Flemish competent officials assess the keeping of reptiles in captivity and can exercise control over this. Confusion with other laws that impose restrictions on the keeping of dangerous reptiles (VLAREM) or regulate trade in endangered species (CITES) must be avoided.
- The species included in this proposal can be successfully kept by novice reptile keepers without extensive prior knowledge. Thus minimum housing standards and guidelines for environmental parameters are not applicable for the proposed species.

3.5 COMPARISON OF FLEMISH AND WALLOON LIST

- The number of species included in the Flemish proposal is greater than that on the Walloon positive list. The following considerations have hereby been made:

- The number of reptiles kept in Flanders is higher than in Wallonia and the number of reptile species kept is presumably also more varied.
- The number of reptile species that potentially conform with the documented criteria undoubtedly exceeds the number of species included on the list. After all, account was also taken of current availability and thus the incidence of keeping the evaluated species.
- In addition to three working group meetings, a large number of expert group meetings were organised to assess the reptile species within the various orders and genera. No one person has a comprehensive knowledge of all reptile species. The applied method prevented certain species from being over- or under-represented in the proposal.
- At present, there are almost 11,000 reptile species (<http://www.reptile-database.org/db-info/SpeciesStat.html>). The 422 proposed species were consistently tested against the set criteria, and represent only a small percentage of the number of known reptile species.
- Support for the advisory document and its lists is extremely broad (please refer to working group composition).

4 PRESENTATIONS

- Animal Welfare Service, 2018. Positive list of reptiles: Wallonia opinion. Slide presentation.
- Animal Welfare Service, 2018. Positive list of reptiles history. Slide presentation.

5 OPINION APPROVAL BY THE FLEMISH ANIMAL WELFARE COUNCIL

Approved on 28/11/2018.