Pet Shops: The Unseen Suffering
The HSUS Exposes Cruelties behind Closed Doors

"In my presence, the pet shop owner picked up one of the kittens in one hand, picked up a wooden dowel in the other hand, and struck the kitten in the front of the head," said the former manager of a northern California pet store in a sworn statement. "I observed blood run from the nostrils of the kitten. The owner then placed the kitten in the freezer without really checking to make sure the kitten was dead. He then instructed me to kill the remaining eight kittens the same way. I did as I was told."

It was an operation where profits took precedence over proper care, where animals were reduced to saleable merchandise and those considered "defective" were destroyed in the least costly manner possible. Unfortunately, in today's commercial pet business, where cutting costs is often the name of the game, atrocities like the one described above happen far more frequently than the public knows. For this reason, and spurred by grisly first-hand accounts by pet shop employees, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is working to expose the suffering of thousands of helpless pet-trade animals. Only through our ongoing investigations and our legislative efforts, only by opening America's eyes to the brutality taking place behind closed doors, will we dry up the demand for these exploited creatures.

Sadly, the harrowing incident described above doesn't begin to reveal the magnitude of suffering taking place nationwide, or even in the three northern California pet stores that recently made news headlines. In that episode, ten former employees testified to the behind-the-scenes abuses they'd witnessed and the near-death conditions of animals that had been sold.

"I observed sick dogs at that store that eventually died because of neglect," said one employee. "The dogs would be placed in the back room and would not be given the necessary food, water or medication and would die."

"Birds were put down by striking their heads on the sides of tables," said a manager. "Hamsters would be killed..."
by placing them in bags and then striking the bags against the wall.

"On another occasion," said a kennel worker, "I recall ... the district manager placing a sick female beagle puppy into a plastic bag and slamming the puppy against the wall. He then placed the beagle into the freezer. I also saw him destroy kittens in this manner."

The gruesome tales go on. Tales ofroach-infested back rooms, freezers bursting with animal carcasses, and mass killings of unspoken Easter bunnies. But such horrific accounts are not limited to northern California. In New Jersey, Florida, Kansas, Massachusetts, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia, pet shop employees have related startlingly similar stories of brutality and neglect—the vast majority describing large franchise operations usually located in shopping malls.

"In the past, pet shops were family-run establishments and people really cared about the animals they sold," says Patrick Parkes, HSUS vice president for field services. "While some of those shops still exist, the sale of pets has become a big business and there are plenty of people in it strictly to make money."

And run like businesses they are. "You're not going to walk into a pet store and see a disaster area," says Parkes, "because the public areas of these places are designed to entice people to purchase animals. The cruelties occur in the back rooms and basements where ill and injured animals aren't receiving the proper care or medical attention they need." While the exact extent of back room cruelties is difficult to assess on a nationwide basis, theavailable evidence from employees is alarming.

Unfortunately, for millions of animals—particularly puppies and newly popular wild-caught birds—their miserable journey begins long before they reach the pet shop door. For these vulnerable creatures, the suffering may start at birth and continue until they are sold or, as is too often the case, die of neglect.

What You See Is Not What You Get

The journey for that irresistible spaniel or terrier begins under some what less cosmetic conditions than the glass-encased cages the customer sees. While some pet shop puppies come from reputable local breeders, for many of the 400,000 dogs sold each year, life begins in the cramped, decrepit confines of the puppy mill. It's on such mass breeding farms, located primarily in the midwestern states, that puppies endure extreme deprivation during their first weeks of life. House on wire floors in chicken coops and rabbit hutches, with nothing more than wooden boxes—if that—to protect them from blizzards and baking sun, puppies are afforded only the barest essentials to keep them alive. During an extensive undercover operation, one HSUS investigator turned up newborns living inside rusty barrels, discarded washing machines, even empty fuel tanks. Another HSUS investigator discovered a stable housing some 600 caged dogs, with piles of feces waist deep!

At eight weeks of age, puppies are crammed two to a crate and shipped to any of thousands of pet shops across the country. These animals, jostled from truck to truck and finally to air cargo bay, may endure days in transit. "The stress of transport weakens their immune systems," says HSUS scientific director and veterinarian Dr. Michael W. Fox. "Even if they've been properly vaccinated, they're likely to become diseased and die." Pet shop employees have alleged that puppies arrive at retail stores by the truckload, coughing, vomiting, and suffering from severe dehydration—symptoms that ultimately spell pneumonia, distemper, and deadly parvovirus.

Employees Play Doctor

Whether sick or healthy, however, a puppy's so-called "shelf-life" (determined by cuteness) is only a few short weeks. To ensure quick turnover, managers at times employ deceptive sales practices to move the merchandise. One pet shop employee recalled the sale of a terrier so sick that it had to be force-fed to be kept alive. She urged the store manager to seek veterinary attention for the animal. "The next day, I noticed the cage was empty," she said. "I asked him if the puppy had died and he said, 'No, I sold it.' " Not surprisingly, the puppy died soon after in the care of its new owner.

In the back room, the store manager who buys a pet only to have it become violently ill within hours or days of purchase, still hopes his customers will cover expenses for veterinary treatment. To them it's far less expensive to reclaim a sick animal—take care of it and receive a credit from the breeder—than to shell out the money for vet bills.

In the long term, pet shop owners think it feasible to "treat" sick animals, the burden of playing doctor too often falls on an unprepared sales staff. With virtually no veterinary training and the pressure of sales quotas upon them, employees are seldom equipped to care for sick and dying animals. Sufferers are generally placed in "quarantine" in a back room or shipping area, even a storage closet. There, cramped together in cages and infecting one another, animals may be left to fend for themselves or die.

A foul odor seeping into the display area of this Antioch, California, pet shop alerted humane officials to the atrocities taking place behind the scenes. When authorities inspected the store's back room (pictured at right), they came across scores of neglected cats, dogs, and birds. Below, one of ten dog carcasses discovered. The animals had starved to death.

Birds of a Feather Die Together

Pet shop cruelties are not limited to traditional companion animals but extend to the new status symbol in pets: the wild-caught bird. With the U.S. cage-bird population at 40 million individuals, the bird business is the fastest growing segment of the pet industry. Unfortunately, the trade in wild species is growing at a rate that not only seriously jeopardizes entire bird populations, but spells an unavoidable waste of animal life. The fact is, for each parrot or finch that is seen perched in the pet shop cage, another four birds have suffered tragic deaths. And the mortality rate climbs for the more delicate species: only one of every eleven survivors makes it through the harrowing journey from its native habitat to the pet shop.

It's a journey that starts in the forests and fields of Latin America, Asia, or Africa, where catchers match young birds from their nests—often cutting down trees and ravaging forests in the process. "Most birds caught for export are taken from their nests before they are even old enough to fly," explains an HSUS investigator, who recently went undercover among bird catchers in Peru. "Catchers simply hack open the nesting hole to remove entire clutches of young birds at a time." Birds are also trapped with leg snares—a process during which captives may be left to gang gasplessly for hours on end. Such capture methods, says our undercover investigator, cause serious injury to birds, often killing as many birds as are captured unharm ed.

The death toll skyrockets again when wild birds depart their native countries, bound for pet shops in America. Some smugglers have banded together in an effort to sneak their cargoes of exotic creatures, birds continue to be stuffed into tennis ball cans, hidden under hoods of cars, and even taped to smugglers' bodies in an effort to sneak them over native borders. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that roughly 30,000 black-market birds are smuggled into the United States alone each year. How many others—stuffed inside suitcases, their beaks taped shut along the way?

Despite this, there's little evidence that the pet industry has done anything to curtail these staggering losses. In...
The industry has found it more profitable to charge exorbitant prices for the few birds that make it to pet stores alive rather than provide humane treatment for all those captured. And profitable it is. With demand soaring and customers paying between $500 and $10,000 per bird, retailers are enjoying an unprecedented economic boom. Little do customers realize that they are picking up the tab for those birds that didn't make it to the pet shop alive.

To end this exploitation, New York has become the first state to enact a law banning the import of exotic birds, and several other states have followed suit by introducing similar progressive measures. But the nearly four-billion-dollar pet industry, fearful of losing its grip on this highly lucrative business, is waging a fierce legislative battle. By portraying New York's law as a serious threat to the entire pet industry, the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC), the industry's lobbying arm, has mobilized retailers nationwide in an effort to both overturn the new law and obstruct the passage of any similar bills.

What The HSUS Is Doing

Recognized as a leader in the effort to stop the wholesale slaughter of wild birds, The HSUS has succeeded in keeping New York's far-reaching bird law on the books. Although PIJAC nearly won repeal of that law in May and will undoubtedly try again next year, our staff will do everything in its power to keep that measure intact. We'll also be fighting for passage of protective bills in several other states.

By taking our case to the media, we've been educating the public to the unseen cruelties of the commercial pet trade. In addition to our extensive investigation of midwestern puppy mills, which spurred a rash of publicity about the horrendous conditions in many of the nation's 5,000 puppy factories, The HSUS prompted 'NBC Nightly News,' CBS national news, and the "Today" show to air exposes on the abuses within the industry. Thanks to our investigators, similar segments have aired on newscasts in every major city in the country.

To toughen pet shop regulations, HSUS regional directors continually meet with public officials ranging from state governors to city council members. On the local level, our efforts have been surprisingly successful. Despite this, with upwards of 10,000 pet shops in the country, it will be quite some time before we're able to enact or strengthen ordinances in thousands of communities nationwide.

Meanwhile, our team of investigators will continue to monitor conditions at pet shops throughout the country, working to gain prosecution of those individuals who, for financial motives, subject their vulnerable charges to unspeakable suffering and neglect.

We Need Your Help

- If someone you know is in the market for a dog or cat, encourage him to visit the local animal shelter or suggest that he buy from an area breeder. Always visit the breeder's facilities to ensure that a pet was raised properly and in humane surroundings.
- If you discover what appears to be a sick animal for sale in a pet shop, contact your local animal control and health departments immediately. These agencies can usually send an inspector to the scene to take the appropriate actions. Also, be sure to alert your state department of consumer affairs to what may very well be deceptive business practices, and notify your area humane society as well.
- Encourage your local humane society to work for stricter enforcement of current regulations as well as for tougher ordinances and state laws governing the sale of animals in pet stores.
- Finally, help The HSUS bring the hidden cruelties of the pet trade to the public's attention. Only by drying up the demand for these exploited creatures will we end the abuses taking place "behind closed doors." Your tax-deductible contribution will enable us to continue our investigative, legislative, and educational efforts to end the suffering for thousands of pet-trade animals as well as for countless other wild and domestic creatures so desperately in need of our help. Please use the enclosed postage-paid envelope to send your contribution today.

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