

Animals in the Classroom?

A Guide to Decision-Making

Are you considering keeping an animal in your classroom? The Bronx Zoo/Wildlife Conservation Park Education Department recognizes that under certain specific circumstances, students may benefit from the proper care and study of live animals in school. However, the department does not endorse keeping animals in classrooms as a routine practice by teachers and their students. Only when school administrators, teachers, and students can fulfill specific conditions of animal care, housing, and study does the Bronx Zoo Education Department recognize the overall net benefit of animals in the classroom. The conditions that meet acceptable standards for animal keeping are outlined in the following pages. Careful consideration must be given to the issues raised here. If you believe that classroom animals are an educational option, begin research and a comprehensive discussion with staff members at your school, students, and parents. Consult the bibliography (page 7) and be certain that you can respond to the issues raised in the box on page 3.

Background

Keeping animals in school classrooms is becoming more widespread. The Bronx Zoo Education Department has extensive contact with teachers nationwide through its training programs for teachers of grades K-12. We have learned of many teachers who attempt to keep animals in school with mixed success. Most teachers who wish to keep animals will seek information to prepare them. Information is available in books and journal articles. However, this information is not always accurate, comprehensive, objective, or current. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the quality of the information. This is one reason why the Bronx Zoo Education Department cannot provide a strong endorsement for classroom animal



Principles of animal care can best be demonstrated with common domestic animals, such as guinea pigs. Selective breeding has made domestic animals more docile than wild animals.

collections. Instead, we prefer to counsel educators against keeping animals in the classroom *unless* school personnel and students are willing and able to meet the criteria outlined on the following pages.



Potential drawbacks

There are many problems caused by indiscriminate animal collecting, ranging from the animals' safety and survival to pressures on wild populations. The most obvious drawback is that classroom animals might not be properly cared for, especially after the novelty has worn off. All too often, in classrooms and in people's homes, animals are acquired on impulse without planning and consideration of care in captivity. Consequently, many animals with inexperienced caretakers have shortened life expectancies and a relatively poor quality of life.

With certain species, consideration must also be given to the students' safety. Improper handling could cause serious injury to either the animal or the handler. But perhaps the biggest concern is that the keeping of classroom collections may encourage individual students to acquire unsuitable animal collections at home.

The major source for home collections is usually the local pet store, which often sells animals that were imported from the wild. This exploits many species and fosters the perception that animals are simply commodities to be bought and sold. All too often, people do not make the connection between animals in the pet store and animals in the wild. They do not consider that the animals were removed from their natural habitats.

Teachers and students should be aware of the direct, negative impact the pet trade has on wild animal populations. The pet trade has been responsible for the decline of many species, including parrots, snakes, and lizards. Many animals die between the time of collection and arrival at the pet store, partly due to stress during capture, holding, and transport. Stress, rough handling, poor accommodations, and inadequate diets are the main reasons for these heavy losses. Improper health care for exotic animals and lack of information on their specialized needs are problems that are transferred by the pet dealer to the buyer of such animals.

Potential benefits

Introducing animals to students can foster appreciation and respect for animals, wildlife, nature, ecosystems, and conservation. It can also foster a sense of responsibility for living things. Keeping animals in the classroom is also an excellent way for students to learn about general biology and more specific topics, such as habitat conservation, animals' survival needs, and animals' adaptations to their environments.

Keeping animals may improve student performance, stimulate an interest in science, promote student involvement in conservation-oriented projects, and prompt greater use of the zoo as a learning resource. The animals can indeed take on the role of ambassadors from nature and raise the consciousness of teachers and students, spark concern for wildlife, and encourage participation in wildlife conservation projects.



Considerations for selecting classroom animals

Animals should not be removed from the wild for classroom collections. animals classroom should be domestically bred. When purchasing an animal from a pet store or dealer, it is essential to investigate the animal's history to ensure it was domestically bred, and not captured from the wild. Principles of basic animal care can be more easily demonstrated with common domestic animals than with exotic species, whose care is often much more demanding, or even unknown.

Another important consideration in the selection process is what to do with the animal when it is no longer wanted. If the animal is kept alive and its needs are



Animals should not be collected from their natural habitats for classroom use. This bearded dragon was domestically bred.

the animal is kept alive and its needs are met, the consideration of what to do with the animal in the future must be considered. Some species can outlive their owners.

Misinformation or improper selection of a species can lead to another problem: the animals may outgrow the space available. We are often considered to be a "throwaway society." However, an animal is not a disposable commodity, even if it is no longer desired by its owner.

A realistic approach must be taken when selecting animals for the classroom. The first question to ask is: What kinds of animals can be kept and maintained properly in a classroom setting? Consider the following issues:

- The amount of time and space available for care of the collection;
- The students' and teachers' interest and commitment to proper care for the animal;
- Budget issues, including cost of animals, cage set-up (including furnishings and bedding), necessary heating devices, proper feeding, and medical treatment;
- The ability to provide for the animal's special needs, including climate control during school closings, weekends, and vacations (what happens when the school turns off the heat?);
- The impact on the animal if the teacher who is responsible for its care leaves the school;
- The lifespan of the animal; will care be available for this length of time?;
- Security and protection for the animal against vandalism;
- Sources of proper food and medical care.



Animals collected locally by students can also pose a problem. Collecting may be illegal in some circumstances. It can deplete local populations and foster an exploitative attitude in students. With few exceptions, we do not endorse local collecting of animals. Collecting is responsible for the decline of numerous wild animals, such as the box turtle. For certain species of invertebrates, however, a collection made in the early fall, under careful supervision, can provide suitable small animals for classroom use. Examples include crickets, sow or pill bugs, millipedes, garden slugs, snails, potato beetles, Japanese beetles, and mealworms.

Provided that teachers are willing and able to abide by all our recommendations, we restrict our list of suggested classroom animals to the domestically-bred species listed below.

Can Be Handled With Teacher Supervision

hamsters mice

gerbils bearded dragons guinea pigs king snakes chinchillas corn snakes rats doves

Observation Only

zebra finches canaries cockatiels budgies

leopard geckos axolotl salamanders
Argentine horned frogs African clawed frogs

most species of freshwater fish

Teachers should always inform students of the federal, state, and local laws that prohibit collecting of animals without special permission. Students should be taught sound conservation practices and made aware of the legal protection of animals, *including* insects and other invertebrates.

We discourage keeping species that are commercially collected when it potentially threatens populations. Examples include grass frogs, some tropical saltwater fish, tarantulas, and most lizards and snakes. We recommend that the teacher discuss the source of the animals with the students; it is important for students to know where the animals came from and how they arrived at the school.

The issue of animal care during weekends and vacations must be given a great deal of thought. For example, the practice of sending classroom animals home with a different student every weekend is unacceptable. It is impossible to monitor the quality of care the animal receives when not under the teacher's supervision. Frequent transport is too stressful for many species. We are aware of instances where an animal was enthusiastically taken home by a child to a very hostile home environment. Parents may initially approve of hosting an animal and later reverse their position because they object to an animal's odor, the noise it makes, unusual dietary needs, or potential health hazards.



In every situation, animals must be selected with proper consideration of the students' role in animal care. We discourage keeping animals that can only be properly cared for by adults.

Teacher knowledge and preparation

Teachers who plan to keep animals have an obligation to first learn as much as possible about the species (refer to the bibliography). The information provided at pet stores may not be accurate or complete; do not rely on the pet store as the sole information source. Some factors to investigate include the following:

Proper housing

This includes the cost of the enclosure, the space the animal requires, the necessary bedding, and other cage furnishings.

Plans for proper housing include selection of appropriate bedding for the animal.

Diet

The nutritional needs of the animal must be researched, including quantities of food at each serving and feeding frequency. A reliable source of quality food must be arranged. Natural changes in an animal's dietary needs as it grows older should also be investigated.

Investigate the animal's dietary needs thoroughly. Foods that are only available in large quantities will need to be stored.

• Temperature requirements

Some animals have very specific temperature needs. Reptiles, for example, typically require additional heat sources to remain healthy. Certain animals cannot tolerate fluctuating temperatures. This information is vital for planning a reliable heating system.

Light requirements

Lighting can have dramatic effects on animals. Some animals have specific light requirements, and may need a special source of light (e.g. natural light, full-spectrum light, or high-intensity light) or special timing of the light. Light can affect nutrition, activity cycles, breeding behavior, growth, vitamin production, and overall health.

• Social requirements

Be sure to research the behavior of the animal you are interested in bringing to your classroom. For example, in the wild does the animal live in social groups or alone? Is it an aggressive animal? What will happen if individuals are housed together or forced to compete or share territories (such as fish in an aquarium)?

Expected growth rates

Consider how large the animal might grow. Do you have adequate space, housing, and caretakers for the animal's lifetime? Understanding the animal's normal rate of growth will also help you monitor the animal's health.

Potential diseases

Teachers should be able to recognize common ailments and seek medical treatment. The availability and cost of veterinary services should be investigated. Routine exams



and illness care must be budgeted. All too often, the animal becomes ill and the teacher has no place to turn without paying for medical care out of pocket.

Teachers should also be aware of the potential for spreading certain diseases between animals and people. Proper hygiene and sanitation should always be enforced. The possible transmission of salmonella is always a concern.

Peer and administrator involvement

Teachers who intend to keep animals must have specific curricular goals in mind. We advise defining objectives for study of the animals in as many curricular areas as possible. If feasible, the classroom study of animals should serve as a prelude to, or follow-up for, zoo studies.

If school administrators approve of teachers' keeping of classroom animals, they must be willing to provide proper services, such as light, heat, proper space, and housing materials. Principals, department heads, or curriculum coordinators must be fully aware of the teachers' objectives for using animals as a part of the curriculum. Administrators and teachers should work together to define ways that the animal collection can benefit as many students in the school as possible.

A single teacher should never manage a school's animal collection. School administrators must consider, as must the teacher, the fate of the animals when the supervising teacher leaves the school. We strongly urge administrators not to permit the keeping of classroom animals unless long-term plans for care involving two or more supervising teachers are formulated.

Involvement of the students

When possible, students should be given partial responsibility for animal care to avoid students perceiving the animal as nothing more special than a microscope slide. However, animal care does not mean frequent animal handling. We discourage indiscriminate animal handling. Improperly trained animal handlers usually cause unwarranted stress to the animal, which will contribute to poor health. All classroom procedures for animal care should minimize animal handling.

Involvement of parents

Parents should know the curricular reasons why animals are being maintained in the classroom. Share information about the animals with parents. Provide assurances regarding health, safety, and the students' role in care giving.



The decision to have animals in the classroom must be carefully considered. All animals, including this budgie, require special care and responsibility.



Role of the local zoo

Zoos are excellent sources of information on animals through their education departments, libraries, and exhibit signs. It must be emphasized, however, that zoos do not have sufficient staff, funds, and facilities to diagnose, medicate, or receive unwanted or "discarded" animals.

Your local zoo may have relatives of your classroom animal. Students can conduct projects to apply their new knowledge to the behavior, needs, and care of zoo animals. This can help students understand the complexities of maintaining viable breeding populations of animals in modern wildlife conservation parks.

SUMMARY

The keeping of animals in the classroom is a sensitive issue. Unlike prepared specimens, classroom animals are living beings totally dependent on their keepers for the fulfillment of their needs. Ethically, animals can only be used in the classroom if a serious commitment is made by the school to fulfill the responsibilities of proper care and maintenance. The quality of life for these animals must be the primary concern. Educators who choose to keep animals in the classroom must instill in their students a sense of responsibility and respect for wild animal populations, habitats, and the global ecosystem.

In the final analysis, when all the responsibilities of classroom animal care are taken into account, perhaps one of the best ways for students to enjoy wildlife is to visit the local zoo, where care is in the hands of experts.



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