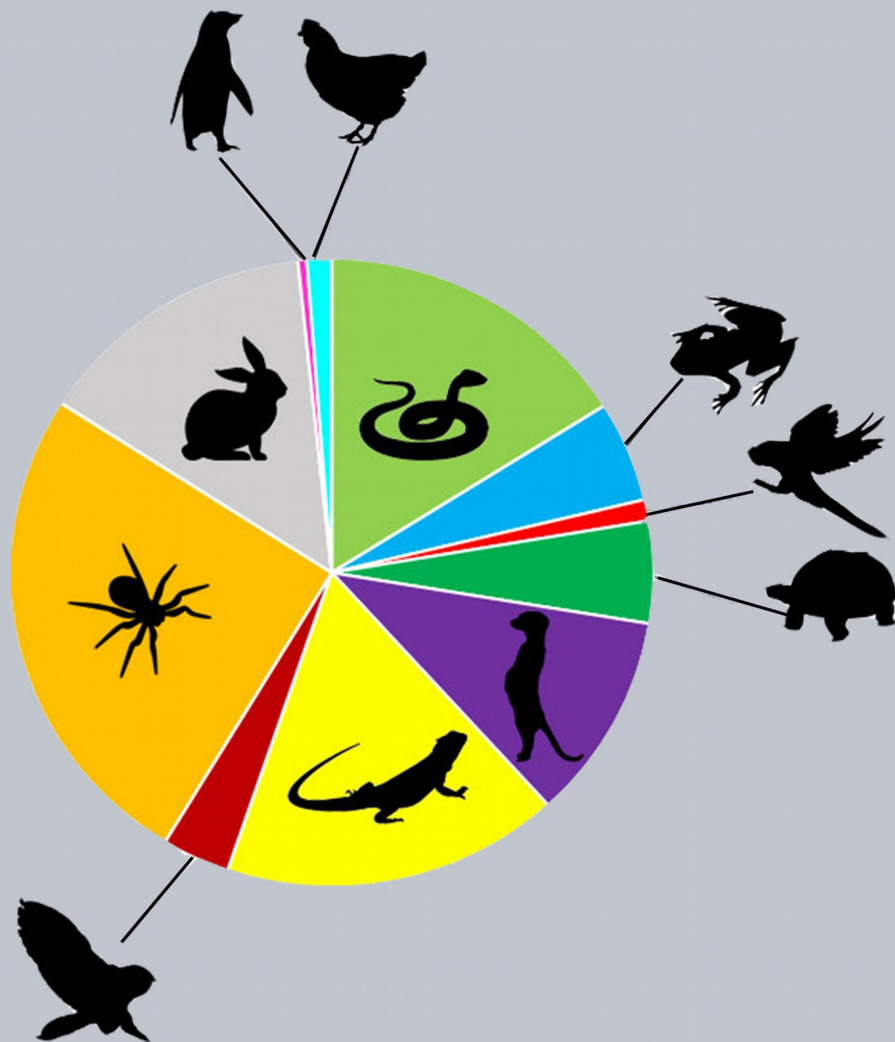


# The growth of Mobile Zoos: A review of the UK Mobile Zoo Industry in 2016



**CAPS**

Captive Animals' Protection Society

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Since the release of the Captive Animals' Protection Society's (CAPS) research into the 'Mobile Zoo' industry in 2013, we have continued to receive reports of these companies exploiting animals at events across the UK.

New research carried out in 2016 again shines a light on the extent of the industry and its unregulated use of a large number of animals. It is clear that this industry is growing, reiterating the need for action to be taken to protect the animals they use.

## The Industry

The number of Mobile Zoo companies identified increased from 160 in 2013, to 187 in 2016. While **56 new companies** were recorded, 35 of those listed identified in 2013 are now closed or no longer advertising, some 22% of those identified in 2013. One of these businesses closed due to a lack of funding and the animals were relocated to various zoos. It is difficult to find out what happened to the animals used in the other closed businesses.

## The Animals

Over **180 species** are used by the mobile zoo industry in the UK, making up an estimated total of over **3500 individual animals**.

From snakes to meerkats, and tarantulas to raccoons, these animals are transported to parties, schools, fairs, and other public events, with some businesses seemingly having no restrictions on the distance they will travel.

### Reptiles:

- 600 Lizards and crocodiles
- 570 Snakes, including pythons, constrictors and corn snakes
- 190 tortoises, terrapins and turtles

### Invertebrates:

- Over 900 animals including tarantulas, millipedes, scorpions and giant snails

### Amphibians:

- 190 frogs, toads, newts and salamanders

### Exotic Mammals:

- 380 individuals, including skunks, meerkats, raccoons, coatis and monkeys

### Wild Birds:

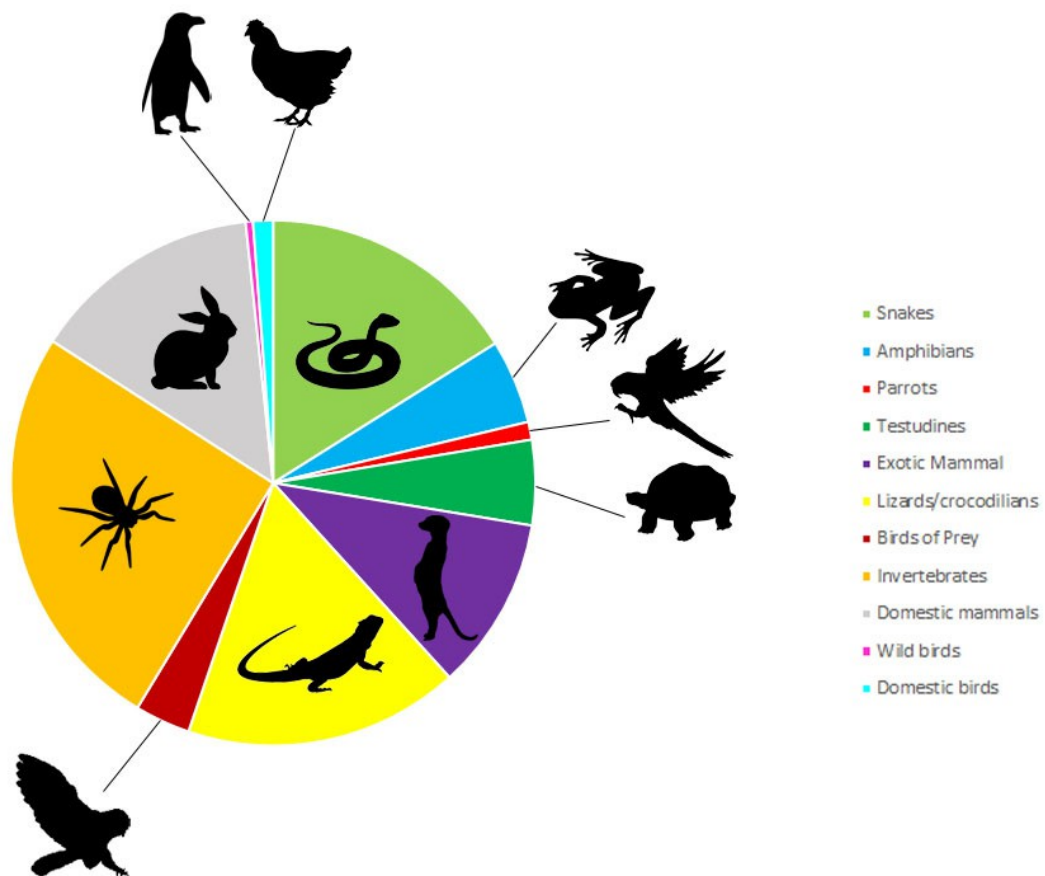
- Over 180 wild birds, including macaws, cockatoos, owls, and hawks

### Domestic Animals:

- 500 domestic mammals including rabbits, rats, guinea pigs, ponies, cats and dogs
- 50 domestic birds including chickens, turkeys and ducks

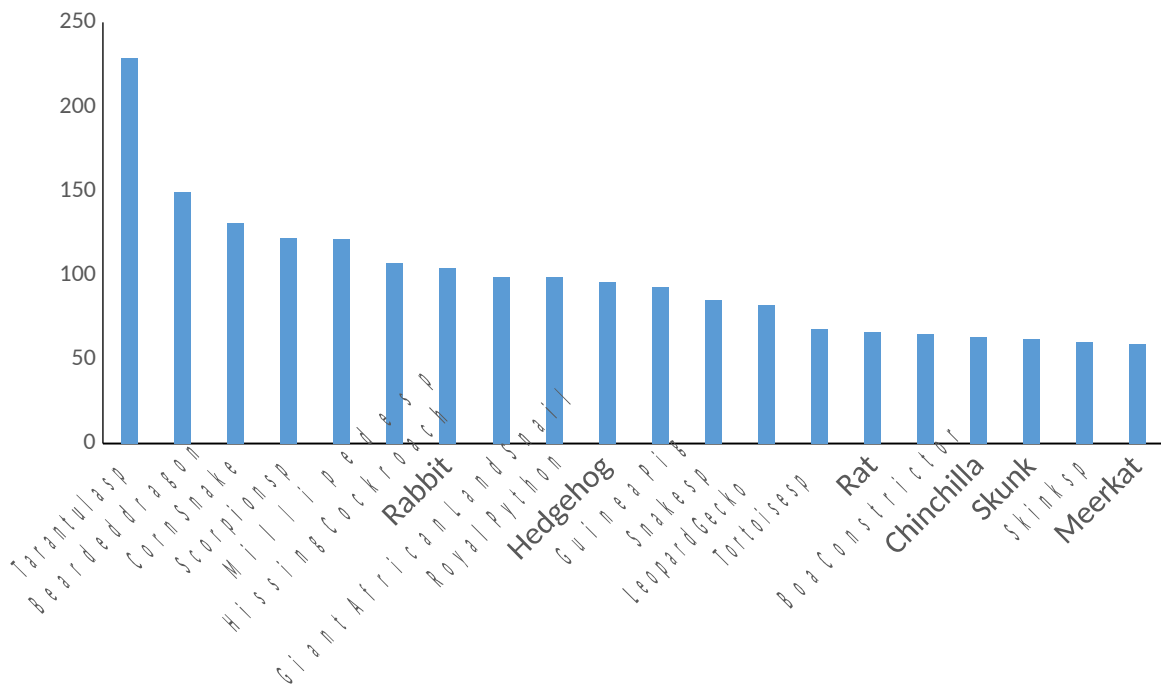
While these numbers may seem large, our research may only scratch the surface of the true number of animals used. A performing animals regulation document discovered online from “Celebrity Reptiles” shows that this business hold multiple numbers of each species they advertise as available for events, including 25 corn snakes, 6 sugar gliders and 50 hissing cockroaches<sup>[1]</sup>.

### Species held in Mobile Zoos in the UK



Many mobile zoos attempt to justify their businesses through claims that they aim to educate and raise awareness of nature conservation. However, of over 180 species on display in mobile zoos, **only 10 of these are classified as threatened with extinction by the IUCN**<sup>[2]</sup>. The majority of species used in this industry are therefore not considered endangered or vulnerable to extinction. Additionally, a large proportion of the animals used are in fact domestic animals, who are clearly included for entertainment and not educational value.

### Minimum number of species held in Mobile Zoos in UK



### Legislation

While there currently is no specific legislation that covers the mobile zoo industry, some companies boast holding Performing Animals “Licences” and Dangerous Wild Animal Licences.

The Performing Animal “licence” they refer to is not in fact a licence at all, it is merely a registration with the local council under the Performing Animals (Regulation) Act 1925. No inspection is required upon registration and there are no mandatory regular inspections, although there are powers of entry by officials. The Government itself has stated many times that this piece of legislation does little to protect animal welfare<sup>[3]</sup> and has been described as “ineffective”, leading in part to the creation of a formal licence for wild animals used in circuses and promise of a legal ban on the use of wild animals in circuses<sup>[4]</sup>.

It is unclear to CAPS why some mobile zoos register under this Act while others do not. The RSPCA state that “By ‘performing animal’ we mean any animal that is taken away from its usual home environment or social group or that is trained/set up to behave in a particular way for a production. This can be anything from simply sitting in one place to performing a complex sequence of behaviours.”<sup>[5]</sup> By this definition, animals used by mobile zoos would be classed as performing animals and all mobile zoos would therefore be required to register under the Performing Animals Act.

Seven of the mobile zoos identified in the research advertise having animals which are listed in the Dangerous Wild Animals Act, including camels and crocodile species. The DWA act states that the animal shall not be moved from the premises specified in the licence or shall only be moved from them in such circumstances as are specified in the licence<sup>[6]</sup>. This therefore raises questions over how mobile zoos using animals classified as Dangerous Wild Animals are legally able to transport these individuals around the country to put on display for children at schools and parties.

## Welfare Issues

The regular transportation and handling of wild animals in mobile zoos is clearly a cause for concern in terms of animal welfare. Animals who would naturally roam a large area and engage in a variety of natural behaviours including socialising with others of their species, hunting and foraging, and defending territories are largely denied the opportunity to have these experiences when used in a mobile zoo.

Looking at some of the more popular “exotic” species held by mobile zoos, there are clear specific issues caused by keeping these animals in captivity, transporting them around the country and exposing them to regular handling (often involving children and people with no experience of handling wild animals).

Meerkats, for example, are a popular choice of exotic mammal for use in mobile zoos. In the wild, meerkats live in large colonies of 20-50 individuals with complex social structures, and exhibit a wide range of natural behaviours including digging, foraging and hunting, performing sentry duty, and communicating vocally with each other<sup>[7]</sup>. Usually kept with just one or two other meerkats, those in mobile zoos are denied the enrichment of social activities that they would experience in the wild in a natural meerkat mob. The typical life of a meerkat in a mobile zoo would involve being confined to a travel crate and then put on display in a family’s front room at a children’s party. Meerkats undoubtedly suffer a lack of freedom to dig, hunt, patrol their territory and form social bonds with numerous other meerkats.

As ectotherms, reptiles use the heat in the environment to regulate their body temperatures. This means that they are particularly vulnerable to changing environments, such as being transported and handled outside of a heated enclosure. The RSPCA recommends that bearded dragons, for example, should not be kept out of their vivarium for handling for longer than 10-15 minutes<sup>[8]</sup>. The change in temperature and surroundings, being handled by and exposed

to crowds of excited people therefore poses a very stressful situation for these sensitive animals who are used in their thousands by the mobile zoo industry.

Some mobile zoos are also potentially breaching animal welfare legislation. One mobile zoo identified boasts a pair of “descended” skunks available for parties. Since the introduction of the Animal Welfare Act in 2006 the surgical removal of a skunk’s scent glands, known as ‘de-scenting’, has been illegal in the UK, raising additional concerns about this particular company and where they obtain their animals.

There are also concerns regarding the animals used in those businesses which have shut down. Almost 22% of the businesses identified in 2013 have shut down in just over 2 years. This closure rate seems very high but perhaps reflects concerns that many people are setting up these businesses with little business or animal welfare experience, who are then failing to succeed in making it work. From the ‘founding’ stories put out by mobile zoos many owners start as a hobbyist, collecting exotic animals as pets, who then decide a mobile zoo business would be a good idea. That many of these might be realising this is a more serious situation and not one they can manage, does not surprise us but does give us concerns for the animals they were using. We would call for strict retirement plans for animals currently used in this industry.

## The future

This updated research clearly shows that the mobile zoo industry is growing, with even more animals being used with very little protection. These figures represent the bare minimum number of animals due to the lack of information available on both the species held and the quantity of species held. The actual number of animals is likely to be far higher.

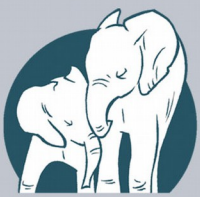
These results highlight the need for these businesses to be scrutinised by officials, to offer some protection to the animals they exploit. A stock-list should be a basic legal requirement for these businesses to provide to the authorities to at least ensure it is clear how many animals are used in the industry. Overall CAPS wants to see a change in the law to, at the very least, introduce licensing for these businesses which will include welfare inspections for the animals and mandatory retirement plans.

However we strongly feel that the very nature of these businesses create severe welfare issues for animals and that exotic animals in particular should never be used in this way. We would therefore welcome a ban on the use of animals in mobile zoos as this is, in our view, another version of traveling entertainment similar to animal circuses.

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