



National Code of Good Practice

Pets & Invasive Alien Species

Common concerns over the significant detrimental impacts of invasive alien species may bring together interest groups to draw attention on those man-mediated actions or interventions that may facilitate the introduction and spread of invasive alien species. In parallel with the drawing up of the National Strategy on Invasive Alien Species, a series of sector-specific codes are being drawn up to raise awareness and promote good practice to curb the risks associated with introducing and using alien species that exhibit an invasive potential. The mandate for such codes is found in Malta's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2012-2020). The present document puts forward a series of recommendations to serve as a code in the keeping and trading of pets/companion animals. The recommendations, which adopt the principle of self-regulation, aim to provide practical and concise guidance in establishing common standards of good practice and responsible attitudes and behaviours when using alien species in the pet industry. The recommendations do not replace established national legislation that regulates activities that use alien species. The recommendations are intended to be complementary to the legally-binding obligations defined in national legislation to entice compliance, and also to support the implementation of the National Strategy on Invasive Alien Species. Wide dissemination of this code to the target stakeholders is of essence in order to create partnerships and encourage voluntary adoption in order to overcome any malpractices that may occur as a result of lack of knowledge or understanding of the risks that alien and invasive species may pose.

2018

National Code of Good Practice – Pets & Invasive Alien Species

Further Reading:

European Code of Conduct on Pets and Invasive Alien Species – Davenport & Collins, Council of Europe, 2016.¹

CBD COP12 Decision XII/16 - Invasive alien species: management of risks associated with introduction of alien species as pets, aquarium and terrarium species, and as live bait and live food, and related issues – Decision adopted by the Twelfth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity²

Pets, Aquarium, and Terrarium Species: Best Practices for Addressing Risks to Biodiversity - Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2010)³

Many households in the Maltese Islands keep and own some type of exotic animal(s) as a “companion animal” or “pet”, that is ‘*an animal kept for personal amusement and companionship*’. The **variety of species kept as pets** is very vast and includes small mammals (e.g. hamsters, rabbits, guinea pigs, domestic rats) and birds (e.g. canaries, finches, budgerigars, parrots) in cages and aviaries, aquatic fish (e.g. guppies, goldfish, koi) kept in aquaria (and garden ponds), reptiles kept in vivaria, and amphibians and invertebrates kept in terrariums. The **source of the pet** may not necessarily be as a result of purchase from a pet shop; it might have been acquired through a friend or family member, a private breeder, from the internet, from fairs, or as a stray. Non-commercial/private owners of pets may range from a person with a single pet (e.g. a hamster, parrot, etc.) to an enthusiast specialising in one or more taxonomic groups of large exotic animals kept in outdoor enclosures (including cages, hatches and aviaries). Pets are intended to be owned and kept more or less confined for the purpose of personal enjoyment and companionship, viewing, handling and possibly breeding.

The keeping of exotic animals as pets or companion animals presents risks in relation to the **potential of escape** due to negligence, such as poor maintenance of cages/enclosures, or carelessness, and is more likely to happen with mobile species (mammals and birds). There is also the **risk of intentional release** of unwanted pets into the natural environment. An escaped or discarded individual specimen is unlikely to survive as it may end up killed, predated or die due to lack of food, poor/fading health or poor natural survival skills as a result of domestication, selective breeding, taming and dependence on man for sustenance. Some species are however more resilient and adaptable if met with favourable conditions in terms of food and habitat. Survival chances also depend on the species’ tolerance to the receiving environmental conditions and climate, where it was released. In this case, and depending on the number of release or escape incidents, the numbers of specimens involved and whether these include individuals capable of reproducing (including single parent reproduction), breeding and rapid dispersal, may lead to successful establishment in the environment. Released specimens may also hybridise with native species, if related taxonomically.

There are various **reports of pets having become invasive** in other European countries. Examples are release/discards or escapes of the red-eared slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*), the American bullfrog (*Rana catesbeiana*) from garden ponds, ring-necked parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*) and the Siberian chipmunk (*Eutamias sibiricus*). There are only few examples in Malta’s case (e.g. the release of goldfish at *il-Qattara*). However with the ever increasing trade in animals, there is still a concern. It is hence imperative that responsible behaviour is adopted by both commercial and non-commercial owners of exotic species intended to be kept as companion animals or pets to minimise any such accidental escapes or intentional discarding of unwanted pets into the natural environment. The end goal is to

¹ Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/168063075d>

² Available at: <http://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-12/cop-12-dec-16-en.pdf>

³ Available at: <https://www.cbd.int/doc/publications/cbd-ts-48-en.pdf>

avoid any opportunities for these to become invasive in the Maltese Islands (or opportunities to hybridise with native species, where this applies). Concern over the escape or release of pets is not only of concern from **environmental and animal welfare perspectives** but is also worrying from a **social perspective**, if the released specimen may cause harm/injury, is a nuisance or is dangerous.

Pets are imported and bred either from EU countries or from outside the EU. **Importation into the EU** is subjected to control under CITES, veterinary, animal welfare and fish health rules, including certification and physical examination at the point of import. **Commission Decision 97/794/EC** provide specific provisions with respect to these checks. Veterinary checks in respect to animals from third countries entering the European Community via border inspection posts situated on the territory of Malta are carried out by the Veterinary Services Authority in accordance with **“Principles Governing the Organisation of Veterinary Checks on Animals Entering the Community from Third Countries via Border Inspection Posts of the Territory of Malta Regulations, 2003” (S.L. 437.40)**. A system is also in place for controlling importation of animals from non-EU countries. An import license, issued by the Trade Services Directorate in accordance with Regulation 3 of the **“Importation Control regulations, 2004” (S.L. 117.14)** is required before animals listed in Schedule II of the said regulations, can be imported from non-EU countries.

Regulation (EU) 2017/625⁴ defines the arrangements for the external border checks and for the internal movement of live animals from third countries. All consignments of live animals from a third country are subject to the veterinary checks carried out at border inspection posts by the competent authority under the responsibility of the official veterinarian as required by this Directive before they can be introduced into the European Union (EU). These checks include:

- documentary check: verification of the certificates or veterinary documents accompanying each consignment of animals;
- identity check: verification by visual inspection only for consistency between the documents or certificates and the animals and for the presence and conformity of the marks, which must appear on the animals; and
- physical check: a check of the animal itself, possibly including sampling and laboratory testing and, where appropriate, additional checks during quarantine.

Intra-European Community movements are, as and when required, subject to alerts via the **Trade Control and Expert System (TRACES)** run by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection and additional health certificates, as specified for each relevant animal group.⁵ Certain animal products, live animals or germplasm bought from within the EU or traded with another EU country require a health certificate signed by a government-approved official veterinarian. The health certificates, known as **“Intra Trade Animal Health Certificates” (ITAHCs)**, are issued through TRACES. Importers may also need a **“Common Veterinary Entry Document” (CVED)**, which gives a veterinary assessment of live animals or products.

Council Regulation (EU) No. 1143/2014 on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species sets out rules to prevent, minimise and mitigate the adverse impacts of the introduction and spread, both intentional and unintentional, of invasive alien species (IAS) on biodiversity within the Union (**Article 1**).⁶ One of the rules applies a number of restrictions to **invasive alien species of Union concern** (Article 7). Such IAS of Union concern shall be specified in a list that shall be adopted by the Commission via implementing acts (Article 4) and on the basis of risk assessments (Article 5). Articles 31 and 32 of this Regulation lay down respectively **transitional**

⁴ Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32017R0625>

⁵ Available at: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/sanco/traces/>

⁶ Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014R1143&from=EN>

provisions for owners of companion animals not kept for commercial purposes that belong to the species included on the list of IAS of Union concern and for commercial stocks.

Under Article 31, owners of companion animals not kept for commercial purposes that belong to the invasive alien species included on the Union list are only permitted to keep such animals until the end of the animals' natural life, provided that: (a) the animals were kept before their inclusion on the Union list; and (b) the animals are kept in contained holding and all appropriate measures are put in place to ensure that reproduction or escape are not possible. In the case of keepers of a commercial stock of specimens of invasive alien species, acquired before their inclusion on the Union list (Article 32), such keepers are allowed: i) up to two years after inclusion of the species on that list to keep and transport live specimens or reproducible parts of those species for selling or transferring them to the establishments referred to in Article 8 of Regulation 1143/2014 or ii) up to one year after inclusion of the species on that list to sale or transfer such specimens to non-commercial users.

In 2017, the Control of Invasive Alien Species of Union Concern Regulations (S.L. 549.119) came into force, which designated the competent authorities in charge with the implementation of EU Regulation 1143/2014 as well as, laid down appropriate penalties for infringements against the latter Regulation.

The Owning and Keeping of Dangerous Animals Regulations (S.L.439.19), published in 2016, include provisions such as the registration of keepers of such animals, appropriateness of enclosures and prohibitions on their release into the environment. Additionally, in 2014 the Protection of Animals Offered in Pet Shops (Minimum Standards) Regulations (S.L. 439.16) came in force which also includes provisions relating to the animal enclosures so as to prevent escape and ensure record keeping.

The following recommendations are adapted from the **"European Code of Conduct on Pets and Invasive Alien Species"**. The recommendations apply to all animals kept as pets excluding dogs, cats, horses, birds of prey used for falconry, and the use of animals for reasons other than companionship. The recommendations are intended to be followed by all pet owners, keepers, breeders, importers, retailers and wholesalers.

✘ NEVER purchase a pet unless you are well informed and are sure that you can keep it and provide it with sufficient care for the duration of its life span; Avoid "impulse" or "spur of the moment" purchases

✘ NEVER deliberately release or abandon your pet(s) outside of your premises and into the environment as this is not only cruel but may also result in your pet either suffering, being killed or dying

✘ NEVER release water from aquaria or garden ponds into natural water bodies

✔ Properly DISPOSE of waste from terrariums in closed bags taking care to ensure that there is no discard of eggs or larva

✔ BE AWARE of what are Invasive Alien Species (IAS) and the problems they may cause in all purchasing decisions

✔ BE AWARE of the serious consequences that may result from the release or escape of your pet and that it is socially unacceptable

✓ BE AWARE of the EU and national regulations that apply to the keeping, breeding, exchanging, trading and release into the environment of species kept as pets and the penalties that apply

✓ BE AWARE of whether the species you are purchasing, keeping, breeding, exchanging or trading as a pet is on the List of IAS of Union concern or on the national list of species deemed to be invasive alien species, since legal restrictions apply to these and if not complied with, would result in an offence that is punishable by law

✓ ALL breeders and retailers of pets are to INFORM at the point of sale and make their customers aware what they are receiving/purchasing as well as their responsibilities to keep their pet in contained conditions (such as through the provision of clear and accurate information or in the form of care sheets (see example in the [Table](#)))

✓ ALL breeders and retailers of pets are encouraged to OFFER where possible services supporting the adoption or re-homing (either by resale or giving away) of pets purchased from them in the short term (and with provenance known to them) and that are no longer wanted; this excludes those species listed as being of EU or Malta concern

✓ REPORT any sightings of exotic pets out of captivity or in the wild as well as escape events of a pet immediately to the Competent Authority

✓ CONSULT the Competent Authority should you require advice before purchasing an exotic species over the internet and to know what regulations apply

✓ CONTACT the relevant stakeholder should you have problems of keeping an exotic pet and wish to relinquish ownership

✓ ENSURE that all cages and conditions of contained holding are properly secured, maintained and regularly inspected to avoid escape due to negligence or carelessness (and also breaking-in); outdoor enclosures must withstand all reasonable expected weather conditions

✓ CONSIDER registering your exotic pet

These recommendations, if followed by all relevant stakeholders, combined with adherence to EU and national regulations, would help avoid bad practices from occurring and thereby prevent more and new IAS being released into the country. Continued dialogue and cooperation between Government, the pet industry, trade associations and NGOs is of essence to proactively minimise and provide appropriate solutions to the IAS problem in the pet trade via awareness raising, provision of advice and the promotion of these recommendations as an agreed national code of good practice that is widely supported.

Table: Example of Information to convey in Care Sheets at Point of Sale

To avoid a pet becoming unwanted due to lost interest, it must be ensured that individuals purchasing a pet are well informed at the point of sale about the animal. Information as care sheets would comprise the following information of the species that is sold:

- Accurate identification;
- Behavioural characteristics;
- Care information (including, when appropriate, information how to keep the animals secure);
- Any hazards they may present e.g. ability to sting or bite;

- Longevity;
- Adult size;
- Fecundity; and
- Indication of the cost of care.