

The pet primate trade in the U.S.

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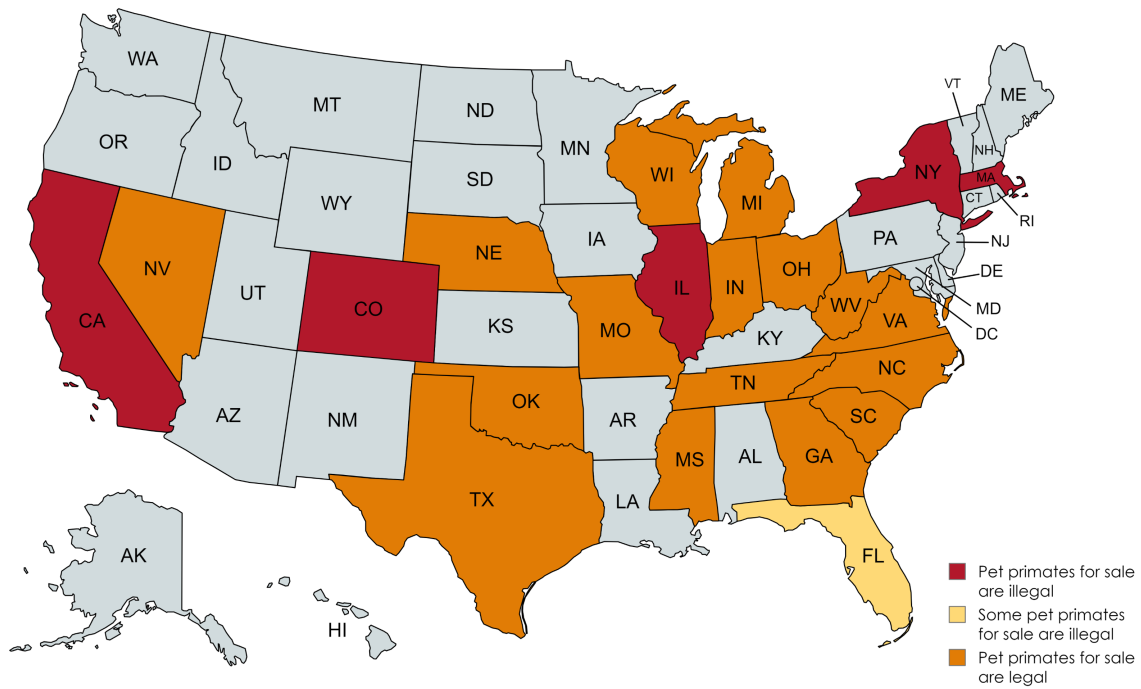


Photo courtesy of Jungle Friends Primate Sanctuary

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Dr Melissa Seaboch, Professor and Department Chair at Salt Lake Community College, discusses the challenges regarding the pet primate trade in the U.S., including its impact on animal welfare and owners and the complexity of regulations

Little is known about the pet primate trade, especially in non-habitat countries, including the United States. It is commonly estimated that there are 15,000 pet primates in the U.S. However, the basis of this estimate is unknown.^(1, 2) A recent study on the global online trade in pet primates reported that the U.S. ranked third out of 171 countries in the ease of purchasing a pet primate online,⁽³⁾ behind Indonesia and Vietnam. The same study reviewed previously published studies on the pet primate trade and the U.S., with over 500 primates found for sale in a single year,⁽⁴⁾ ranked seventh out of 20 countries in the number of primates for sale (adjusted for study duration). Though there is widespread agreement among veterinarians and primatologists that primates do not make good pets,⁽⁴⁾ the trade in pet primates in the U.S. appears robust.



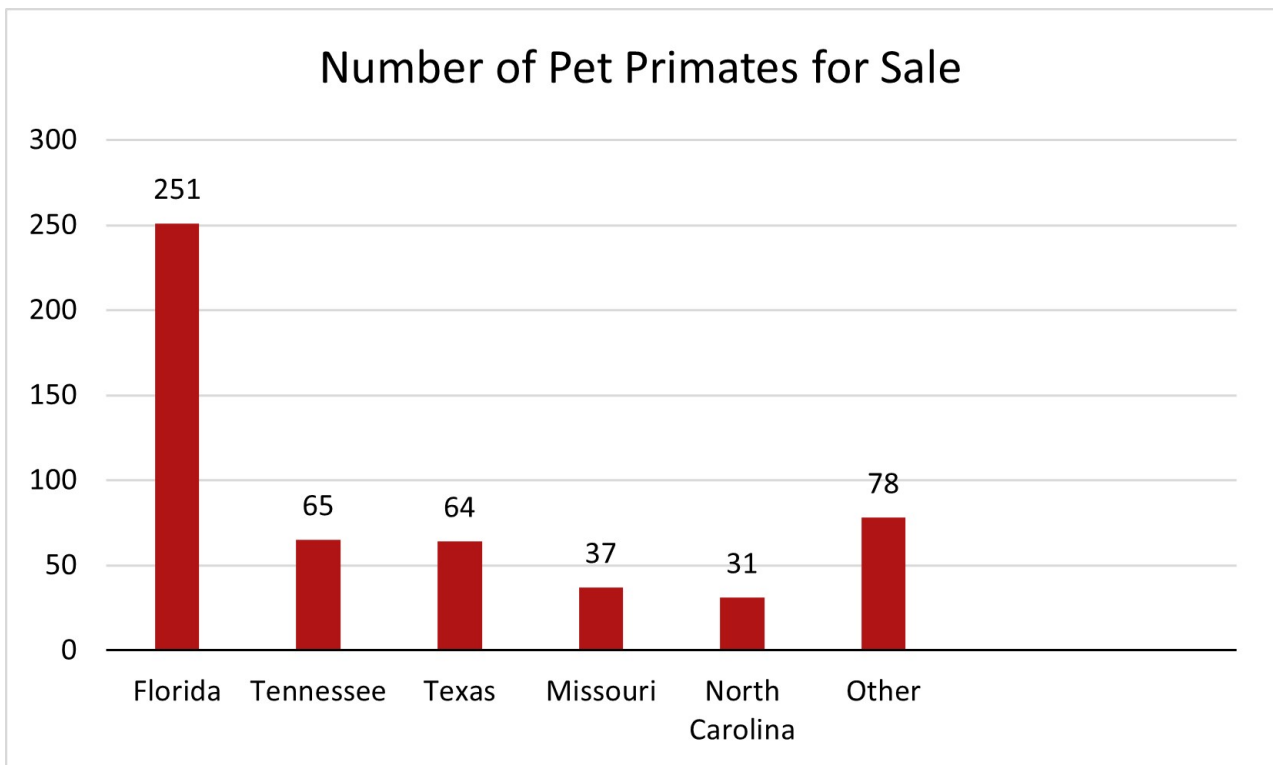
Regulations on the ownership of pet primates

While many non-primate habitat countries, such as Australia and many EU countries, have federal bans on pet primates, ⁽⁵⁾ the U.S. does not. The lack of federal regulation governing the private ownership of primates has led to a patchwork of state and local laws ranging from no limitations on pet primate ownership to a ban of specific types of primates to requirements on the regulation or permitting of pet primates to a complete ban on pet primate ownership. In some states, laws vary from county to county, while in other states, local (i.e., city) governments can enact laws regulating or banning pet primates that may be legal at the state level. This complexity of regulations speaks to the need for federal guidelines.

Pet primates in the U.S.

Over one year, we examined advertisements for pet primates for sale through six exotic pet websites and found advertisements for pet primates for sale in 22 states. ⁽⁴⁾ We expected that most primates for sale would be in states without regulations on owning a pet primate; Florida, Tennessee, and Texas had the most pet primates for sale. Our results were somewhat surprising because Florida requires a permit to own a pet primate and has age and experience requirements (e.g., one year (at least 1000 hours) of substantial experience) to own many species of primates. Additionally, two species of primates for sale in Florida are banned (baboon and mandrill). Of the other top-selling states, Tennessee, Texas, and Missouri allow the ownership of pet primates with no permit required.

In addition to the two illegal pet primates for sale in Florida, we found 11 primates for sale in states that ban all pet primates. A search of news stories finds several instances of illegal pet primates. ⁽⁷⁾ For example, a spider monkey bit a car salesman in Ohio, a pet marmoset bit a young girl in Kentucky, and a lemur bit a toddler in Colorado. In 2023 alone, four pet primates made the news for escaping their owners and injuring members of the public; two were illegally owned, and two were subsequently euthanized. Stories of pet primates attacking their owners and their owner's family and friends are common, and these owners often excuse their pet primate's behavior, so it is likely that many more attacks occur that are not reported. ⁽⁸⁾



Federal ban on pet primate ownership is needed

Primates do not make good pets, and the ownership of primates can be harmful both to the primate because it is nearly impossible for pet primate owners to meet their nutritional, social, and behavioral needs and for their owners, as pet primates can transmit diseases. They can be aggressive, especially after reaching sexual maturity. ^(1, 9) Additionally, though most of the pet primates sold in the U.S. are captive-bred, the private ownership of pet primates still has negative consequences for the conservation of wild primates. ⁽⁴⁾ These dangers to the pet primates and their owners, along with the mélange of regulations on pet primate ownership in the U.S., strongly speak to the need for federal legislation banning the private ownership of all primates. The Captive Primate Safety Act, H.R.3135/S.1588, which would ban the interstate trade and private ownership of primates, has been introduced in Congress multiple times, most recently in May 2021. ⁽¹⁰⁾ The similar Captive Wildlife Safety Act bans the sale and transport of large cats, such as lions and tigers, and was enacted due to public safety concerns and the welfare of the big cats. ⁽¹¹⁾ While primates may not pose the same threat to public safety as lions, concern

for their welfare is great because they are highly intelligent and sentient animals and our closest living relatives and deserve the protection the Captive Primate Safety Act would afford.

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12. Map created with <https://www.mapchart.net/>

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