

A Closer Look Behind the Scenes in the Grisly Pet Trade

U.S. Global Exotics Investigation



A metal trough full of live and dead prairie dogs at USGE.

For seven months in 2009, a PETA investigator went undercover at U.S. Global Exotics (USGE), a massive international exotic-animal wholesale facility in Arlington, Texas. At the time, USGE was one of the nation's largest sellers of exotic animals to distributors and pet stores around the world. In the U.S., USGE shipped mammals, reptiles, amphibians, arachnids, and other animals to pet stores, breeders, and other wholesale distributors, including suppliers to **PETCO** and **PetSmart**. One such supplier was Rainbow World Exotics, at which similarly horrific conditions were found by another undercover PETA investigator. PETA's investigation of USGE and courtroom testimony also revealed that the company directly supplied animals to national chain **Petland**.

USGE confined tens of thousands of animals to its facility and employed a staff of three or four people to care for them. PETA's investigation revealed that hamsters, gerbils, hedgehogs, chinchillas, ferrets, snakes, lizards, turtles, tortoises, frogs, wallabies, sloths, anteaters, kinkajous, and other exotic animals suffered terribly as a result of continuous, cruel confinement to severely crowded and filthy enclosures. Animals at USGE were denied not only a natural habitat but also the most basic necessities, including food, water, adequate air and space, humidity, heat, veterinary care, and even a painless end to their misery.

Primates and other sophisticated mammals at USGE were locked inside barren bins and cages as well as dark, dungeon-like metal troughs, sometimes for months. Animals who were subjected to this type of cruel confinement were driven to desperate behaviors such as incessant pacing, "back flips," and other repetitive movements; frantic clawing at cage openings in an attempt to escape; fighting for space and food; and refusing to eat. Hundreds of injured and dying squirrels, lizards, and snakes were frozen to death in USGE's chest freezer, in which some animals remained alive for hours before finally dying.



A wild-caught baby wallaby, who died in shipment from NZ to USGE.

USGE - which, thanks to PETA's investigation, is now out of business - was owned and operated by Jasen and Vanessa Shaw. The couple acted as USGE's president and vice president. Over the course of PETA's investigation, the Shaws shrugged off, altogether ignored, or just plain forgot about dozens of requests for food and basic care for animals - some of whom were gravely ill and dying. When an outbreak of vesicular disease started killing snakes daily, USGE Vice President Vanessa Shaw said that a veterinarian's recommended treatment for the animals was "f***ing ludicrous" because of the time and medicine that the treatment would have required, which was minimal. The Shaws routinely ordered that live animals - including a squirrel whose neck had been so badly wounded that muscle was exposed and a chinchilla who was bleeding from a prolapsed rectum - be frozen to death.



An injured hamster at USGE.

USGE bought and sold wild-caught and captive-bred animals across America and around the world. Animals who survived grueling journeys into the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport were subjected to deplorable conditions and systemic neglect at USGE, sometimes being kept for days or weeks in pillowcases, shipping boxes, or even 2-liter soda bottles with no food, water, or other basic necessities. Those who survived the stress, illness, and injuries that are business as usual in the pet trade were sold to stores, breeders, and dealers internationally. (See the accompanying chart that shows the magnitude of USGE's business worldwide.)

Evidence gathered during PETA's investigation was shared with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, whose agents executed a search and seizure warrant at USGE on December 9, 2009. The agents seized records and computers

that they suspected would reveal violations of the Lacey Act—a federal law designed to combat trafficking in illegal wildlife, among other things. Upon entering the facility, the federal agents, who have no jurisdiction over local anti-cruelty laws, called Arlington officials with concerns about animal welfare issues.

The multimillion-dollar business's facility reeked of death and decaying flesh. Tens of thousands of mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and arachnids - many of them sick, injured, dying, or dead - were confined in filthy, deplorable conditions. Arlington officials met with PETA that same day, and less than a week later, **more than 26,000 animals** were seized from USGE.

On the day of the seizure, hundreds of animals were found dead - one freezer contained the remains of three sloths, a tree porcupine, dozens of sugar gliders, and a labba, among other animals. Those who survived the horrific conditions at USGE were transported to a rescue facility where they finally received adequate food, water, heat, and humidity and a chance to overcome the days, weeks, or months of neglect they had suffered at the hands of the pet trade. PETA was eventually able to secure permanent homes for many of the animals, a good number of whom were placed with the progressive Detroit Zoo.

USGE's owners, Jasen and Vanessa Shaw, did not attend the hearing that would determine the fate of their "inventory" because they were vacationing in their homeland of New Zealand. The Shaws' attorneys tried every trick in the book to get the animals back. **They even got representatives of the Dallas World Aquarium and the Fort Worth Zoo to testify in defense of the Shaws' business practices**, which included not feeding snakes for *months*, confining up to 50 tree frogs in one 2-liter soda bottle, and keeping baby turtles stacked in boxes for weeks without any food, water, heat, or light in order to "force hibernate" them. **The zoo reps claimed that such abuse was an industry standard in the pet trade.**

After hearing seven days of testimony - much of it from PETA's undercover investigator - a judge ruled that all the animals had been treated cruelly and would not be returned. The Shaws fought the ruling and appealed, but justice prevailed when a second judge affirmed the initial ruling.

USGE was a major player in the international exotic-pet trade as a multimillion-dollar business that exported and imported millions of animals for eventual resale at stores and chains all over the world, including PETCO and PetSmart stores. But since the December 2009 raid, USGE has effectively been shut down. Not a single animal has been bought or sold by USGE, and the company's facility is empty and up for sale. A federal arrest warrant has been issued for Jasen Shaw, who is under investigation for smuggling, conspiracy, and aiding and abetting; he is in New Zealand and is wanted by Interpol.

In March 2012, Dr. Gene F. Giggleman, who was USGE's attending veterinarian, was formally reprimanded based on allegations of unprofessional and/or dishonorable conduct and fined \$2,500 as a result of evidence gathered during PETA's investigation.

Rainbow World Exotics Investigation

Video footage obtained in a 2007 PETA undercover investigation revealed horrific nightmare conditions for small animals and birds bred and brokered by a major supplier to PetSmart and PETCO.

In addition to the ever-present misery caused by extremely crowded cages, filthy conditions, a lack of basic enrichment, an often inadequate food and water supply, and excessive noise, PETA's investigation of a massive breeding mill and one of PetSmart's main animal suppliers, Rainbow World Exotics in Hamilton, Texas, also revealed that live animals were routinely thrown into the trash, were deprived of desperately needed veterinary care, were suffering and dying alone in their cages, and were cannibalizing each other; that rabbits underwent crude neuter surgeries at the hands of a layperson in a filthy, dark room; and more.



A young Goffin's Cockatoo, who later died from an untreated bacterial infection.

Unsuspecting PetSmart customers have reported buying unsocialized, sick, and injured animals, including guinea pigs with eye and upper respiratory infections, hamsters with deadly diseases, sick and dying betta fish, and grossly

suffering birds. As PETA's investigator documented at this breeding mill, overcrowding, lack of veterinary care, and lack of socialization are the norm, not the exception, for the tens of thousands of animals at Rainbow. After receiving "shipments," PetSmart managers wrote countless health reports to the corporate offices, stating: "Died after 24-hours," "bites/fight wounds," "diarrhea," "loss of appetite," "neurological problems," "hair loss," "skin infection," "eye-injury," "respiratory infection," "skin fungus," "parasites," among other illnesses and injuries.

Sun Pet Ltd. Investigation

In 2010, a PETA undercover investigator worked for more than three months at Sun Pet Ltd., an animal dealer in Atlanta that sells hamsters, mice, gerbils, birds, fish, and other small animals directly to PetSmart, PETCO, Pet Supplies Plus, Petland, and Walmart. He documented that animals were cruelly killed, abusively handled, and kept in severely crowded, filthy conditions.

PETA's investigator witnessed numerous abuses. A worker put hamsters in a plastic bag and bashed them against a table in an attempt to kill them. He also reported that many sick and injured animals died after PETCO and PetSmart stores returned them like damaged goods to Sun Pet without enclosing any food or water for the long journey, instead of providing them with veterinary care or ending their suffering.

Sun Pet sells hundreds of thousands of animals annually, just like U.S. Global Exotics (USGE), the exotic-animal dealer that PETA investigated in 2009. (*Detailed on pages 1 and 2.*) That investigation resulted in the seizure of more than 26,000 animals, the largest animal seizure in history. (Perhaps not surprisingly, Sun Pet has ties to USGE. Before that hellhole was raided and shut down, Sun Pet purchased hamsters from USGE and then sold them to PETCO stores, among others)

Global Captive Breeders Investigation

Investigation in 2013, into the California breeder and seller of reptiles and rats.



Rats who were killed by slamming their bodies against walls and tables – as the manager laughed.

[See details of the conditions that were found and charges brought](#)

Holmes Farm Investigation

PETA's December, 2015 investigation of small-animal dealer [Holmes Farm](#) revealed animals were considered so worthless that the facility didn't even keep a death log. Thousands of animals – including hamsters, rabbits, gerbils, chinchillas, ferrets, and other small animals – were confined to plastic bins stacked in shelving units like filing cabinet drawers at this massive animal mill in Pennsylvania.

The buildings reeked of urine and feces, and one building's floor was *spattered with blood* where helpless prey animals had apparently been attacked by cats, who were allowed to roam freely throughout the facility, *regularly jumping in and out of the bins*.

In addition to the wretched conditions they endured while stored in these warehouse, animals were killed by piling them into freezers (many inside plastic bags) or stuffing them into coolers where they were crudely gassed with carbon dioxide. *Their screams could be heard across the room*. To compound the shame of the situation, Petco representatives visited these facilities themselves – even after being alerted to the manifold offenses – and still ordered animals from Holmes Farm.

Reptiles by Mack Investigation

The **sixth** PETA exposé into the pet trade was the 2016 investigation into the Ohio reptile dealer [Reptiles by Mack](#). Unbelievably, frogs, turtles, lizards, and other reptiles were shipped thousands of miles in soda bottles, milk jugs, and bags. Dehydrated and injured in transit, many were dead on arrival. Others had severed and maimed limbs.

Those animals who were deemed too sick or injured to sell were allowed to languish in tubs until someone got around to gassing and freezing them.

When you purchase ANY animal from a pet store that sells animals, you line the pockets of large-scale breeders, wholesalers, and distributors of sentient beings. By hosting dog and cat adoption events, and donating a few dollars to spay/neuter programs, former puppy and kitten sellers PetSmart and PETCO have convinced the public they are honorable businesses. Once the campaign to get these two pet supply giants to end the sale of puppies and kittens successfully concluded, everyone relaxed and began praising them for their charitable practices.

The reality is an enormous number of animals *continue to suffer at the hands of PetSmart and PETCO* (and any other animal seller), because they don't have the same fan base that dogs and cats have. Just as dog and cat lovers see no conflict in eating cows, pigs, and chickens, most do not give a second thought to the commercial exploitation of hamsters, lizards, birds, and others.

The trade in live animals supports this mass-breeding industry, which is just as cruel as – and even less regulated than – the puppy mill industry. It results in abysmal treatment of tiny, vulnerable beings, and it ultimately leads to their overpopulation, homelessness, neglect, and suffering.

Even if you don't purchase an animal from these stores, when you buy your supplies there you are tacitly condoning their cruel policies and practices. Putting money and support into the hands of people like this should be the last thing you want to do. **Please – break ties with stores that sell animals.** [You have abundant alternatives.](#)

Call on PetSmart, PETCO, Petland, and Pet Supplies Plus to end the sale of animals at their stores.

www.petsmart.com

www.petco.com

www.petland.com

www.petsuppliesplus.com