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## Re-Homing Exotic Species--A Pilot Program to Prevent Release of Exotic Aquatic Pet Species

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## Re-Homing Exotic Species--A Pilot Program to Prevent Release of Exotic Aquatic Pet Species

### Abstract

An educational poster program designed to inform pet owners of the dangers of releasing exotic species and provide a re-homing mechanism was evaluated as a means to reduce unwanted environmental releases. The poster provided a URL to the program partners' Web site, which listed participating re-homing pet shops in Maryland. Survey results revealed that 201 aquatic animals were re-homed. 1 Survey respondents rated the poster at 94% and 92% percent for educating consumers of the potential of re-homing and benefits to the pet industry, respectively. The program provides a proactive opportunity and alternative to environmental release of exotic species.

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## Introduction

The introduction in 2002 of northern snakehead, an Asian fish species thought to be highly predatory (Cortenay & Williams, 2004) in Maryland, resulted in extensive media attention and consideration by natural resource agencies to implement stricter import regulations for pets and other animals. Aquaria releases rank third as the pathway for introductions and account for approximately 15% of all fish releases (Benson, Jacono, Fuller, McKercher, & Richerson, 2004).

The pet industry in Maryland was concerned over economic implications of possible new regulations on pet importation and possession. Maryland Association of Pet Industries (MAPI) proactively developed a collaborative education program promoting responsible pet ownership and presenting the dangers of introducing exotic species to the environment. In addition, the program went beyond existing non-native species education programs such as Habitattitude <<http://www.habitattitude.net/>> and Nab the Aquatic Invader <<http://www.sgnis.org/kids/>>, and focused on establishing a re-homing mechanism for placing unwanted pets in new homes, in hopes of reducing unwanted environmental releases.

Though prompted by the first introduction of northern snakehead, *Channa argus*, in a Maryland pond, which was addressed by common fish eradication techniques (Lazur, Early, & Jacobs, 2006), the education program focused on all exotic species, including animals and plants. A poster served as the main educational tool and related the dangers of releasing exotic species and included the MAPI Web site address for more information on re-homing pets. A preliminary survey of participating pet shops was conducted to assess initial perception of pet shops of the concept of re-homing pets.

## Methodology

The poster and re-homing program was a collaborative effort between MAPI, Maryland Sea Grant, and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. MAPI surveyed its members (pet shops) as to interest in serving as a participating re-homing outlet. Fourteen shops agreed to participate in the pilot re-homing program, which involved receiving, caring for, and relocating or re-selling a pet.

Re-selling and placing the returned pets in new homes was the preferred option of shops for handling pets. Other possible options are placing animals in an educational display, such as a public aquaria, or euthanasia, if deemed necessary due to poor health or if the animal is regulated as a prohibitive species.

A no-questions-asked policy of the pet shops helped to encourage participation by pet owners. This was developed as concern over possession of snakehead fish increased after a new federal regulation was enacted after the first introduction in Maryland, which prohibits importation, but not possession. The poster (Figure 1) was 11 x 17 inches in size and was initially distributed to approximately 50 pet shops in Maryland and later distributed to recreational fishing licence centers in Maryland and Virginia.

**Figure 1.**  
Poster Used in the Re-Homing Program



After a 2-year period, a mail survey was distributed to the 14 participating pet shops to determine:

- Number and species of pets re-homed
- Assessment of program and its benefit to the industry
- Ability of poster to gain attention of consumers
- Ability to educate consumer of dangers of releasing pets
- Pet shop assessment of other consumer needs for exotic species educational material

## Results and Discussion

The poster was distributed to 50 pet shops and over 100 fish licence centers in Maryland and Virginia. The mail survey of the 14 participating pet shops resulted in six responses, of which five indicated they re-homed pets. A total of 653 animals, were re-homed in the 2-year period by the five shops. From the survey it was estimated that 31% or 201 of the re-homed animals were directly attributed to the poster. Specifics of the 201 animals species re-homed are as follows:

- 192 fish
- 5 crabs
- 2 birds
- 1 snake
- 1 African frog

Of the 192 fish, 38 species were represented, including 30 freshwater and eight marine species. Freshwater species included:

- Cichlids
- Eel
- Goldfish
- Oscars
- Pacu
- Snakehead
- tetras

Marine fish species included:

- clownfish
- grouper

- lionfish
- puffers
- triggerfish

The survey also showed that pet shops:

- Rated the poster at 92% for being able to gain attention of consumers and being of benefit to the pet industry,
- Rated the poster at 94% as a means of highlighting the re-homing program, and
- Rated the poster at 76% for ability to educate consumers of the dangers of releasing pets into the environment

In addition, three of the six shops recommended that additional educational material on the dangers of releasing non-native or exotic species be distributed to consumers. Specific recommendations included:

- Providing definitions of non-native and exotic species and
- Expanding emphasis on the potential cruelty of releasing animals into an unfamiliar environment

Though not specifically evaluated in the survey, participating shops do derive economic benefit from re-homing animals, and also gain important consumer support being perceived as aiding in the cause of environmental stewardship.

## Conclusions

The relatively large number of animals re-homed over a 2-year period as reported by the six shops demonstrates that re-homing is an attractive and environmentally responsible mechanism for pet owners to humanely handle unwanted pets. An additional benefit of the program was that other shops have expressed interest in re-homing pets.

Developing a pet re-homing program is simple and provides consumers with the assurance that their pet will be placed appropriately in a good home, which can help prevent environmental releases of exotic or invasive species. The commitment made by the 14 participating pet shops was coordinated by MAPI and would be relatively easy to duplicate by other pet associations. Including telephone contact information for local Humane Society offices may be an important addition to re-homing programs.

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