Pocket Pets Come with Special Needs

Local News

Posted by:

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Olympia, WA - Is it enough nowadays to have a dog or cat when you could have a sugar glider, chinchilla or ferret? More people are choosing exotic "pocket pets" like these to be their new best friends. If the critters become too expensive or too much to handle, however, their inexperienced owners often surrender them to animal shelters.

Debbie Leahy, a captive regulatory specialist for the Humane Society of the United States, says her organization is concerned about the "pocket pet" trend.

These are animals with very specialized needs. The average person doesn't have the resources to provide proper care for these animals. - Debbie Leahy
Many imported animals carry diseases and illnesses, perhaps not yet discovered, Leahy says. For example, last year she says the owner of a kinkajou was hospitalized multiple times for a fungus he got after the animal bit his finger. Leahy points out there is very little regulation of "pocket pets."

If "pocket pet" owners regret buying them, Leahy warns that they have few options, since many animal rescue groups are not equipped to handle exotics.

"People get these animals on an impulse. After they've had them for about two months, the animal will often start to become more aggressive, more unpredictable, more dangerous."

The Seattle Animal Shelter sees just about every type of pet, "pocket" and otherwise. The shelter's manager of volunteer programs and fund-raising, Kara Main-Hester, says sometimes animal control officers round up exotic pets after owners abandon them. In other cases, owners turn them in to the shelter.

The pet's behavior isn't always the problem, she explains. Sometimes it's the unexpected expense.

"The housing and the bedding and the special diet all add up really quickly, and it can get to be very expensive. In addition, many veterinarians won't accept these animals or be able to provide services for them, so you're going to specialized vet care, which can also be more expensive."

The problem often is that the animal has not been properly socialized to be around humans. The Seattle Animal Shelter has a group of foster parents who work with abandoned animals, so the next time they're given a chance at a new home the odds will be better that the adoption will work out.
- Chris Thomas