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Protecting animals that belong in the wild

By Michael Markarian
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Earlier this month in nearby Caliente, a man was gravely injured and his wife bitten after being attacked by two male chimpanzees who had escaped their cages at a so-called "sanctuary." Two female chimpanzees also escaped. The male chimps were shot and killed, the females were recaptured five hours later, and the mauled man remains in critical condition.

Unfortunately, such incidents are not uncommon as "pet" primates have become a reckless and dangerous fad in America. It's estimated that there are 15,000 nonhuman primates – chimps, macaque monkeys and others – in captivity in the United States. They are often purchased as infants, readily available for sale on a number of Internet sites.

Cute baby monkeys become aggressive as they grow older, and these animals can be highly dangerous. The average homeowner quickly learns that he or she cannot provide the appropriate housing, veterinary care or diet that primates require. At least a hundred people have been injured by captive primates in the last decade – 29 of them children.

Here in California, a pet spider monkey escaped and bit an officer in Rancho Bernando before being captured, and the owner of a vervet monkey in Santa Clara was bitten while feeding him. In Kansas City, pet chimpanzees have bitten a 7-year-old girl and thrown another child. In Oklahoma, pet monkeys have injured a 4-year-old girl at a motel, and bitten a child at a Home Depot. In West Virginia, a loose monkey bit three children before being captured. In Kentucky, a 6-year-old girl was bitten by a monkey at a county fair. In Texas, a macaque severely injured a 9-year-old boy. A child in Maine was bitten by a monkey during a demonstration at school. In Florida, a capuchin opened its enclosure, scratched a 13-year-old boy and bit a police officer; a spider monkey severely injured a neighbor's dog and bit the neighbor as well; and another spider monkey bit a 19-year-old woman and a 15-year-old girl during a two-day escape.

In every region of the country, pet primates are a national epidemic. These are highly intelligent and social animals who live long lives. They have complex social and psychological needs, but are typically kept chained or confined in small, sterile enclosures. In order to render the animals less dangerous, owners often mutilate them by removing their teeth.

The threats to public safety and animal welfare are perhaps eclipsed by the public health time bomb just waiting to explode. Primates can spread dangerous diseases such as yellow fever, monkey pox, Ebola and Marburg virus, tuberculosis, herpes-b and Simian Immunodeficiency Virus (SIV), the primate form of HIV. Nearly every macaque monkey in captivity carries the herpes-b virus.

Recognizing this serious risk, registered nurse and Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Texas, joined by her colleague Congressman Rob Simmons, R-Conn., has just introduced H.R. 1329, the Captive Primate Safety Act. The bill would ban the interstate transportation of apes, monkeys, lemurs, marmosets and other nonhuman primates for the pet trade.

A number of states and communities already prohibit private ownership of nonhuman primates as pets, but the patchwork of local laws and the interstate nature of the primate pet trade call out for a federal response.

The Captive Primate Safety Act is similar to a bill that passed Congress unanimously in 2003, prohibiting the interstate commerce in tigers, lions and other dangerous big cats for the pet trade. Like the big cats bill, the primate bill would crack down on the exotic pet industry but would have no impact on zoos, medical research, and other federally licensed facilities.

We need to end this dangerous monkey business. Primates belong in the wild, not in our backyards and basements. For our own health and safety – as well as the animals' – the U.S. Congress should act swiftly and pass the Captive Primate Safety Act before the next child is mauled by a chimp.

Markarian is executive vice president of The Humane Society of the United States, the nation's largest animal protection organization.