

Live Animal Imports

The issues surrounding live animal imports are varied, complex and highly controversial. The Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) involvement is tied to the regulations for restricted species under the Fish and Game Code. The Fish and Game Commission (FGC) has some authority to determine which non-native species may not be possessed outright, and which may be possessed with restrictions. One of the more controversial issues has been the importation and sale of live turtles and frogs for food. The majority of the market for these animals is the Asian community.

The roots of the controversy are centered on humane treatment of the animals and the risk they pose to human health and the state's wildlife if released illegally into the wild. Animal rights groups argue that the animals are being inhumanely transported, housed and slaughtered in the markets. Others have expressed concern that the animals are diseased exposing humans to disease. Some environmental groups have requested these importations be stopped because of the risk to California's native wildlife if they are illegally released. These groups have been requesting that the Commission ban the importation and sale of live turtles and frogs.

Proponents of importation argue that the sale of live turtles and frogs are an important part of their culture and livelihood. They claim that the conditions under which they import, sell and slaughter these animals are humane. The proprietors state that these animals pose no threat to the state's wildlife because they are purchased for consumption, not to be released into the wild. Some of this group's leaders, including legislators, have called the efforts behind the prohibition racist and discriminatory.

DFG's perspective is that humane treatment of live food is more appropriately dealt with by local animal control organizations and the Department of Food and Agriculture. The human health threat is the purview of the Department of Public Health, which has indicated they have no records of any human disease caused by the consumption of these animals. DFG's only responsibility is to protect the state's wildlife and the habitats upon which they depend. There is currently very little evidence that the food markets are a meaningful threat to the state's natural resources. However, there is a threat in the importation of live animals for use as pets.

DFG believes that the primary threat to the state's wildlife from the importation of live animals is not from those imported for food, but from those imported as pets. FGC has been exploring these issues and has requested a rule change to ban the importation and possession of unspecified turtles and frogs. Some of the challenges to this effort will be in specifying which turtles and frogs should be banned, what to do about existing pets, and the lack of resources to actually monitor and enforce a ban. In addition, FGC does not have the authority to ban the importation and possession of frogs used for jumping contests.