HIGH COST OF PETS IS BORNE BY ALL

The pleasure of keeping a pet is compelling. Otherwise, Americans would not spend approximately $40 billion a year on pet services and supplies, an amount that is twice the Connecticut state budget. This pleasure accrets primarily to the keepers.

The displeasure accrues to everyone, especially in urban and suburban settings. Consider the nuisance complaints associated with dog barking, unsightly feces and cat predation of songbirds, combined with threats to public safety caused by maulings.

These concerns are only the beginning. Seldom are the financial costs of invasive species and the ethical costs of capturing, commodifying and caging wildlife factored into what is another tragedy of the commons.

In May, the journal Science published a forum, "Reducing the Risks of the Wildlife Trade." It reports that the "majority (92 percent) of [wildlife] imports were designated for commercial purposes, largely the pet trade," and that the annual public cost of species invasion is $120 billion. Though not all invasions are pet-related, many are.

The spread of one of America's most hated and costly invasive species began with the import of aquarium plants - Eurasian milfoil, which is degrading the ecological health and recreational value of lakes in many states. This outrageously expensive headache for private lake associations, public agencies and nonprofit environmental organizations began with a private act.

Contagious disease is an even larger issue. "Nearly 80 percent of [wildlife] shipments contained animals from wild populations, the majority of which have no mandatory testing for pathogens before shipment," according to the Science report.

The transmission of microbial diseases from animals to humans also is a growing public health worry. This year's hot-button issue is swine flu, caused by the H1N1 virus. During the consternation to come, don't forget that pet potbellied pigs have been identified as a potential risk factor.

In 2003, the main concern was the monkeypox virus. African rodents imported for pets transmitted the disease to pet prairie dogs, which transmitted it to humans, which led to a media stampede and a flood of federal spending.

"Despite mandated labeling of imported animals to species," and despite the authority of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to impound or reject shipments from U.S. ports of entry, "the majority of shipment records did not contain the appropriate level of taxonomic information" needed to "fully assess the biological diversity of wildlife entering the United States." The private commercial demand for pet products is creating an open window for potential public costs.

A second public cost is the emotional bummer irresponsible pet ownership creates for non-owners. Unleashed large dogs create fear for those who have been previously attacked, even if the pet is well cared for and lovable. Chained and penned-up dogs create sadness in non-owners who understand that "animals love and suffer, cry and laugh; their hearts rise up in anticipation and fall in despair . . . they feel."

That quote is from "When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals," whose author, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, looks forward to the day when "animals are no longer colonized and appropriated by us." I understand the control and even the killing of animals for utilitarian purposes.
But what gives Americans the right to harvest billions of wild creatures for the emotional reward they provide to their keepers?

In a 1998 essay titled "The Blinded Eye," novelist John Fowles wrote: "Always we try to put the wild in a cage . . . I hate the pet mania, as I mistrust zoos and all other compromises between humans and nature in the wild." I must agree with him, or I would not be saddened whenever I walk by a tethered puppy, or be grieved by the depression of zoo animals held captive for exhibition.

Meanwhile, two lonely dogs bark in my neighborhood. They are not free. Nor is their cost to me.