



# BEST PRACTICES



## Wildlife in the Classroom and at Home: Do Not Release

Live animals in the classroom and at home are a way to stimulate students' interest in nature. Use of wildlife in the classroom or at home can teach about different species life history stages and habitat needs. Many of the wildlife species that come into the home or classroom are non-native species, meaning that they are not native to our region and may be considered exotic or invasive species.

As the school year ends, teachers and other education specialists, including parents, may wonder what to do with these animals that have become "pets". Unfortunately, once the lesson plan or school year is completed or the owners tire of taking care of these animals, they are often released into the wild.

### Why not release wildlife?

Releasing household or classroom pets or surplus laboratory specimens into the wild is prohibited in many states, and, in all cases, it is unethical. Once released into the wild, many of these unwanted animals negatively impact native species and their ecosystems. Releasing household or classroom pets or laboratory animals can result in:

- The introduction of harmful pathogens and parasites that threaten native species
- Increased competition with native animal species for resources
- Predation on native animal species
- Degradation of the native population's gene pool
- Suffering or death of the animal released

Before you bring any animal into the classroom or home, consider the lifespan and long-term care needs of the animal. Can you or someone else care for it under safe and humane conditions? Animals such as turtles, snakes and some birds have a very long life span of up to 50 years! Also, you will need to consider what you are going to do with the animal after the school year ends or your child loses interest in it.

### What should you do?

Instead of releasing unwanted classroom, laboratory or household animals into the wild, consider one of the following alternatives:

- Find the animal a new home or classroom that will be responsible for its long-term care
- Check with Thurston County Animal Services to see if the animal can be adopted
- Return it to the place where it was purchased (ask when animal is purchased)
- Keep it as a family pet
- Donate it to your local natural history museum, science center, zoo or aquarium (inquire before you purchase the animal)
- Do not flush any animal, including fish, down the toilet
- As a last resort, consider humane euthanasia (contact your local veterinarian)

All of these alternatives outweigh the risk of releasing captive animals into the wild. To avoid the problem of what to do with unwanted classroom, laboratory or household animals, think about what you will do with them before

you obtain them. Although the release of “one little animal” into the wild may seem benign, that action could have long term serious biological and possible legal consequences.

### Non-Native Invasive Species

#### Red-eared Slider Turtle (*Trachemys scripta elegans*)

Native to southern USA, but it has been introduced and released all across the United States. Red-eared sliders have a life span of 20-50 years. They eat a variety of animal and plant species including fish, crayfish, tadpoles, snails, aquatic insects and numerous aquatic plant species. This exotic species may carry diseases that can be devastating to native turtle species.

#### Bullfrog (*Rana catesbeiana*)

The bullfrog is a voracious hunter. This exotic species preys upon native populations of small birds, turtles, snakes, crayfish, frogs, salamanders and fish. The frog has been introduced into many wetland areas outside its natural range and has out-competed native species where it has been released.

*Source: Stream Team News, Spring 2015*

