

# Ethical Acquisition

Buying an Eastern Blue Tongue Skink from an ethical source isn't as easy as you might think?

The skink market has absolutely EXPLODED over that past 10 years and as beautiful photos of amazing color variants or "morphs" from Australia have flooded the social media realm it has fueled an extreme desire for these awesome lizards by non-Australian enthusiasts.

## Two Problems

### 1) To my knowledge the Australian Government has never legally exported blue tongue skink "morphs." EVER.

This is a fact. I have personally communicated with the Australian authorities and leading breeders to confirm this fact. There is a ton of misinformation regarding the "legally" imported morphs that are present in the US. Many folks assume when someone claims they have "papers" they are meaning papers from Australia. That is not the case.

These skinks are indeed legally imported...but NOT from Australia. They have been imported from third party countries (typically Hong Kong, Ukraine, or Germany). Why a third party? Because the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) allows for the importation of non-listed captive bred wildlife from countries who allow the legal exportation of the same. Thus, excluding founding stock, blue tongue skink morphs are captive bred, and therefore if Hong Kong allows the export of captive bred skinks then the US will allow the import of the same. One problem...these skinks or their ancestors originated from Australia not Hong Kong. Meaning they are likely to have been smuggled. This process is called laundering wildlife, a very common practice among smugglers and wildlife traffickers.

If wildlife traffickers wish to launder skinks they use intermediary countries with relaxed wildlife laws or minimal security due to either high volume or low funding as a go between. Once the skinks are in the third party country the traffickers re-label the smuggled skinks or breed them and export the offspring to more strict countries as legitimate specimens.

### So why aren't these animals confiscated and people put in jail?

The problem is that, at least in the US justice system (according to my non-legal professional understanding), a person is innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Unfortunately for Australia and their exploited skinks in question, the mere presence of a morph outside Australia does not prove beyond a reasonable doubt. Why? Because genetic mutation can occur naturally in captivity just as it does in the wild (ergo reasonable doubt). Added to it, there were wild-type blue tongues legally exported from Australia before the restrictions were put into effect. Thus, there is no way to prove guilt by presence alone within the resources of the USFWS. An example of a morph occurring in captivity is the Anergythristic gene in Pioneertown

locality Rosy Boas which first appeared in captive specimens in the early 90's. Within the US justice system (again according to my non-legal professional understanding) a person does not have to prove innocence and thus the burden of proof is on the USFWS to catch a person in the act. But since the act occurred during the Australia to Third Party Country trip it's nearly impossible for US officials to accomplish.

### **So then what does it matter if some rules got broken? What's done is done right?**

I can partially agree with this in the sense that morphs aren't part of the Australian wildlife landscape and there isn't a population of wild morphs out there being harvested from the outback. So what's the big deal if someone moved a captive bred skink from a cage in Australia to a cage in America right? Well, the problem sits in the method of movement. **Bottom line: it's animal abuse... flat out unethical, immoral, and inhumane. Period.** Because the Australian Border Force actively patrols to stop this criminal activity the criminals (smugglers) must take inhumane measures to conceal their actions. Smugglers roll skinks up in duct tape like a burrito and stuff them in food containers. Smugglers stuff them inside gutted kitchen appliances and try to ship them. Now, according to a friend of mine the new trend is to hide them among tropical fish cargo. It's abuse. If we buy one we are likely PART of that chain of custody, part of the abuse.

In an interview with one of the world's most notorious wildlife smugglers he estimated that 25%-50% of the "haul" dies in transit due to extreme concealment measures. That means the skink morphs we see here likely represent the approximate same amount of skinks that died from the abuse due to getting them to a third party country illegally. This is a black eye on humanity and the reptile community.

### **2) Australian breeders hybridized Northern and Eastern "morphs." They aren't really Easterns anymore...**

Early in the skink "morph game" in Australia it was discovered that the Eastern Blueys, where most of the morphs were appearing, were not as vigorous or healthy as their wildtype counterparts. The choice was made to aim for what is called hybrid vigor, whereby a hybridized animal can in some cases have a more robust nature than pure species.

Aussie breeders elected to take a Kimberly region Northern Blue Tongue (*Tiliqua scincoides intermedia*) and cross it with an Albino Eastern Blue Tongue (*Tiliqua scincoides scincoides*). The result was a litter of subspecies hybrids that were 100% heterozygous for albino. From there the process was off. Nearly all (not all) morph blue tongues in Australia to date have some form of hybridized blood in them. Therefore, they are not truly Easterns nor Notherns but simply common blue tongues. This is something to consider. I'm personally not a fan however, many people find no harm in a subspecies hybrid for a morph project.

## **Final Thoughts**

So when purchasing a morph here in the USA that isn't proven to have originated from a mutation occurring in captivity outside of Australia then there is a likelihood that it is a direct result of smuggling, wildlife laundering, and likely not a pure subspecies but rather a subspecies hybrid.

Please take these things into consideration when choosing a Blue Tongue Morph.

### ***My personal stance:***

Reptile Mountain LLC does not work with any non-pure morphs or morphs that have not either originated from US captive stock or from the legal spoils of USFW seizures. Bottom line, Reptile Mountain LLC requires either justice to have been served or proof of innocence and purity to work with morphs. I feel strongly that if I were to conduct business without such standards I would be actively in the chain of custody responsible for the abuse and exploitation of these beautiful creatures.

I went to great lengths to import legally acquired pure Eastern Blue Tongue Skinks from New Zealand in 2018 and would not have done so without significant reason.