

White Paper:  
**Skink Morphs in the US**

Buying an ethically sourced and pure Eastern Blue Tongue Skink morph isn't as easy as you might think.

The blue tongue 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. This has fueled an extreme desire for these awesome lizards by non-Australian enthusiasts.

***There are two issues with the morphs coming from Australia: Ethical Sourcing and Subspecies Integrity***

### **Ethical Sourcing**

**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 Anerythristic 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.

### **Subspecies Integrity**

**Australian breeders hybridized Northerns into Eastern morphs. They aren't Easterns anymore. Calling them that is 100% inaccurate.**

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. Those offspring were more robust and breed better. Since then all (except those with pure traceable lineages) albino morphs and any morphs/hets containing the albino gene in Australia have some form of hybridized blood in them. Therefore, all (again with the exception of traceable animals) are **not truly Easterns nor Northerns** 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 as long as they are represented honestly.

## **Don't they have a natural intergrade zone in the wild where the two subspecies mix?**

Yes, they absolutely do in Queensland. However, nearly all the original Eastern morphs were New South Wales animals and the Northern animals crossed into the morphs were Kimberly locality. That is basically as far away from each other as possible so claiming natural similarity is a farce. Also, the issue is more with honest representation than purity. Too often morphs in the US are INCORRECTLY marketed as Easterns when they are most certainly (at least extremely high probability) not pure Easterns but subspecies hybrids to some extent. Honest and accurate representation is the integrity issue a hand.

## **Final Positions**

- Blue Tongue Morphs commonly produced in Australia but existing outside of Australia are likely the direct result of smuggling or wildlife laundering regardless of US importation paperwork. Purchasing one is unethical.
- There is also an extremely high probability that morphs that were once Eastern pure are not pure anymore but rather a subspecies hybrid to some extent. This degrades an already limited subspecies population.
- Breeders/sellers who falsely represent any morph not proven to be pure (within reason) as an Eastern are being inaccurate and unethical.
- Reptile Mountain LLC will not do business with anyone who misleads their customers or knowingly and intentionally participates in the illicit wildlife trade.