

Companion Animals Fact Sheet

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Introduction

Companion animals have come to play an important part in the lives of many people. The majority of homes in Australia have at least one companion animal. Some surveys indicate that over 80% of Australian families have owned a pet at some stage(1), ranging from dogs (48%), cats (30%), birds (12%), fish (10%), rabbits, guinea pigs and horses to more unusual pets such as ferrets, snakes and reptiles, livestock and native animals. They provide companionship and a sense of responsibility.

Generally speaking, the level of care given to companion animals has improved significantly, with a reduction of "excess" pets being dumped. Instead, people are taking the more responsible approach and delivering them to animal shelters. As a result, the number of strays roaming the streets and resultant accidents has decreased. As some measure of responsible ownership, in the last 18 months, the value of vaccinations sold has amounted to \$9.2 million.

By adopting a companion animal you are taking the responsibility of caring for the animal for its whole life - that is a great commitment and one that is not to be taken on lightly. There are many issues to consider before introducing a companion animal into your family, and these include; desexing, identification & registration, surgical procedures and responsible ownership, as well as deciding on where to obtain your new friend. (1) RSPCA The Pet Care Book.



Henry Spira and Zeus

Australian Pet Population by State

Petcare Information and Advisory Service.

At 66%, Australia has the highest incidence of pet ownership in the world. 65% of American homes have pets while only 51% of English homes do.

There are no accurate statistics on companion animals in Australia and estimates vary widely. Figures are based on surveys of households where companion animals are held and our assumption that responses are accurate.

State	Dogs	Cats	Birds	Fish	Other*
	('000)	('000)	('000)	('000)	('000)
NSW/ACT	1,338	883	2,620	4,300	300
Vic	949	656	2,000	2,900	200
Qld/NT	860	502	1,520	2,200	100
SA	324	249	630	1,000	100
WA	341	303	720	1,200	100
Tas.	127	95	240	300	negl
Total	3,939	2,688	7,730	11,900	800

*Other includes pleasure horses, rabbits, guinea pigs etc.

A real solution to overbreeding

However, tens of thousands of unwanted animals are surrendered to animal shelters each year. Many more are abandoned in areas where their likely fate is death by accident, starvation, disease or from predators. The numbers escalate over the Christmas and Easter periods when 'owners' choose to abandon their animals rather than arrange alternative accommodation for them while they are away, or pets given as Christmas presents lose their 'cute and cuddly' appeal and are discarded. Many animals end up at animal shelters and if no homes are found for them, through no fault of their own, they are killed.

The most sensible way to avoid an excess of unwanted animals is to neuter (de-sex) them. This also avoids distress when the young are taken from their mother. Neutering is carried out by a qualified veterinary surgeon under general anaesthesia. The female is spayed, which is the removal of the ovaries, or the ovaries and uterus, and males are castrated, which is the removal of the testicles. Both procedures are quick and humane, with little post-operative discomfort.

Early age desexing is now widely accepted by both veterinarians and animal welfare organisations. Studies which track the health of dogs and cats desexed at early age have shown no adverse effects.

If adopting an animal, you should expect him/her to be desexed before being able to take home, or perhaps for the operation to be done soon after.

A positive move to increase the number of animals being rehoused

Another approach to decrease the number of cats and dogs killed each year is to find homes for more. Over the past few years, the San Francisco SPCA has developed an "Adoption Pact" which has been spectacularly successful in reducing the number of animals being euthanased.

The Pact states that if the City Animal Control Centre is unable to find a home for any of its

healthy dogs or cats, the San Fransisco SPCA will take the animal and guarantee to place him/her. Their support services include an animal shelter which is open 7 days a week, an "Adoption Outreach" program where they take the animals out into the community, a "Dial-A-Cat" program, providing adoption services and advice, a grooming college and an "Open Door" program to promote rental housing opportunities for people with companion animals. These programs, together with an intensive advertising campaign has made the "Adoption Pact" an extremely successful venture. RSPCA Victoria representatives have visited the centre and are keen to adopt some of their practices in Australia.

RSPCA National Statistics

	'93/'94	'94/'95	'95/'96	'96/'97
Total Animals Received	104,192	126,406	142,727	158,109
Dogs Received	43,762	58,496	60,627	69,956
reclaimed/rehomed	22,056	29,446	30,559	36,162
euthanased	21,706	29,050	30,070	33,794
% of dogs euthanased	50%	50%	50%	48%
Cats received	42,126	46,224	58,632	62,163
reclaimed/rehomed	10,783	12,654	15,158	15,500
euthanased	31,333	33,570	43,434	46,663
% of cats euthanased	74%	73%	74%	75%
Other animals received	18,304	21,686	23,466	25,990

Overpopulation & Euthanasia

Unfortunately, there has been more than 14 million cats and dogs destroyed in Australia since World War II, due to irresponsible breeding and ownership.(2)

(2) RSPCA. The Pet Care Book.

Identification & Registration

In Victoria, since April '96, cats and dogs are required to be registered with their local councils. Since the legislation was implemented (the first for cats), the number of cats passed into animal shelters had dropped by 20% in the first year and more than 65% of cats had been registered over the same period. Legislation will be put before State Cabinet in NSW for similar laws.

Companion animals should be identified to ensure their safe return if lost or stolen, and to encourage owners to take responsibility towards the animals in their care. Identification should be permanent and painless to the animals.

Animals Australia supports the permanent identification of companion animals.

Surgical Procedures

A number of surgical procedures, performed mostly for cosmetic reasons or for their owners' convenience, can cause suffering to companion animals. These procedures include debarking, ear and tail docking of dogs as well as tail nicking, tail neurectomy, shaving of muzzles and clipping of inner ears of horses. These things are done primarily for cosmetic reasons and can cause considerable suffering.

Some Animals Should Not Be Kept as Pets

The confinement of birds in cages is particularly cruel, and other species which are occasionally kept (such as pigs, fish, reptiles, as well as native wildlife) often cannot have their needs adequately met in captivity. These animals need specialised attention and, as a result, often suffer from poor care and inadequate housing and nutrition.

Many other animals are treated cruelly by thoughtless or ignorant people. The community needs

to be educated about the welfare requirements of animals and deficient companion animal laws need to be strengthened.

During the 1996/97 financial year, in Victoria alone, the RSPCA investigated a total of 11,580 cases of cruelty. This included 596 abandoned cats and dogs, 54 breeders, 728 cases of cat cruelty and 4,427 cases of cruelty to dogs, although only a small percentage were prosecuted.

Pet shops

Pet shops should not sell animals, due to the difficulties of holding animals in a public place and the usually indiscriminate nature of sale. For the same reasons, animals should not be permitted to be sold at markets or other temporary premises.

Pet shops encourage impulse buying, and when cute puppies and kittens lose their appeal and grow into adult dogs and cats they are often dumped or end up at an animal shelter.

If you decide to get a puppy or kitten, dog or cat, go along to an animal shelter and select one from there. Most will be the results of unplanned pregnancies, found abandoned, or delivered to the refuge at an early age. All pets taken from a welfare agency are checked, and treated if necessary, by a veterinary surgeon before being placed. All are either desexed before leaving the shelter, or are issued with a desexing voucher.

Puppy Mills

To supply the demand for "designer" companion animals, often the 'cute' balls of fluff kind, a very large industry has developed and has done so without regard to the consequences of oversupply.

"Puppy Farms", or "Puppy Mills", supply dogs to pet shops as well as for the export market. Although these establishments are "covered" by Codes of Practice in some states the RSPCA or government authorities can only step in if there is evidence of cruelty.

Unfortunately, the conditions of Puppy Mills are far less than desirable for most of the dogs, who are generally treated as "breeding machines". It has been observed that farmed puppies who come into pet shops are often nervous, wormy and sick.

Puppies Bred for Export

In places such as Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines and Singapore, the keeping of dogs as pets has increased in popularity and as a result Puppy Mills supply dogs for export to these countries.

This has raised many welfare concerns including accounts of falsified pedigree papers; fraudulent vaccination certificates; sick puppies, weakened after their long stressful journey, dying in transit and arrival.

There are also reports of authorities cracking down on the keeping of pets in public housing, and many imported pups being euthanased because they are no longer wanted.

Backyard Breeding

To reduce 'backyard breeding', Animals Australia has proposed that only licensed breeders should be allowed to breed animals in premises open to an Inspectorate and required to conform to a defined set of standards.

Animals sold as pets should be vaccinated, wormed and, if sufficiently mature, desexed prior to sale. In the case of animals too young to be desexed prior to sale, later desexing should be condition of the sale.

Guard Dogs

Guard dogs are usually bred and/or trained for their aggressive traits. As a result, they may be

dangerous animals and the higher risk of attack from these dogs may lead them to be subject to public fear and mistreatment.

While 'on duty', particularly on business premises, guard dogs often lack companionship, may suffer from extremes of weather, may be left unattended for long periods over weekends or holidays and may not be fed regularly. They may be locked in small isolated enclosures such as caged trailers when not 'on duty'.

The surveillance of residential and business premises should be undertaken by electronic means and/or by security guards rather than by guard dogs.

Colony Cats

Stray cat control has always been a very controversial topic. Some believe that colonies in suburban areas can only be controlled by destruction, but the trapping and killing of cats is both stressful for the cats and often ineffective.

The "Desex and Return" program has been shown in a number of trials to be one method of successfully reducing cat numbers and cat-related problems. Every colony cat has its territory and by removing it, other cats will move in to fill the vacuum. By desexing and returning them to their own territory, further breeding is prevented, as is the chance of intruder cats moving in and taking over.

Such programs however, can only be successful and humane with ongoing management to treat disease or injury, and the managers must therefore have the ability to retrap as required. As trapping is stressful for cats, managers must have access to the necessary skills to minimise stress and the time between trapping/retrapping and release should be as short as possible, consistent with health consideration.

Birds

Captive birds are compelled to live, often in solitude, in confined, impoverished and unnatural environments.

Factors likely to cause stress, injury, self-mutilation and/or a threat to life may include close confinement in small cages, lack of companionship, concentrations of pathogens, harsh weather conditions, inadequate hygiene and lack of suitable food or variety of food. Other problems include stress resulting from fear and the inability to escape harassment from penmates or outside sources as well as the denial of the psychological stimulation of their natural habitat.

It is frequently claimed that caged birds have lost their wild instincts and could not survive in the wild. However, if they have not been severely physically or psychologically deformed by confinement, many native birds can be rehabilitated to the wild, provided they are released in an environment compatible with their species' needs.

The keeping of caged birds should be phased out and the commercial breeding and trapping for the captive bird trade must be prohibited.

Fish

Fish which are kept for display often suffer. Aquaria are frequently too small and cause the fish to suffer from stress, usually exhibited through stereotypic behaviour similar to that displayed by mammals kept in small cages or on chains.

Barren environments and isolation from other animals of the same species often add to the boredom and lack of stimulation. Poor water quality, particularly in small aquaria, can cause disease, breathing difficulties and death.

The 10 Commandments of Responsible Pet Ownership

1. Feed an adequate balanced diet.
2. Supply clean cool water at all times.
3. Provide a cosy dry sleeping area.
4. Provide the dog with regular exercise and allow the pet regular family contact.
5. Protect the health of the dog and cat, particularly: vaccinations, regular worm control (including heartworm for dogs) & control of fleas and ticks.
6. Register the pet with the local council and ensure the registration tag and owner's name and address is on the collar when the pet is outside the home. Cats should have an identification tag on an elasticised collar. Permanent identification increases the chance of recovery if the pet is lost.
7. Confine the dog to the property at all times, especially at night. Cats should be kept inside the house or garage overnight.
8. Train the dog so that it is not a nuisance to neighbours, for example, by barking or attacking people or other animals.
9. Dogs and cats that are not used for breeding should be desexed. Female dogs that are not desexed require a fully enclosed pen, including a roof. Dogs are "in season" for 3 weeks, usually twice a year. Female cats that are not desexed should be kept inside when "in season". Cats can come "in season" every two weeks between Spring and Autumn.
10. Ensure the dog or cat is adequately cared for during holidays, preferably at a reputable boarding kennel or cattery.

adapted from - Bureau of Animal Welfare, Victoria.