

Owning pets in today's society

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BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

This paper presents some exploratory qualitative research that MacCallum Research completed in 1992. The research was about current and past pet owners' attitudes towards dog and cat ownership and it examined motivations and benefits of pet ownership and the personal, familial and social context within which they occur.

The study was purely qualitative in nature, using non-directive group discussions, conducted in private homes. Twenty group discussions were held in all; 10 amongst women and 10 amongst men - all respondents were current owners of cats and dogs, or had owned such pets in the past 7 years. Groups were spread across the age ranges of 20-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65 years, and were held in Sydney, Melbourne, Ballarat, Bendigo, Tamworth and Central Coast New South Wales. The research was carried out by Maree MacCallum and Margie Beaumont with Hugh Mackay playing an active consulting role.

PETS ARE AN ANTIDOTE TO THE STRESSES OF MODERN LIFE

In the 90s Australians are turning in larger numbers towards their dogs and cats, and the reasons for this are many, but in part are a result of the kind of relentless social, cultural, economic, political and technical change which has happened within Australia and which has destabilised us in the 1980s and 1990s. During this time our major landmarks, which are our major reference points to our ways of life, have been redefined.

Stress has become a central factor in many Australians' lives and they are pre-occupied with ways of reducing that. We have a greater sense of loss of control, a greater sense of isolation, and we've lost confidence in our future. Against this background pet ownership is therapeutic, because it offers companionship with three features:

- A reliable relationship;
- People believe they can be themselves with their pets; and
- Pets are part of the back to basics push.

Australians are looking for an antidote to the complexities of modern life and modern relationships. They are seeking to establish in their lives some of the simple pleasures and satisfactions that pet ownership can bring. In part, this is because of the demands of contemporary life, the every-increasing pace of social change and the unsettling effect that this has on human beings. It is also because now, perhaps more than any other time in human history, relationships between adult humans are subject to considerable stresses.

Stress comes from our renegotiation of male/female relationships, and the high demands people place on one another and on their relationships.

People are looking towards pets for some of the characteristics they would look for in any relationship; loyalty, devotion, affection, company, comfort, responsiveness, and even control.

Pet lovers have long believed that the relationship that they enjoy with their pet is a 'proper' relationship, and as such, involves a balance of rights and responsibilities, pleasures and duties. And so pet owners would argue vehemently that a renewed sense of the importance of pets to our lives should result in a corresponding emphasis on the need to care properly for dogs and cats.

There are obvious positives and negatives in pet ownership, and I'll deal with some of the negatives first, but for pet owners the result of the equation is strongly on the side of the intangible, and many would say immeasurable, positives which dogs and cats provide.

THE NEGATIVES

The bulk of the findings in this research reflect the positive and intangible benefits pets provide. Inevitably, however, there are cases where animal ownership is not a success, although these factors may not necessarily be enough to prevent future ownership, since not all members of the household may share the negative perceptions.

- **Pets tie you down.**
- **They cost money** - not so much the purchase price and food costs, but the ongoing and unexpected maintenance cost like vet fees.
- **Sometimes pets are criticised for being dirty and smelly.**
- **Some people are allergic to fur.**
- **Cats can be vandals, and so can dogs.**
- **Attacks on wildlife and problems caused by feral cats are getting more attention.**
- **Pets can cause disputes between neighbours.**
- **People may not have pets which are appropriate for where they live.**
- **Pets may not live up to their owner's expectations.**
- **Pets can be a heartache** - sometimes the distress caused by losing a pet can make one hesitant about replacing them.

Other problems can arise as well. Pet owners can value the relationship with their animals so strongly, they are sometimes disposed to defend their animals to the point where they could be deemed socially irresponsible.

While owners are very willing to acknowledge their responsibility for the care of their animals, they are disgusted by owners who neglect animals.

The relationship between pet and owner is seen as a *private* relationship. With children, the parent is trying to prepare them to take their place in the outside world as a decent citizen; with a pet there is not usually this sort of motivation. The pet is there for the gratification it provides to its owners: So outside influences may just be seen as an unwelcome intrusion into the pet/owner relationship, and legislation for controlling pet behaviour may be resented when it comes to ones own pet. To the Pierre Trudeau version that 'governments have no business in the bedrooms of the nation', Australian pet owners would say 'governments, especially local councils, have no business in the kennels of the nation'.

I don't know about this new legislation: I don't think people would respond too well to the government coming around and taking away their dog.

So while there is intellectual support for legislation to restrict and restrain day-to-day pet behaviour, such legislation tends to be emotionally resisted. At a rational level, the need for legislation to control the behaviour of pets around a neighbourhood, on beaches etc, is accepted. Owners don't want to tread in dogs' droppings, they don't want unleashed dogs attacking their cats or biting them or their children, or having ones sleep disturbed by a barking dog.

The thing that really gets me is when you're walking along in the park. and you see an owner who has obviously just taken their dog off the lead to have a crap. You try to catch their eye but they won't look at you. They feel guilty. Sometimes now I say 'Shouldn't you be collecting that in a plastic bag?' They just try and pretend that it hasn't happened. It really gets me.

At an emotional level, however, the private nature of the pet/owner relationship means that owners may resist the notion of more legislation for pet control. Part of this resistance could also spring from an inherent dislike of more legislation and government control in any area when it affects ones own behaviour .

Legislation is necessary but it's the wrong approach. Owners need to be educated. It's not the dog's fault he wants to crap and procreate. The council leaves the real problem and picks up nice, friendly Labradors like mine.

Legislation control is also criticised because it may strike at the physical freedom of animals, and is therefore seen as stopping them from doing what comes naturally.

He loves roaring along the sand dunes: it wouldn't seem right to stop him from doing that.

Resistance may also be influenced by the fact that neighbourhood control legislation affects dogs more than cats, and there seems to be more general community support for dogs.

There is support among some owners, however, for compulsory spaying of pets to control numbers, especially cats. It is more acceptable for intervention to prevent the existence of animals which one has no relationship with, than to try to intervene where a relationship is already established.

More support for legislation to protect wildlife from domestic pets. While attitudes to increased day-to-day neighbourhood legislation are ambivalent, there is more general support for wildlife legislation. There appears to be a reasonably high level of awareness of the damage which domestic pets, particularly cats, can inflict on native fauna if these animals become feral.

Containment of cats at night, and registration of cats, are thought to be the main elements of wildlife oriented control. Some respondents had difficulty coming to grips with exactly how these two issues would work in practice. Since cats are known to be nocturnal and to enjoy roaming at night, to lock them in at night seems almost cruel.

Cats, by their nature, seem less containable and predictable; more of a free spirit than dogs. Nor can people quite understand how the registration of cats would work, as they are not used to seeing them collared and they cannot grasp how they would be identified.

The thing that worries me is how can you control a cat? Under the new legislation you are only allowed three pickups and then it's a hefty fine. I never know if our cat is in or out.

Still, animal lovers do want wildlife protected, and they do want irresponsible pet owners to be regulated and/or discouraged (as long as it's not them).

That covers the negatives of pet ownership. Now let's consider the bulk of the research findings, which were *positive* .

THE POSITIVES

1. Pet ownership transcends the rational

The overriding impression to emerge from this study is the extent to which pet owners' relationships with their cats and dogs parallels human relationships. Thus, responsibility, care, cost and control are elements of the relationship as are mutual support, reward and affection, and in the most extreme cases, obsession. But as motivations for ownership, these elements are not on a continuum; that is the possible negatives are not realistically weighed up against the positives. Rather, the emotional rewards of ownership are so great that the rational objections to ownership simply don't have much influence on the final decision to own a pet.

Thus a (potential) owner will acknowledge the likely hassles of ownership, but be influenced ultimately by the *emotional* positives and benefits.

*It's not an easy' thing to explain how I feel about Lucky:
The money doesn't come into it, just like you don't cost your children out.*

Just as rational incentives to ownership don't carry much weight, so the rational arguments in favour of ownership are ultimately unsatisfactory as well. They turn out to be exactly that; rationalisations. Thus, the watchdog turns out to be a sook; parents talk about acquiring a pet so that their children can learn responsibility by caring for it, and then they laughingly admit that this so called advantage came to nothing. Instead the children have benefited at an emotional level from the love and affection generated by pet ownership.

In the final analysis, owning a pet is a bit like falling in love, or having children - one does it, in spite of any rational awareness or consideration of the problems which might ensue. Recognition of the separation of these rational/emotional and positive/negative factors is fundamental to our interpretation of the factors influencing pet ownership; they are not two sides to an equation, rather they are two separate agendas.

2. The pressures of contemporary life favour increased pet ownership

There are factors in modern day life which act as triggers to pet ownership. The kind of unconditional love which pets offer seems to act as a safety valve for life's pressures.

2.1 Human relationships are now more complex.

The readjustments resulting from divorce, the blending of families, becoming a step-child or step-parent, the pressures on working mothers, or conversely, the pressure of unemployment, are becoming increasingly common in modern day life and can add enormously to its difficulties and complexities. The undemanding simplicity of love offered or required by a pet can be a welcome contrast to this.

2.2 Life itself is more unstable and unpredictable.

The past decade has been a period of enormous social, political and cultural upheaval, not to mention the technological advances that confront us every day at home and at work. Rapid changes have taken place and continue to do so, with the result that there is an absence of reassuring rituals and certainties. Families fragment, businesses are sold, houses make way for high rise developments and people are bombarded with information on how to improve their communications. As a result of both the nature and degree of these changes, anxiety, stress and insecurity are experienced. In this world of rapid change, the one thing which remains pretty constant is one's pet.

He's a good little cornerstone in our household. It doesn't matter how pissed off everyone else is, he's happy.

2.3 Society today places strong pressure on us to be 'good'.

The 'good' citizen is expected to be unprejudiced, tolerant, to refrain from abuse and to recognise and avoid stereotyping. Racism and sexism are unfashionable and unacceptable. Trying to step through this verbal and emotional minefield can mean that people are increasingly inhibited about freely expressing their emotions and reactions.

Social engineering can dictate what it is 'politically' correct to say.

Against this background it is a welcome (and generally acceptable) release to be able to 'tar' all Pit Bull Terriers with the same brush, or to vent one's frustrations on one's own pet.

2.4 The loneliness and isolation.

Loneliness and isolation can be tempered by pet ownership, and while control is demanded in other aspects of life, one can 'let go' with an animal and weep, or enjoy the cuddling and nurturing. A pet can be a receptacle and an encouragement for emotional outpouring. Pets allow their owners to show emotion without judging them; pets give pleasure when they show their own emotions.

2.5 A link with nature

And finally, owning animals can provide a much needed link with nature for those living in a highly urbanised environment.

Living in the city no-one talks to you. You could be here for 20 years and no-one would talk to you, you could go home with no-one knowing or caring.

3. Pets deliver intense therapeutic benefits

There are different therapeutic roles that pets perform which, in turn, make up the positive and emotional agendas already referred to. These factors are a key influence in the process of making decisions about pet ownership.

3.1 Firstly, pets provide a **secure and reliable relationship** which is, at the same time, undemanding and uncomplicated.

Dogs are better company than husbands. and they can't talk back ...of if they do you can lock them out.

I want a female dog, I understand females. My husband is enough in the male department.

They make the atmosphere normal. We were all brought up to think we would have a house and a family and a fence and animals.

3.2 Animals can be a **relaxant**, both physically and emotionally.

There is something soothing about stroking or patting an animal, even the feel of its fur can be comforting. Venting ones frustrations, prejudices and anger on an uncomplaining and unavengeful pet can be a relief from the demands of normal human relations.

They really relax me. I'm hypertensive. I have been for years. When I cuddle my cat I can feel the tension dropping away.

3.3 Unlike some people, **animals are responsive to contact!**

The dog and cat love the attention, whereas the other day my daughter said, 'Stop stroking me Mum, I'm not a cat!'

3.4 In comparison with some human relationships, pets can represent **a low (emotional) investment for a big return.**

The relationship does not require the same input in terms of time and effort as a human one, and yet the rewards can be great-love, gratitude, fun and affection, and the *animal* keeps on giving even when the owner is (temporarily) neglectful.

My dog costs me less than \$5 a week. but you should see what she gives me back.

3.5 Pets can provide **structure and ritual** in lives which might otherwise feel out of control. The simplicity of their demands forces one to 'keep your feet on the ground' and to follow some sort of routine in terms of food and care.

Having an animal gives me a responsibility. If you're on your own you have to get up for the animals. their total dependence stops you giving into yourself

In death they can also compel a comforting observance of ritual.

When our dog died we couldn't put it in the bin. We had to give it a proper funeral.

3.6 Pets can be important **facilitators of human contact** - they can enrich and protect family life; they can act as a reason to talk to strangers and as a point of contact with neighbours; they can also represent neutral territory in family disputes and divorces.

When I first moved here Ralph was on a diet he'd do the rounds when the other dogs were eating with a pathetic look on his face and every one of the neighbours would feed him ...his favourite was the Spanish man down the road: he'd go there for tacos.

3.7 **Pets empower.** An owner can choose, change and reject a pet, in a way which is difficult if not impossible (and perhaps frowned upon) with humans. Nor do pets answer back or flout the authority of owners in quite the same deliberate way as people may do. This is not to say that pets are always controllable, rather their motives for being out of control do not usually involve the same *sort* of struggle, and owners will usually win in the end.

It's the power you have over an animal ... the children answer you back ... at least people know I can discipline someone!

Pets therefore could be said to deliver some of the most fundamental human needs - companionship, reliability, stress release and order, all of which are basic to human happiness and very much needed in our increasingly unreliable and rapidly changing world.

4. **'Pet Stories' are an abundant source of folklore, legends and stereotypes which amuse and deeply satisfy pet owners**

It was apparent from the tone of the discussions held for this study that pet owners *love* talking about their animals. This is partly because of the inevitable enjoyment anyone feels when talking about a subject of intense interest to themselves, but there are also some rather more subtle issues at work.

Firstly, owners are *allowed* to talk about their pets, at least among other pet owners, in a way which society does not tolerate so readily for children. One can boast about and admire the exploits of one's pets with few inhibitions, whereas lengthy discussions of one's children in the same tone can earn the ire of the listener.

Our cat learned to open the 'fridge. It had perfect timing: it would hit its paw against the seal and then jump on the bench, into the 'fridge and eat the food. Glad Wrap and all. So we got a new 'fridge and within a week she had that worked out too...

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, society places considerable pressure on people to be 'good' - tolerant, non-judgemental, unprejudiced and so on. Trying to observe these rules can be hard work.

These sorts of pressures simply don't apply to animals, or at least not to the same extent, and this makes the telling of pet stories much *easier and simpler*.

Well established prejudices against, say, certain breeds of dog, or against cats in general, or the fairly simple expectations one has of a pet (in comparison with what is expected in human relationships) all serve to remove potential complexities from the owner/pet relationship. The undimensional nature of the relationship thus adds to the enjoyment of it, and to the enjoyment of talking about it.

The following quotes are a sample of the sort of simplistic generalisations which are frequent in conversations about pets.

I don't trust people who don't have animals, they're lacking in warmth. Little dogs bite far more than big ones.

Thirdly, irrespective of how intensely an owner may feel about their pet, for most people they are still regarded as animals, not humans. It is thus permissible to laugh at hard luck and even violent pet stories, whereas to do so with human stories would be tantamount to 'speaking ill of the dead', or condoning behaviour likely to attract the attention of child welfare authorities.

Euthanasia is also a widely accepted practice with animals that are suffering.

In consequence of the above influences, pet stories can become key elements in *family tradition and folklore*, told with relish and embellishments, laughter and tears, and handed down from one generation to the next. Their popularity may be due in part to the paucity of human folklore, now that we have moved so far from our tribal origins.

5. **Pets play many different roles in the lives of their owners**

It was apparent from respondents' discussions that pets can play different roles in their owners' lives at different stages of life. Thus a pet may be acquired as a teaching aid for children and end up as a companion. Or be bought as a watchdog when in fact it becomes a child substitute. The relationship between an owner and their pet(s) is thus not static and it can be influenced by the personality of the animal as well.

Pets can play any of the following roles, or indeed a combination of them.

5.1 Pets as teachers of children. This is a common rationalisation for acquisition of pets by parents of younger children. Children plead for a pet and part of the 'bargaining process' involves the children agreeing to care for it and feed it. Apparently, reality rarely fits these expectations.

Pets are more successful, however, as teachers in the less tangible areas of learning respect and compassion. Pets are also believed to be useful instruments in the difficult areas of how to cope with death and the basics of reproductive behaviour.

Overall, pets act as a repository of traditional values and the duty which parents feel to pass these onto their children. Some parents feel they would be failing in their responsibilities as parents if they 'deprived' their children of pets, and that what they learn from pets makes them better human beings. Typically, if parents had pets as children, then they feel their own children have a right to them as well.

5.2 Pets as family members. In addition to their function as teachers, pets are often regarded as integral to family life, giving a family a 'completeness' which could otherwise be lacking. They can 'draw families together' and bridge generations through the shared love and care of an animal.

It's not family without a dog.

5.3 Pets as child substitutes. This can apply in situations where someone has never had a child (in which case this motivation for ownership appears to be more readily recognised by other people) or where the children have left home. Anthropomorphism can be the result.

5.4 Pets as companions. This function is often associated with owners who live alone.

5.5 Pets as fashion accessories or decorations. There is an element of 'pet as status symbol' here, as well as recognition that breeds go in and out of fashion.

There's an Irish Wolfhound across the road, the owner is a single career woman in her 30's for her it's a yuppie thing. It's a pedigree, it's got papers, it's trimmed, groomed and shampooed. All her friends have fancy dogs too...

5.6 A pet can enhance or clarify the identity of the owner - it says something about their interests and personality .

I wouldn't like to walk around with a poodle. I'd like something more macho.

5.7 Pets as demonstrations of authority. A pet may be more amenable to discipline than other household members and 'they don't answer back'.

I like having a dog because at least it shows I can train my dog better than my kids.

5.8 Pets as playmates and toys. Here the pet is a malleable object, particularly for children.

My daughter dresses our Blue Heeler in baby clothes.

5.9 Pets as pure animals. There are some owners for whom their pet is not obviously a symbol of anything - they seem to love it for what it is, they don't treat it as 'a human in a fur coat' and they are recognised by others as lovers of animals in general.

I should have been a vet. I'm an animal person but not over the top, we enjoy our animals.

6. Pet ownership is pleasantly basic and simple

Against the complexities of modern life and human relationships, the relationship between owner and pet is refreshingly simple.

6.1 **There is (usually) a clear master or mistress** and the animal cannot answer back or complain. Respondents occasionally related anecdotes which appeared to involve pet revenge (for example, so called 'accidents' in the house, on clothing etc.) but *in most instances the owner enjoys a gratifying sense of unchallenged power*. They can discipline the animal as they wish; choose and reject them; use them as a conduit for fighting with the neighbours; and take their frustrations out on them. The power the owner has over the animal may be a welcome compensation for lack of power in human relationships. Rivalries between animals and other household members are an illustration of an upset in the exercise of power.

Dogs will try to dominate you - you've got to show them who's boss.

6.2 **The needs of a pet are easily satisfied** and they are always grateful, at least in the case of dogs. The owner's expectations of a pet may also be quite straight forward - companionship, child substitute, teacher, watchdog. Even the notion of a dog as 'man's best friend' implies an uncomplicated, unquestioning and rewarding relationship. Feelings of guilt can be quite strong if an owner feels they have not kept their side of the simple 'bargain' of trust between pet and owner.

6.3 When men talk about wanting a dog to protect their family while they are away, **the 'cave man' instinct** shines clearly through the civilised man.

I want a good guard dog to look after the wife and kids.

6.4 The overall conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing points is that **pet ownership satisfies a deep urge to be in touch with our basic instincts**, with life and 'nature' represented in those primitive motivations which drive us and ultimately satisfy us. Pets don't demand sophistication or even intelligence from their owners, the communication is carried out at a basic and uncomplicated level.

7. **The trend towards superior pet care acknowledges the increasingly important role of pets in contemporary life**

During the course of their conversations, many respondents referred to the amount of time, effort and money they spend on caring for their pets, in comparison with the somewhat more casual approach of previous generations. In the past, people may have cared *about* their animals, but they are thought to have been less willing to physically care *for* them to the extent that many owners claim to do today.

Some *breeders* are believed to check suitability of potential owners - further evidence perhaps of how owning a pet has gained status today as a form of parenting.

You go to a pedigree breeder and it's like getting a credit card. They really check you out.

Respondents often complained volubly and at length about *the cost of veterinary care*, while nevertheless usually being willing (reluctantly) to part with their money. Indeed, in some instances, a vet seems to have been chosen with as much care as one would choose a doctor.

One bad experience at the vet can give your dog a phobia We choose a vet for our animals the same way we choose a doctor for ourselves.

Overall, there are indications of a greater sensitivity than in the past to the needs of pets, both physical and emotional, and of a greater willingness to be *responsible*. Owners seem prepared to spend more in terms of time and effort as well as money, possibly because in the context of contemporary life the benefits of doing so are so great, and so obvious. For many owners, the rewards they receive for their care outweigh the inherent irritations.

The therapeutic benefits of ownership for those living alone, in broken homes or indeed in any situation, are justification alone.

These days we live better and so do they.

8. Dogs can be more emotionally accessible than cats

There is a common perception held by both cat and dog owners that the two animals are inherently 'different' in style and 'personality' and that the nature of the relationship one has with them is therefore different as well - potentially just as rewarding but different. (Note: this perception is based on another one of those generalisations which can make pet ownership so satisfying and simple).

8.1 It appears to be **easier to have a rewarding relationship with a dog**. Dogs are thought to love unconditionally, to need you more than a cat, to be more obviously grateful for what is done for them and to be more amenable to discipline. Cat owners as well as dog owners conceded these general points (especially if they are cat *owners* rather than cat *likers*. Cat owners are less happy with dog owners' contentions that dogs are more faithful, clever and 'steady'. On the downside, however, there is general acceptance that dogs require more care and attention than cats.

8.2 **Cats seem to polarise affections** in a way which dogs do not, and dogs appear to be the 'winners' in this equation. Thus it is acceptable for someone to say 'I'm not a cat person', whereas people rarely admit they are not 'a dog person'.

Amongst dog owners especially, and even amongst some cat owners who acknowledge the emotional difficulties of dealing with cats, to say that one is not a dog person can imply that there is something wrong with the person rather than with dogs.

8.3 To the uncommitted, cats can seem selfish, standoffish, fickle, mysterious and unpredictable, as well as wild. Cat owners, on the other hand, acknowledge that cats are often not as approachable and friendly as dogs, and thus not as emotionally accessible, but they defend these characteristics on the grounds that **cats are more discriminating and independent**, less fawning and pathetically grateful. Thus what non-cat people interpret as arrogance, cat owners see as levels of discrimination and taste which are worthy of respect. In addition, to be loved by a cat makes owners feel superior and privileged, as if they are a part of an 'inner sanctum', whereas a 'dog'll be all over anybody'. Cats are also thought to be cleaner.

8.4 Some cat lovers are also fascinated by **the mysteriousness and sensuality of cats**. The (possibly) more straight-forward dog lover, however, may find these qualities devious and deceptive, even sinister.

8.5 There are indications too of **sexual stereotypes and prejudices** at play in perceptions of cats versus dogs. Thus dogs have macho connotations (this is true of female dogs too) whereas cats tend to have a female aura.

It's harder to talk about cats because they've got less of a personality ... or maybe it's because dog owners are more aggressive and they talk more.

Women like cats and blokes like dogs.

All of these qualifications notwithstanding, the evidence of this study suggests that **in the current climate, dogs may be favoured over cats as pets**. With their less complicated and more outgoing style, dogs are easier to develop a relationship with and thus more immediately rewarding. They may be more dependent and require more care, but it is this dependency which makes the owner feel loved and needed. Generally speaking, cats will be cheaper to feed and less demanding, but they require more emotional work.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the fundamental benefits of pet ownership, namely companionship and certainty in a stressful and rapidly changing world. As human relationships become increasingly pressured and complex, owners take great pleasure in the simplicity and straight-forwardness of the demands which their pets make on them.

Pets also provide a valuable release, a sort of safety valve, which allows us to 'let off steam' with a pet in a way which may be frowned upon in human relationships.

The therapeutic benefits of pet ownership are so precious to owners that they are naturally disinclined to accept any form of (legal) control which potentially 'interferes' in what is essentially a private relationship. At the same time, however, there is general support for regulations which provide increased protection for wildlife. Inevitably, however, legislation such as the NSW Dog Act of 1993 which came into force on September 1, will compel owners to take more responsibility for their dogs' behaviour in public.

It is to be hoped that this sort of legislation will protect the rights of both owners and non- owners, at the same time as allowing owners to reap the enormous rewards from having a pet.

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