

Pet populations in Australia. Dogs increasing and cats decreasing - why is it so?

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ABSTRACT

The pet population is dynamic and changing. Australia has amongst the highest levels of pet ownership in the world and there is no doubt that we are a nation of pet lovers. But these changes will affect everyone who is involved in the pet industry and in the management of companion animals. This paper discusses the levels of pet ownership in Australia, current trends in pet populations, the reasons for these trends and the likely impact these changes will have on society and those responsible for managing companion animals.

NUMBERS OF PETS IN AUSTRALIA

Pet ownership is a normal part of everyday Australian life, in fact 64% of Australia's 6.6 million households have a pet, almost equal to that of the United States of America (where 65% of households keep pets) and greater than the United Kingdom (50% of households). In terms of dog ownership, Australia leads the way with 40% of all households owning one or more dogs.

Our country is home to some 4 million dogs and 2.6 million cats. To put this in a broader context, for every 100 people living around you there will also be approximately 21 dogs and 14 cats. Whilst dogs and cats are the most popular pets, birds and fish are also kept in large numbers.

Pet Type	Million
Dogs	4.0
Cats	2.6
Birds	8.4
Fish	11.9
Other pets*	2.0
<i>* Other pets include pleasure horse, rabbits, guinea pigs, chickens etc.</i>	

Source: BIS Shrapnel 'Contribution of the Pet Care Industry to the Australian Economy' 1999

WHO DOES AND DOESN'T OWN PETS

We know that almost every Australian has owned a pet at some point in their lives.

Pet ownership is highest amongst families and particularly for families with children aged 6 – 17. The typical pet owner is female (generally females are the main carer of pets), married with children, living in the suburbs and most likely employed.

Pet ownership is lowest for retired people living alone and second lowest amongst single people living alone or sharing a household with unrelated people.

Australian society is dynamic. No longer do we have the image of the '1960s' where society was largely made up of the family with the house in the suburbs, large backyard, wife at home, kids and pets.

The fabric of society is changing rapidly, with higher populations of singles, couples with two incomes and no kids and more retirees. As society changes it also influences and changes the populations of pets. Both busy executives and retirees are looking for maintenance-free lifestyles and this has stimulated the proliferation of unit and townhouse developments. As a result they may contribute to a slight decline in numbers of dogs and cats, but on the other hand may create interest in smaller breeds of dogs and more exotic pets.

PET POPULATION TRENDS — CATS DOWN, DOGS UP

The owned cat population has been in steady decline since 1989 from 3.2 million to 2.6 million in 2000. This represents a drop of almost 20% in the population and is a significant decline.

At around the same time the dog population has grown from 3.6 million in 1994 to 4 million in 2000. Over the last few decades the dog population has tended to keep pace with the human population; as the human population has increased the dog population has grown with it, but the percentage of households with dogs and the average number of dogs kept has remained somewhat the same.

Australia is unique with its declining cat population. Virtually every other westernised nation has seen cat populations increase over the last decade.

REASONS FOR THE CAT POPULATION CHANGE

There are many factors combining to influence the declining cat population in Australia.

As already highlighted, society is changing. We are seeing more families with dual incomes, more single person households, an aging society and higher density living. At the same time we are seeing less tolerance and tougher legislation with owners becoming more accountable for their pets actions — put simply, it is becoming harder to own pets.

But whilst many of these factors appear to conspire against dog ownership, the reverse should be true of cat ownership. It would seem to make sense that cats should be the perfect pet for today's lifestyles; cats are compact, they do not need to be walked, are happy to stay at home on their own and can offer a great deal of companionship.

Market research indicates that the major reason for people not owning a cat is that they 'dislike cats'. Humans seem to have quite polarised attitudes towards cats — that is to say they either love them or hate them.

Some of this dislike of cats could be due in part to the perception that cats are a threat to wildlife. This is given as the second major reason for not owning a cat and perhaps stems from the frequent lack of differentiation between feral, stray and owned cats.

In Australia it seems cats have been painted as environmental vandals and their popularity as pets has suffered as a consequence. Whilst it is true that some household cats do kill wildlife, by far the biggest threat to native animals is habitat destruction by humans.

On the whole, well-managed, responsibly owned cats present little threat to native animals. Most domestically owned cats live in highly modified environments and it would be hard to differentiate their impact from the impact of introduced species and habitat change. In environmentally sensitive areas, both cats and wildlife can and should be managed to reduce predation.

Another reason for our declining cat population is the very high desexing rates amongst cats. Many people are sceptical about these statistics but studies have repeatedly shown that around 90% of owned cats are desexed. The word 'owned' is important here. People should be careful not to confuse stray and feral cats with owned domestic cats. Of course there will always be many unwanted litters of kittens born to stray and feral cats, and until we can find better ways to manage these populations this will continue.

But the fact remains that the vast majority of cat owners are responsible and do desex their pets. There's a simple reason for this - undesexed cats are very difficult to own. Female cats call repeatedly when in heat and Tom cats fight and spray, making for a fairly unpleasant pet.

Whilst it's great news that cat owners are responsible, it also contributes to the declining number of cats in this country and if it continues will ultimately lead to a very narrow gene pool where moggies may become a thing of the past.

WHY PETS ARE IMPORTANT

So why is any of this important and how will it affect us? Well, pets contribute more than a simple lick, pat and wag. We receive social, psychological, health and financial benefits from our four legged friends.

Also, the pet care industry has become a major contributor to the national economy to the value of \$3.3 billion dollars annually, employing over 37 000 people directly and indirectly. The management of pets by local government is a prime example of employment in the pet industry. All councils in Australia collect registration fees from owners and employ animal management officers to enforce pet laws and educate pet owners. These jobs wouldn't exist without the high levels of pet ownership in Australia.

Aside from the economics, pet owners would argue that pets offer us so much more. They offer companionship, a vector for meeting people, an exercise stimulus, they teach our children responsibility, they give pleasure, love and are loved in return. Pets are good for you. By improving health pets translate into enormous savings in the health budget. This has been estimated at \$2.2 billion per year.

Quite simply, if the cat population continues to decline, there will be less opportunity for people to receive the health and companionship benefits offered by cat ownership. Furthermore it will impact negatively on the economy and employment, particularly for those employed directly in the pet industry or the management of pets. If the dog population were to also begin to decline this problem would be exacerbated.

WHAT WE'RE DOING TO PROMOTE RESPONSIBLE PET OWNERSHIP

All of this positive information about the popularity of pets raises the question; why are bans and restrictions being imposed which make it more difficult to own pets?

This is where UAM becomes so important.

To enable the community to receive maximum benefit from pets we need to minimise the nuisance caused by pets – in other words we need to ensure that our companion animals are pets not pests.

The better we become at urban animal management the more responsible pet owners will be and the less problems pets will cause. This will reduce the knee-jerk reactions and unnecessary tough laws by government to pet difficulties. There are already enough pressures on pet owners and pet populations without making it even harder for people to enjoy the benefits of pet ownership.

Fortunately there is considerable support for local government in the promotion of responsible pet ownership. Welfare organisations, the veterinary profession and the pet care industry are all working hard in this area. The welfare groups handle the downside of pet ownership, they primarily deal with lost and unwanted pets and cruelty issues, but they are also keen to prevent problems through better education. The veterinary profession educate individual owners on caring for their pets and as an industry support education programs, urban animal management and ethical decisions. The pet industry supports individual projects and also work together through the Australian Companion Animal Council (sponsors of UAM Conferences) a non-profit organisation which provides a forum to discuss pet related issues.

Collectively as an industry we have produced a high number of responsibly owned dogs and cats. It has been calculated that of the 6.6 million owned dogs and cats in Australia less than 5% cause problems requiring the attention of councils or welfare groups. It is clear that irresponsible owners are a small minority.

PREDICTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Within a few years the biggest single group of households in Australia will comprise a single adult living alone. There will also be a massive population growth of older Australians as 'Baby-boomers' move into the 65+ age group. We know that singles and elderly people are the lowest pet owning demographics in Australia, yet they are the very people who stand to gain the most in terms of health benefits and companionship from pets.

Pets are likely to become even more important in the future as people seek companionship. We may find that older people will be prepared to adopt older pets and this may be a way of reducing pressure on animal shelters. The aging population also means that we are likely to see more resident pets in nursing homes. There is also the likelihood that there will be special schemes created to care for pets after their aged owners die or enter nursing homes. Whatever the case, we need to ensure that people don't perceive that it has become too expensive or difficult to own pets.

No matter what happens in the future pets will always have an important role in Australian's lives because one thing always stays the same.....love, loyalty and companionship.

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