

## Why is our community pet focused: What are the benefits?

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Why are we interested in animal management and why are we doing our various jobs? Quite simply it's because humans like to keep pets. We're not here just to manage animals as the term might imply, it's a fact that pets don't keep themselves - humans keep pets. We're really here to manage both humans and animals and their relationship with the surrounding community.

Animal management in Australia is a dynamic, diverse and complex area incorporating a multitude of roles and activities. The term animal management is reasonably self explanatory and in the context of the AIAM conference, it's primarily about the management of dogs and cats by local government. Although a specialised field, animal management nonetheless can be found in a variety of local government sectors - animal control, regulatory services, local laws, environmental health and other related areas.

The way companion animals are managed varies hugely across Australia, it can be influenced by socio- demographic factors, environmental conditions, cultural considerations and political concerns. The roles and jobs are necessarily extremely diverse. To understand why animal management roles are so important it may be useful to understand why it is that people keep pets and what it does for them.

### How did humans first come to keep animals?

The concept of pet ownership can seem somewhat strange. The idea that apparently normal people (animal management professionals amongst them) choose to share their lives and homes with furry creatures that are essentially unnecessary, that cost money to feed and maintain, that have all manner of exercise and grooming requirements and are prone to complex and often displeasing behaviours, is somewhat bizarre. Yet pet ownership is an extremely popular Australian pastime - more than half of all Australian households own a dog and/or a cat<sup>1</sup>.

There's some conjecture as to how humans actually came up with the idea of keeping animals as pets. It is thought that humans started living with dogs more than 12,000 years ago, possibly as much as 100,000 years ago<sup>2</sup>. A common perception is that man must have tamed the wolf, that somehow it all began with a small group of Homo sapiens putting food out to entice the animals into their camp. It would seem however, that a more likely scenario is that rather than our ancestors enticing the wolf to join them and then 'taming' it, the wolf simply infested human habitations because they provided a good food source. The situation may have begun by wolves hanging around the edges of camps, scavenging human waste. Over thousands of years, through natural selection, the less fearful wolves became better scavengers and thrived while the more aggressive animals would be driven off or killed.

Wolves may not have been the only ones to benefit from this arrangement. The groups of humans with the scavenging wolves may have found an advantage. With a far superior sense of hearing and smell than humans, wolves or dogs could provide an early warning system, alerting the human camp to the approach of predators or rivals. It's obvious that both species had something to gain, the wolves/dogs had a food source and the humans had security - early domestication had begun.

But why are they still here? What's the advantage now? And what about cats?

It would seem that human communities have for a very long time been mixed species ones. The modern popularity of pet keeping, at a time when most people live in cities and no longer have regular contact with other animals, is in some ways not that surprising. What is interesting about modern pet keeping, however, is that it does still hold benefits for humans and can actually improve our lives.

### Benefits of pet ownership

Research into the health benefits humans gain from pet ownership may provide some explanation as to why we still choose to live with companion animals. In many ways pets become intrinsically woven into our lives. They are a part of society, of our culture and our families. Most owners admit to some sort of closeness and 'communication' shared with their pet. It is this bond, amongst other things, that is thought to provide humans with tangible and measurable benefits from pet ownership.

The impact of pets on human health can be loosely categorised into the following groupings:

1. Physiological effects and cardiovascular health.
2. General health.
3. Psychological health: Loneliness and companionship.
4. Children, social development, and family life.
5. Pets and the immune system.
6. Pets and the elderly.
7. Pets in the community.

#### 1. Physiological effects and cardiovascular health

The impact of animal companions on human cardiovascular health was first recognised in the early 1980s, and it's the area of research which really made the medical community take notice of the "pets are good for you" notion:

- American psychiatrist Aaron Katcher examined the effect of social support on the survival of people one year after suffering a heart attack, and found to his surprise that pets made a significant difference. Analysis of variables showed pet ownership contributed an additional 4% to the patient's chance of survival<sup>3</sup>. The results have since been replicated in a larger study of 369 subjects.<sup>4</sup>
- K. Allen and a group of researchers discovered that pet ownership reduced blood pressure responses to mental stress. Their study evaluated the effects of pet ownership on blood pressure responses to mental stress before and during ACE inhibitor therapy (medication for blood pressure). It was found that the blood pressure medication lowered resting blood pressure, but mental stress responses were significantly lower among pet owners relative to those who only received medication. The conclusion was that the medication on its own lowers resting blood pressure, whereas increased social support through pet ownership lowers blood pressure in response to mental stress - providing a buffering effect against stress.<sup>5</sup>

- Warwick Anderson's study of 5,741 participants attending a free screening clinic at the Baker Medical Research Institute in Melbourne found that pet owners had lower levels of risk factors for cardiovascular disease, including lower blood pressure and lower cholesterol, than non pet owners.<sup>6</sup> The results amounted to a possible 4% reduction in risk of heart disease – the equivalent of starting a low-salt diet or cutting down on alcohol.

## 2. General health

Cross sectional studies like Anderson's have the disadvantage of not being able to prove cause and effect. That is to say that perhaps people who are healthy are more likely to own a pet, for example, rather than the health benefits being a result of pet ownership. Longitudinal designs which examine the health of an individual before and after pet acquisition add weight to the argument:

- English scientist James Serpell conducted a longitudinal intervention study where three groups of people were recruited and the first given dogs, the second cats, and members of the third did not receive a pet. Before the intervention, all three groups had similar results for a self reported assessment of general health. One month later, the reports of minor illnesses and complaints had substantially reduced in the pet groups, and in the case of the dog group (but not the cat), this remained true for the ten month duration of the study.<sup>7</sup> The difference between the dog and cat effect may be because dog owners take more exercise.
- In a longitudinal study of 225 occupants of nursing homes, half the group were given pet budgerigars. The conclusion six weeks later was that "budgerigars can effectively intervene in processes of aging, not only delaying deficitary processes, but also increasing the physical, social and psychological quality of life in old age."

Several studies have shown that pet ownership may influence the need for medical services. Pet owners have been reported to visit the doctor less often and may use less medication than non-pet owners:

- In a United States study of 938 Medicare enrollees, pet owners reported fewer doctor contacts during a one year period than non-owners.<sup>9</sup>
- German, Australian and Chinese data indicate that pet owners make fewer annual doctor visits than non-owners, and that the relationship remains statistically significant after controlling for gender, age, marital status, income and other variables associated with health. Research by Australian Professor Bruce Headey has compared Australian pet owners to pet owners in Germany and China, and found that the health benefits of pet ownership for the general community exist in the populations of all three countries, particularly for the long term pet owners.<sup>10</sup> The German and Australian results were the first national representative surveys to show that (1) people who continuously own a pet are the healthiest group (2) people who acquire a pet after not previously owning one are the second healthiest group and (3) people who cease to have a pet or never had one are the least healthy groups.

## 3. Psychological health: Loneliness and companionship

One of the first scientifically recorded instances of the use of animals in a therapy setting was described by psychiatrist Boris Levinson in the late 1960s. In a now famous incident, Levinson had been having trouble making any connection with a particularly withdrawn boy.

When, by chance, he happened to have his dog Jingles with him during a therapy session, for the first time, he saw a response in the child who started to interact with the dog. Levinson continued bringing Jingles to the sessions and before long, the boy started interacting directly with him. So successful was this approach that this form of Animal Assisted Therapy was subsequently used by Levinson to establish a "bridging" relationship with most of his young patients. Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) and Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) are now used in a wide range of therapeutic and institutional settings.

- A study of the impact of cat ownership on mental health by Cheryl Straede and Richard Gates found that "cat owners had significantly (better) scores for psychological health, indicating a lower level of psychiatric disturbance, and could be considered to have better psychological health than the non-pet subjects."<sup>11</sup>
- Psychiatrist Aaron Katcher pointed to the importance of touch in people's lives, and the scarcity, other than with pets, of socially accepted situations in which we may touch others.<sup>12</sup>
- In one study of elderly persons who had recently lost a spouse, pet ownership and strong attachment to pets were associated with significantly less depression.<sup>13</sup> Pets appear to provide a powerful buffering effect against grief and stress.
- Another study of widows found non pet owners reported a deterioration in health after death of a spouse, whereas pet owners did not.<sup>14</sup>

## 4. Children, social development and family life

Pets are an integral part of Australian childhood, traditionally families with children being the most likely group within the community to have a pet. Almost 90% of people confirm that they had pets when they were growing up<sup>15</sup>. More than being a simple playmate and confidante, pets may also aid childhood development, particularly the development of nurturing and social skills.

- A study of school children by Guttman showed that pet owners were not only more popular with their classmates, but seemed to demonstrate more empathy as well.<sup>16</sup>
- Self esteem has been shown by several researchers to be higher in children or adolescents who have a pet.<sup>17</sup> All these factors may help explain the finding by Reinhold Bergler that in a group of German teenagers, feelings of loneliness, restlessness, boredom, despair, depression and futility did not arise so often in dog owners, while this group also thought life was more fun, and had a more positive outlook on life.<sup>18</sup>

Obesity amongst the Australian population and in particular amongst children has become a real concern. Reduced incidental exercise and increased sedentary activities seem to be creating an overall decrease in physical activity in Australia. That is to say we're spending less time walking around doing day to day and work tasks and more time sitting in front of computers, televisions and video games. It's a fact that physical activity in children results in social, mental and physical health benefits, clearly we need to promote physical activity and reduce sedentary behaviour in Australian children. Pets have recently been shown to be an excellent incentive to make kids exercise:

- As part of a large study of the physical activity and sedentary behaviours of children by researchers at Deakin University in Victoria, it was found that young children in families with pets, particularly dogs, took more family walks than those without pets.<sup>19</sup>

Older children in families with pets rated outdoor play with pets second only to play with friends and young teenage girls reported feeling safer when walking alone with their family dog, an important finding when we are more and more concerned about community safety.

In the twenty-first century as family sizes drop, pets are also becoming more important as an outlet for the human nurturing instinct. The urge to nurture is a basic human instinct - one which has evolved to make sure that we look after our children and fellow tribe members for indefinite periods. With many women delaying childbirth or deciding to remain childless, pets provide an essential outlet for this powerful instinct. It's not surprising, therefore, that more and more people treat cats and dogs as their "children".

### 5. *Pets and the immune system*

Western cultures report increasing rates of asthma and allergic disease, with pets often blamed as the cause. An interesting development in recent research, however, has demonstrated the opposite may in fact be the case: the presence of cats and dogs in the home from an early age may actually 'acclimatise' the developing immune system so that it is less sensitive to allergens in later life:

- Research by Gern reports that having a dog in infancy is associated with reduced allergic sensitisation and atopic dermatitis.<sup>20</sup>
- Dr June McNicholas from Warwick University UK has found that children from pet owning families have less school absenteeism through illness, and are more likely to have normal levels of immune function than children from non-owning families.<sup>21</sup>

It appears that the presence of pets in the home may in fact have some regulatory or stabilizing influence on the immune functioning of children.

### 6. *Pets and the elderly*

The role of pets in the lives of the aged is particularly significant for those who live in nursing homes or who require assisted care. Numerous studies show pets provide one of the few interventions capable of permanently lifting the atmosphere of hospices and nursing homes:

- A study of a dog in a hospice in the 1980's showed that patients spent less time alone than before the dog arrived, and staff members reported it gave everyone something to talk about.<sup>22</sup>
- An Australian study by Patricia Crowley found that 18 months after acquiring a Whippet, residents of a nursing home had reduced tension and confusion and reported less fatigue.<sup>23</sup>
- Mara Baun has shown that pets can induce a social response from people with advanced Alzheimer's disease, even those who do not respond to people.<sup>24</sup>
- An intervention study using animal-assisted therapy was conducted by Richeson to measure the effects the animals had on the subjective well-being of 37 nursing home residents. The group that received animal assisted therapy showed statistically significant increases in overall satisfaction with life and statistically significant increases on the feelings 'enthusiastic', 'attentive', 'interested', and 'inspired' when compared to the groups that did not receive animal assisted therapy.<sup>25</sup>

Despite all this evidence, many nursing homes still do not allow pets, and fear of giving up their animal companion is a serious concern for many in the community.

For the rest of the elderly population still living in their own home, pet ownership has many benefits. The social facilitation and companionship functions have already been mentioned, but pets also boost activity levels.

- A substantial Canadian study by Parminda Raina of 1,054 people aged over 65 revealed pet owners are more able to maintain activities of daily living over a one year period.<sup>26</sup> Dogs in particular help keep people active, and provide a routine and a "reason to get up in the morning."
- Similar findings came from a Japanese study which investigated the relationship between pet ownership and the level of daily activity (used as a measure of general health) in elderly women living at home. They found that there was a positive correlation between pet ownership and the level of instrumental activity of daily living. The researchers concluded that it is possible that keeping a companion animal may be linked to better overall health in the elderly.<sup>27</sup>

### 7. *Pets in the community*

Research interest in pets in health is now exploring the idea that pets may help people to build social bridges in our communities, by acting as social lubricants with neighbours or strangers, or even as motivators for walking and use of parks. This in turn facilitates exchanges of greetings and other interactions between people who may not otherwise interact with each other. These social bridges can be collectively thought of as the 'glue that holds society together', also known as social capital.

- Health researchers in Western Australia have begun to investigate the positive role that pets play in our local communities. Through a random telephone survey of 339 Perth residents, they found that pet ownership was positively associated with social contact and interaction, and with perceptions of neighbourhood friendliness.<sup>28</sup> This building of social capital through greater interaction between members of the community is known to have positive effects on the health and economic viability of a society.
- Peter Messent, in his study of people walking with and without a dog in an urban park, has shown that the presence of a dog dramatically increases the number and length of conversations with other people.<sup>29</sup> Pets provide a focus for conversation and a means of "breaking the ice" - especially important for some elderly people, or for those with obvious disabilities, such as people in a wheelchair.<sup>30</sup> This effect is often referred to in the literature as "social facilitation".

This area of social research is only beginning to be uncovered, and promises to yield some fascinating findings on the role of pets in people's lives and in their community.

### **Pet ownership statistics**

All of this information provides a strong indication that pets not only make us feel good but they are actually good for us. If a new medicine was discovered that provided the same benefits it would be hailed a medical miracle. It's no wonder Australians choose to keep pets, nor that we have one of the highest levels of pet ownership in the world or that pet ownership is clearly such a significant community interest.

The numbers speak for themselves - there are some 3.75 million dogs and 2.43 million cats in Australia. Almost 38% of households have a dog and 25% have a cat - over 53% of

households have a dog and/or a cat.<sup>31</sup>

A table providing a summary of pet populations by state and pet type plus a table depicting pet ownership per head of population

State	Dogs	Cats	Fish	Birds	Other pets	Total pets	% of total
New South Wales / ACT	1,219	804	7,091	2,957	1,117	13,188	34.5
Victoria	894	599	4,874	2,045	744	9,156	24.0
Queensland	819	443	3,530	1,714	521	7,027	18.4
Western Australia	338	261	2,016	1,126	298	4,039	10.6
South Australia / NT	373	227	1,984	900	245	3,729	9.8
Tasmania	111	92	505	258	75	1,041	2.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,754</b>	<b>2,426</b>	<b>20,000</b>	<b>9,000</b>	<b>3,000</b>	<b>38,180</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: TNS and BIS Shrapnel estimates

State	Population ('000)	Number per 100 people	
		Dogs	Cats
New South Wales / ACT	7,114	17	11
Victoria	5,038	18	12
Queensland	3,981	21	11
Western Australia	2,019	17	13
South Australia / NT	1,748	21	13
Tasmania	486	23	19
<b>2005</b>	<b>Total 20,385</b>	<b>National Average 18</b>	<b>National Average 12</b>

Source: TNS, ABS and BIS Shrapnel estimates

follows:

## Australians love their pets

Companion animals certainly need management but it's important to remember that 95% of owned dogs and cats never need the services of a pound or shelter. This is reflective of the human population - there will always be a small percentage of people that may experience difficulty looking after themselves or their children and may at some time need assistance and welfare. There will also be people that do the wrong thing or that will commit offences. It stands to reason that there will be people who won't or can't look after their animals but this is a minority. The vast majority of pets are cared for responsibly and in loving homes.

Research has indicated time and again that people share a very special bond with their pets, in fact a 2006 report, the National People and Pets Study, revealed that over 90% of owners feel very close to their pets. Similarly 86% of owners reported that when things go wrong they find it comforting to be with their pets.

So pets aren't just something that need to be managed – they're some people's most treasured companions, they're a motivator to get people exercising, they're a catalyst to help people meet other people, they're a reason for some people to get out in their communities and for others to simply get up in the mornings, they're a real way of teaching children about empathy and responsibility.

Undoubtedly pet owners need services and facilities to help them manage their pets. When local authorities plan for pets and engage in the management of pets they should consider that there are managing creatures that many people consider to be 'family'. By perhaps considering all the reasons people keep pets it will be a positive reminder as to why they're doing their job.

## More information

This paper presents only a few examples from the history of research into the relationship between people and companion animals. Hundreds more scientific articles can be searched

online at [www.anthrozoology.org.au](http://www.anthrozoology.org.au), a website portal to the world of human animal interaction research.

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