

# Importance of companion animals in human societies



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## **Abstract**

Animals have been used throughout history as companions especially for people who mental and physical health problems. Even Florris Nightingale discussed the effects that birds had on patients that were confined to one room. However throughout history the same has applied to our relationship with animals. People will decide whether they want to have a companion animal in their life, and the relationship will begin. But how does this relationship effect the animals involved? Is our relationship with animals a symbiotic one or do we use them for our own needs?

## **Introduction**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a pet as: ‘ Any animal that is domesticated or tamed and kept as favourite, or treated with indulgence and fondness.’ (*Oxford University Press, 2014*). This word is commonly used to describes animals that are kept for no obvious practical or economic purpose – i. e. pets, as apposed to livestock or working animals. Throughout history animals have been kept for symbolic purposes, they are used as status symbols, and were even used as toys, (*Tuan, 1984*).

Pets are often referred to as ‘ companion animals’, scientists believe that the human and animal bond can produce a positive and an affectionate relationship which is mutually beneficial for both, (*One Kind, 2010a*).

## **History of Pet Keeping**

The keeping of dogs, cats and other species as household pets is so widespread in Western countries that it is usually taken for granted. It is

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believed that half of the households in Britain contain at least one pet animal, the number of pets is higher in countries such as France and the United States, (*Serpell, 1986*). In Australia the Aborigines kept Dingoes, Wallabies, Possums, Bandicoots and even frogs as pets, (*Meggitt, 1965*). In Southeast Asia indigenous tribes would keep dogs, cats, pigs and monkeys, (*Evans, 1937; Cipriani, 1966*). North American tribes would keep a variety of animals such as deer, wolves, turkeys and a variety of small wild mammals and birds, (*Elmendorf & Kroeber 1960*). Tribes inhabiting the American Basin, the keeping and taming of wild animals became a minor industry. Henry Walter Bates, an English Naturalist, was the first to record a list of twenty-two unidentified mammals which were living tame in Indian Settlements, (*Galton, 1883a*).

Even though pet keeping was seen throughout Western cultures, it would be considered indecent in modern Europe or North America if a woman was to allow a puppy or kitten to suckle at her breast. Yet in many tribal societies allowing young animals to suckle is considered normal and natural. Several years ago it was found that many North American tribes were extremely fond of pets but would also bring the animals up, (*Galton, 1883a*).

In all societies people pamper, talk and name their pets. They even grieve when they die or are separated from them. (*Galton, 1883a*).

## **Impact and Significance of Pet Keeping for Humans**

Many scientists and people believe that they and others develop health benefits from relationships with their animal companions, several scientific

studies produced over the past 25 years support these beliefs, (*Allen et al, 2007a*).

Evidence has shown that animals are able to improve human cardiovascular health, reduce stress, decrease loneliness and depression, and provide social interactions between people who have pets, (*Allen et al, 2007a*). People who are terminally ill or pregnant are advised to not interact with companion animals due to risk of zoonosis. Although giving up their animals can have a detrimental rather than beneficial effect on their overall health, (*Allen et al, 2007a*).

Research dating back to the 1980's showed that pet ownership has positive benefits on human health. These benefits ranged from higher survival rates from myocardial infection; a reduced risk of asthma in children; a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and physical wellbeing in older people, (*Friedmann et al, 1980*).

As early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century William Tuke, a Quaker Philanthropist who ran an asylum for people with severe mental disorders, he discovered that his patients gained health benefits from being around animals. Thus the courtyards of the asylum were stocked with rabbits, seagulls and poultry in the hope it would give the people greater responsibility and self-control. It was recommended by the British Charity Commissioners that sheep, hares, monkeys and other domestic animals should be added to these institutions, to create a less hostile, more attractive environment. Florence Nightingale, wrote in her 'Notes of Nursing' (1880) suggested that people that were

confined to the same room because of medical problems gained pleasure from the presence of a bird, (*The British Psychological Society, 2011*).

## **Physiological Benefits**

There have been numerous studies which indicate that pets provide their owners with physiological benefits. Whether pet interaction is active or passive, it reduces the anxiety levels in people and reduces the progression of stress-related conditions, (*Wilson, 1991*).

Blood pressure, heart rate and respiratory rate was recorded between 3 and 9 minutes and this was recorded in 24 subjects. They were recorded petting an unknown dog, a dog whom they had a bond with, or they read quietly. They discovered there was significant differences in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure between petting a dog where a companion bond had been established and petting a dog where there was no bond. Both systolic and diastolic blood pressure decrease when petting a dog, (*Baun, et al, 1984*).

## **Cardiovascular benefits**

It has also been noted that owning a dog can reduce an owners blood pressure, (*Allen, 2001*). Contact with any animal, even watching fish in an aquarium, can provide cardiovascular benefits. Health benefits are associated with animal companionship when the animal being cared for does not pose a burden to the person and the animals behaviour is acceptable to the person, (*Friedmann et al, 1995*).

A three study by the Baker Medical Research Institute involving over 5, 000 participants showed that pet owners had lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels than non-pet owners, even after smoking and weight was taken into consideration. Another study by Erika Friedmann, University of Maryland School of Nursing found that pet owners who experienced heart attacks had increased their survival rates compared to those who without companion animals, ( Hering, 2008).

## **Children and Animals**

Researchers have identified that kids who grew up with a pet, like a dog or cat, or who lived on a farm with plenty of livestock are less likely to develop asthma or allergies. From this they produced a ‘ hygiene hypothesis’ – the idea that modern lifestyles are too clean, therefore our immune systems are not exposed to enough bacteria, viruses and parasites, (*Fujimura et al, 2013a*).

A team of researchers from the University of Michigan exposed a group of mice to dust particles produced by a dog, the other group of mice they left. Both groups were then exposed to dust which triggered asthma. They found that the mice that had been exposed to the dogs dust showed a lower inflammation in their airways compared to other group of mice, (*Fujimura et al, 2013a*).

The views of pets are completely different across the world. In Islamic culture dogs are seen as impure, several injunctions warn Muslims against contact with dogs, they believe dogs are not hygienic are therefore not kept in the house, (*Banderker, 2014*).

America, Canada, Europe, Southern parts of Africa and Oceania, mainly Christians. Dogs are more popular in these areas of the world. Whereas in places such as Arabia, North Africa and parts of Asia, are mostly Muslims, dogs are not popular pets. In regions that are mostly Hindu, pets are very popular due to their importance in their religion. There is not a lot of evidence which backs up the importance of pets in Buddhism, (*Bousfield and Brown, 2010*).

## **Impact and Significance to Animals**

The main studies have been conducted on how animals affect their owner's lives, but not a lot of research has been conducted on the impact of animals kept as pets.

Many people consider their pets to be members of the family. People who own animals suggest that the feeling is mutual, as their pets seek attention from their owners. Pets provide unconditional love to their owners, (Lin, 2014a).

There are several arguments that suggest that cats, dogs and other pets suffer at the hands of their owners. Another argument is the relationship is inherently flawed and it is believed that humans are unable to provide the full lives that these animals deserve. This is because they are bred to be dependent on us, the basic relationship between human and animals is weak, (Lin, 2014a; Smith, 2014).

Animals lives are restricted to the homes they live in, they must obey commands and are restricted on what they are allowed to do. It is believed that domestic animals retain many of their basic instincts, however it is not <https://assignbuster.com/importance-of-companion-animals-in-human-societies/>

ethically acceptable to allow a dog to wonder on their own, as it is detrimental to their health and others, (PETA, 2014). As domestic animals depend on humans for their survival, it would be cruel to allow them to live on the streets, (Lina, 2014a).

There are too many situations where an animal derives no benefit being kept as a pet. Some animals such as 'status dogs' are acquired and traded more as trophies rather than kept as friends. In some homes pets are neglected or even ill-treated by their owners, (*One Kind, 2010a*).

There are several pets which are exploited in the commercial trade. Breeding pedigree animals as pets can lead to severe health problems. There are many pet animals which have been selectively bred, which can cause dogs to have eye problems, heart, respiratory and skin conditions, and hereditary diseases, which is all connected to specialised breeding, such as the Pug and the Hairless Cat, both these designer animals have been exploited by humans for the benefit of humans. (*Advocates for Animals, 2006*).

Many exotic species are unsuited for domestic life which is why a lot of research has been conducted on keeping exotic animals as pets.

Exotic animals that are used in the pet trade are taken from Australia, Africa and Brazil, they are subjected to cruel transport. Parrots often have their beaks and feet taped and can be stuffed into plastic tubes, some animals are hidden in luggage and concealed in special vests so that couriers can bypass x-ray machines at airports, (*PETA, 2014a*).



There is increasing evidence that the import of exotic species for the pet trade threatens not only the survival of wild species but can also risk the health of humans, domestic animals and native wildlife. Many exotic species suffer because owners do not know how to care for them properly. As these animals mature, they can become expensive to maintain, they soon develop behavioural problems and can become a long-term commitment. Owners then feel they can no longer handle the animal. Consequently these animals are often neglected, euthanized or released into the wild, (*Schuppli and Faser, 2000*).

## **Conclusion**

Companion animals, play a very significant role in the lives of many humans. They advance psychological and physical well-being to their human companions. The basis of their relationship is that humans decide to keep animals. Some animals may choose to seek the company of humans. Although some humans change their lives to accommodate an animal they still have the power to maintain or break the relationship – by selling the animal, placing the animal in a shelter or euthanizing that animal. When someone decides to keep a companion animal, the animals life will be controlled by humans to suit humans needs. Animals are affected by legislation – under laws animals are generally seen as possessions. Therefore the relationship between humans and animals, is more a form of animal use rather than a symbiotic relationship, (*Sandoe and Christiansen, 2008*).

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