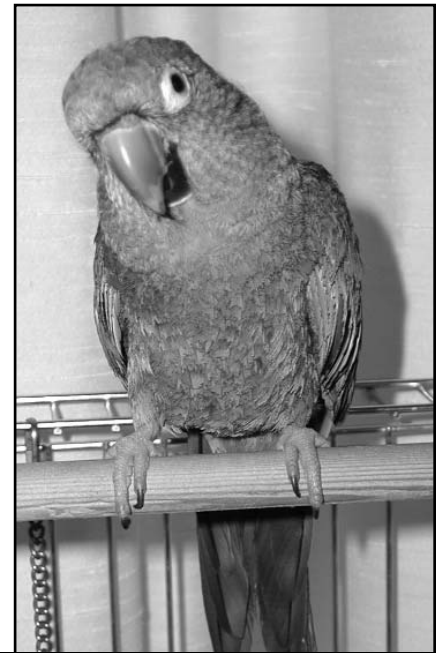


COMPANION ANIMALS

Animals have long been regarded as loving and loyal friends. As early as 3500 BC, the ancient Egyptians started keeping wild cats to protect their food stores from mice and rats. The cats went on to become treasured pets and were even worshipped as gods. The ancestors of today's domestic dog were wild wolves. People found that they could train dogs to help them hunt and to act as guards. Dogs then started to develop bonds with humans in place of their own pack.



Today, around half the households in Britain are shared with a companion animal including six million dogs, 7.5 million cats, one million rabbits, 850,000 hamsters, 750,000 guinea pigs and a staggering 15 million goldfish.

Unloved

Unfortunately, not all animals are treated with kindness by the people with whom they live. Every 25 seconds, the RSPCA receives a phone call about animal neglect or cruelty, and in some cases the animals are taken away from the people keeping them.

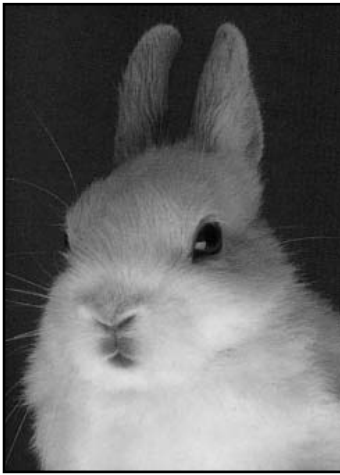


Unwanted

Each year, hundreds of thousands of animals are abandoned. People often see baby animals in pet shops and decide to buy them on a whim. But they don't realise that the cute puppy might grow up into a boisterous dog, the kitten might scratch the furniture and the rabbit will dig up the garden. Once the novelty wears off, animals who aren't so little and cute any more often aren't wanted. Sick or elderly animals are sometimes kicked out on to the streets when their owners move away, or when vets' bills become unaffordable. The lucky ones are taken to animal sanctuaries that will try to find a new family to adopt them. In 2004, almost 70,000 animals were adopted from RSPCA shelters. But thousands of unwanted, abandoned or stray animals are euthanased (killed) because there are simply too many of them to rehome.

Abused

It's a sad fact that many people simply get bored with their animals and can't be bothered to look after them properly any more. Animals need love and stimulation as well as food, exercise and a warm, clean place to live. The RSPCA describes rabbits as the most abused of all 'pets' because millions of these inquisitive animals are left to vegetate inside a hutch without company or freedom. And for those poor lonely fish whose life consists of swimming round and round a tiny bowl or tank, life must be pretty miserable. Nobody knows how many are flushed down the toilet, die from lack of oxygen or from toxins in their water, or jump out of their bowl and suffocate on the floor.



Life is cheap

Even though animal shelters are full to bursting with animals needing a home, breeders go on breeding millions more, to supply pet shops and the market for 'designer' pets. Some breeders treat their animals like baby machines, forcing them to have litter after litter. Some breeders and pet shops do not

care about what sort of home these animals will get after money has exchanged hands. When the breeding animals are too old or stop having enough babies, they may be killed. And remember, there are several other sources of animals as well as pet shops and breeders. Newspaper small ad sales, internet sales and ordinary people who have allowed their pets to breed, add to the vast amounts of animals in need of a home. All should be avoided. Every time someone buys an animal from a pet shop, independent advertiser or breeder, one more animal in a shelter may be destroyed.

Designer pets

Some people are fussy about the colour, shape and type of animal they want to 'own'. The demand for animals to look a certain way can have disastrous consequences for their health. Long-haired angora rabbits end up in a giant tangle because they can't groom themselves properly. Persian cats with squasy faces tend to have sinus infections and weepy eyes. Bulldogs, bred to look stocky and 'butch', can't run properly because their legs are too short. Cloned animals are still a rarity but this type of genetic manipulation may well increase just so that people can 'own' supposed replicas of their deceased pets. In 2004, a woman in the USA paid \$50,000 to a laboratory for a clone of her former cat. All that money spent, and millions of animals in shelters, still longing for a home.

Unsuitable

Millions of 'exotic' animals, such as parrots, turtles, snakes, tropical fish, spiders and monkeys, are caught in the wild and imported to the UK to be kept as pets. These animals are becoming increasingly popular, even though they need specialist food and are very difficult – if not impossible – to look after properly in captivity. Most of the beautiful parrots on sale in pet shops, markets and bird fairs will have been caught in the wild. Many birds don't survive the ordeal: it has been estimated that for every wild-caught bird who makes it to a pet shop or market, three others will have died along the way, during capture or transport. And all the 'lucky' survivors have to look forward to is a

life of misery and confinement in a cage. Birds should never be kept as pets. It is cruel to keep these intelligent flock animals imprisoned in a cage, where they are unable to fulfil their most basic instinct – to fly! It is impossible to recreate the natural habitat in which reptiles live, nor the distance they would roam in the wild. Snakes and lizards will often climb and tap at the glass walls of their tanks, unable to understand why they can't get out.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- **Never buy animals from any source – rescue one from a shelter instead.**
- **Never buy 'exotic' animals such as parrots or reptiles. They belong in the wild, not in your house!**
- **Always have your animals neutered or spayed to prevent unwanted babies being born.**
- **Think very carefully before adopting an animal. Ask the following:**

Why do you want a pet and do you know how long they are expected to live – because this is how long you will have to feed, clean, love and exercise them.

Can you afford an animal? It's not just food that costs. Animals also need regular veterinary visits and, if they become ill, the bill for their medication can be huge.

Do you have time to look after an animal? Many small animals need their homes cleaning out every day or every other day. Dogs should not be left alone all day, and need at least an hour's walk (if not more) every single day. Rabbits need company of their own kind, as do most animals (except hamsters, who prefer to be solitary).

Your pet will be lonely on his or her own so are you prepared for the expense and time involved in taking on two? If you don't look after them, then who will? What about when you want to go on holiday?

- **Join Animal Aid's youth group, Youth4Animals.**

