

---

# **WHAT AUSTRALIANS FEEL ABOUT THEIR PETS**

Conducted by  
MacCallum Research Pty. Ltd.  
in association with  
Hugh Mackay

---



---

# **A STUDY OF OUR ATTITUDES TO CAT AND DOG OWNERSHIP**

**Motivations and Benefits  
Of Ownership:  
The Personal, familial and Social Context**

Conducted for  
PETCARE INFORMATION AND  
ADVISORY SERVICE  
ISBN 0 646 11824 2  
September 1992

---

---

## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

### PROLOGUE

Social Change and Pet Ownership

Hugh Mackay

### THE FINDINGS

#### 1. Pet ownership transcends the rational...

#### 2. The pressures of contemporary life favour increased pet ownership

2.1 Human relationships are now more complex

2.2 Life itself is more unstable and unpredictable

2.3 Society today places strong pressure on us to be "good"

2.4 Loneliness and isolation

2.5 A link with nature

#### 3. Pets deliver intense therapeutic benefits

3.1 A secure and reliable relationship

3.2 A relaxant

3.3 A receptacle and an encouragement for emotional outpouring

3.4 Animals are responsive to contact

3.5 A low investment for a big return

3.6 Structure and ritual

3.7 Facilitators of human contact

3.8 Pets empower

#### 4. Pet stories are an abundant source of folklore, legends and stereotypes which amuse and deeply satisfy pet owners

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

A Pet as a...

5.1 Teacher of children

5.2 Family member

5.3 Child substitute

5.4 Companion

5.5 Fashion accessory or decoration

5.6 "Brand"

5.7 Demonstration of authority

5.8 Playmate and toy

5.9 Worker

5.10 Money earner

5.11 Pure animal

5.12 Waste bin

#### 6. Pet ownership is pleasantly basic and simple

6.1 There is (usually) a clear master or mistress

6.2 The needs of the pet are easily satisfied

6.3 Indulgence in stereotyping

6.4 The "cave man" instinct

6.5 Primitivism

6.6 Cats have "mystical powers"

6.7 Pet ownership satisfies a deep urge to be in touch with our basic instincts

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

#### 8. Sometimes pets just become a nuisance

8.1 They tie you down

8.2 They cost money

8.3 Some people are allergic to fur

8.4 Pets may fail to live up to the owner's expectations

8.5 Pets can become a heartache

#### 9. Dogs are more emotionally accessible than cats

9.1 It is easier to have a rewarding relationship with a dog

9.2 "Cats are more discriminating and independent"

9.3 The mysteriousness and sensuality of cats

### RESEARCHERS' POSTSCRIPT

---

---

## INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of an exploratory, qualitative investigation of current and past pet owners' attitudes towards dog and cat ownership. The study was broad ranging in nature, looking at the motivations and benefits of pet ownership, and the personal, familial and social context within which they operate.

The study was based on purely qualitative methodology, using non-directive group discussions. "Affinity" groups were used in order to harness the dynamics of spontaneous interaction between existing peer groups within the community. Discussions were conducted in private homes to minimize the artificiality of the research design. The role of the supervising researchers was essentially passive and the asking of direct questions was avoided. In the relaxed and permissive circumstances of informal conversation between friends and neighbours, respondents were encouraged to range spontaneously over all aspects of the subject which interested or concerned them.

Fieldwork was conducted in April and May 1992. A total of 20 group discussions was held, 10 amongst men and 10 amongst women. All respondents were current owners of cats or dogs, or had owned such pets in the past seven years. Groups were spread across the age ranges 20-35, 36-45, 46-55 and 56 to 65 years and held in the following areas: Sydney (6 groups), Melbourne (6), Ballarat (2), Bendigo (2), Tamworth (2), Central Coast NSW (2).

Fieldwork was conducted by Maree MacCallum and Margie Beaumont. Hugh Mackay played an active consulting role and was involved in the design of the study and the final analysis of the data. He wrote the Prologue to the report.

Throughout the report, findings and hypotheses have been illustrated by extensive verbatim quotations from the group discussions on which the study was based.

*Maree MacCallum  
Margie Beaumont*

---

## PROLOGUE: SOCIAL CHANGE AND PET OWNERSHIP

The first three chapters of this report describe an emerging pattern of attitudes in the Australian community which strongly favour increased pet ownership and a stronger commitment to the care of pets. That climate is, in turn, the result of some fundamental shifts in the attitudes and values of Australian society which have occurred as a direct result of the relentless pace of social, cultural, economic, political and technological change which has so profoundly destabilised Australian society in the 1980s and into the 1990s.

The past 20 years have, in fact, been a period of unprecedented socio-cultural upheaval. This has been a period in which Australians have begun to realise that the Australian way of life is actually being redefined: it has been a period in which most of the landmarks and reference points traditionally used for defining Australian society have either vanished, shifted, or been eroded. It is fair to describe this period as 'the Age of Redefinition'.

Consider a few of the more obvious examples of ways in which the Australian way of life is being redefined:

Women's re-definition of gender roles, and the influences of the Women's Movement (including some unexpected consequences: exhaustion, conflict, guilt, and resentment of the uncomprehending male);

the re-definition of the institution of marriage; the rising divorce rate and the increasing incidence of family breakdown; young people's growing avoidance of marriage;

the trend towards smaller households (almost 50% of Australian households now contain only one or two people; roughly 30% contain only one adult - with or without children); implications for food, architecture, media consumption (especially the rise of radio);

the changing patterns of work and leisure, (including the radical effects of unemployment and involuntary early retirement);

the changing shape of politics; the blurring of distinctions between major parties; the rise of "personality politics"; and the explosion in the number of swinging voters (up from 5% pre-1972 to 30% in 1990); declining esteem for politicians and increasing questioning of "the system"; rise of the independents;

the revolution in domestic technology; the unexpected social effects of the dishwasher, the microwave oven, the VCR;

the retail revolution; automation, self-service, EFTPOS, ATMs; the problem of depersonalisation and confusion in

the marketplace; regional rather than local shopping; plastic money; the credit boom; the redefinition of health (and associated anxieties about diet, fitness and stress - leading to a new interest in moderation);

economic uncertainty and insecurity; the fear that we will not bounce back from the recession, but will have to learn new ways of thinking about our future;

the emergence of a clear class structure, stratified by the dollar and spelling the end of the Australian dream of egalitarianism;

the impact of "the multicultural" on Australians' sense of their own identity; the rise of republicanism; and so on.

In the light of all that, it would be surprising if Australians were not suffering from a heightened sense of anxiety, and a deepening sense of insecurity. The outcome of the Age of Redefinition has been the Age of Anxiety: indeed, stress is now a central fact of contemporary Australians' lives, and the means of reducing stress have become a major pre-occupation.

There have been three primary effects of sustained exposure to life in the Age of Redefinition, and all three of these effects are relevant to the question of pet ownership and care;

The first effect has been a widespread sense of loss of control of our lives. Australians increasingly feel as though they are victims of change (rather than agents of change), and they are looking for ways to win back some sense of control over their lives and mastery over their destiny.

The second effect is a growing sense of isolation, as a direct result of the fragmentation of families and households, and a feeling that the traditional Australian neighbourhood is under threat. Australians are losing their sense of community, partly because so many of the changes listed above have had the effect of making people feel more isolated from each other. The individual rather than the family has become the social unit, and, when tribal creatures lose their tribal sense, there is generally a good deal of pain to be suffered as a result.

The third primary effect is that Australians have lost confidence in their own future, and in the future of Australian society. Morale is down, and people have a strong need for comfort, reassurance, ritual and other experiences which will reassure them and help to rebuild their confidence in their own future.

All of this may sound somewhat grandiose in the context of a discussion about pet ownership but, in fact, these shifts in social attitudes help to explain the increasing value which Australians are placing on the role of pets in their lives. Stress and loneliness are very undesirable states for human beings to find themselves in, and pet ownership is looming larger than ever as a therapeutic strategy deliberately calculated to reduce stress and to relieve the pain of loneliness.

## What are the 'therapeutic' benefits of pet ownership?

It almost goes without saying that when pet owners (or potential owners) talk about the benefits of pet ownership, they focus on the idea of companionship: pets are valuable as a presence around the house; as substitute children; as essentially benign creatures who enrich the environment with their lives and 'personalities'.

The obvious benefit which pets bring to their owners in terms of companionship cannot be denied, but there are some other, less obvious, therapeutic benefits as well:

### (a) A reliable relationship

There is much more to the companionship offered by a pet than mere company: pet owners enjoy a kind of 'secret life' with their pets in which they form relationships which are, in many respects, akin to relationships with other human beings. In the case of the pet, that relationship has two advantages which are not always available in human relationships:

firstly, the relationship with a pet (especially a dog) is thought to be utterly reliable a pet will never let you down; a pet will continue to be faithful and loyal; a pet will continue to respond to its owner's overtures;

secondly, the character of a relationship between a pet and its owner is often more subtle than a relationship between human beings. Partly because pets cannot speak, owners look for much more delicate and subtle cues in pet behaviour from which to deduce what is going on in the mind of a pet, or what kind of emotional responses the pet might be making to the speech or other behaviour of an owner. Much of this is pure illusion (or possible delusion!), of course, and yet it is a particularly rewarding experience for pet owners to be able to read subtle signals - often no more than hints - in the cock of a dog's head, the arch of a cat's back, or the twitch of a pet's ear. Pets don't even smile, and yet their owners manage to perceive positive and negative emotions on the basis of the most subtle signs in the body language of the pet.

So pets are far more than companions: they provide a rich source of satisfaction for their owners in the evolution of a relationship which, lacking speech and most of the other overt signals which people send each other, nevertheless manage to create a feeling of great affinity - even intimacy - between the pet and its owner. It is hard to convince a pet owner that his/her dog or cat does not understand him/her!

In other words, the companionship which a pet offers its owner is much more than simply 'being there': it offers the rewards which are associated with a reliable, complex and subtle relationship based on mutual affection and understanding.

### (b) "I can be myself with a pet"

Although relationships with pets are of a subtle kind, they do not involve the same complexity as human relationships. Pet owners clearly appreciate the fact that they can relax in their relationships with pets, with nothing to fear from the new breed of fundamentalists who are out to regulate our consciences and our behaviour at every turn! Feminists, New Agers, anti-discrimination campaigners, and other New Puritans of all kinds are abroad in the community, making many Australians feel somewhat defensive about expressing their true feelings on subjects ranging from morality to migration.

By contrast, a relationship between a pet and an owner is able to be relaxed and open. Pet owners appreciate the fact that, in relationship to their pets, there is no pressure to act in a certain way. They can experience and express uninhibited pleasure, uninhibited anger, uninhibited dominance, uninhibited submission, uninhibited amusement they can feel what they like, and show it.

This means that pet owners enjoy the sense of being free to be themselves when they are with their pets. This is a very liberating sense, particularly when it is combined with the feeling that, ultimately, the pet owner is in control of the pet. The freedom to express emotions uninhibitedly even extends to the extreme of deciding to get rid of an unwelcome, unwanted or unacceptable pet. In other words, pet owners feel powerful around their pets: after all, they own pets, and (rather like slave-owners of old) they enjoy the freedom of being able to do what they like and say what they like in relation to their pets.

### (c) Pets are part of the 'back to basics' push

Pet ownership fits in with a strong emerging theme in the socio-cultural evolution of Australia in the '90s. Increasingly, Australians are talking about the need to 'get back to basics'; to get closer to nature; to simplify their lives; to pay more attention to domestic life; to recapture some 'traditional values'.

Much of this is mere nostalgia for the simplicities and certainties of an earlier time. Nevertheless, it has certainly created a very conservative mood in contemporary Australia, and pet ownership seems to fit into this mood rather neatly.

Pets are associated with 'traditional' family life, with an emphasis on home and family, with the simple joys of childhood, and with a time when we placed more emphasis on 'life' and 'relationships' than on mechanical objects and material possessions. Whether the pet is viewed as a toy, an accessory, a companion, a child substitute, a playmate or a watchdog, it still comes closer to 'virtual reality' than any computer or gadget can!

## 1. Pet ownership transcends the rational....

1

The overriding impression to emerge from this study is the extent to which pet owners' relationships with their animals, particularly their cats and dogs, parallels human life and relationships. Thus responsibility, care, cost and control are elements of the relationship, as are mutual support, reward, affection and, in the most extreme cases, obsession. As motivations for ownership, however, these elements/benefits are not on a continuum, in that 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. Thus, a (potential) owner will acknowledge the likely hassles of ownership, but be ultimately influenced by the emotional positives and benefits.

"Sometimes I think I should have written a book on the sagas of our pets. One year I missed all the Christmas parties because I was home feeding our cat through a straw".

"Mum said she couldn't bear the responsibility of a pet anymore, so she took our dog to the pound and left it there. But then after two hours she couldn't bear it anymore, so she went back to collect him. She had to pay \$90!"

"I don't think I could ever be poor enough not to feed my cats".

"You've got to have a dog. I'd never be without a dog".

"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".

"The cost is part of bringing up a dog, I don't really mind the dollars because we have so much fun".

"My son said only the other day 'I still miss Sissie' and I said I miss her too"

Just as rational disincentives 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 had benefited at an emotional level from the love and affection generated by pet ownership.

"We got him as a watchdog but he's hopeless. He'd lick a burglar to death".

"The kids promised the world, but nothing happened".... "That doesn't matter though, they learn things in other ways, like loving and caring for someone else besides themselves".

"They give you back the love you give them".

In the final analysis, owning a pet is a bit like falling in love - one does it in spite of any rational awareness and discussion of the problems which might ensue. Similarly, one becomes a parent knowing that raising children has its problems.

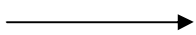
Recognition of the separation of these rational/emotional and positive/negative factors is fundamental to our interpretation of the factors influencing pet ownership: they are not two sides of an equation, rather they are two separate "agendas". Graphically, it is possible to illustrate them in the following way. The diagram opposite also serves to signpost some of the issues discussed in subsequent chapters of this report.

# ISSUES

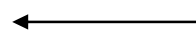
## NEGATIVES

## POSITIVES

Costs ]  
 Feeding ]  
 Vaccinations ]  
 Vets ]  
 Holidays ]  
 Fleas ]  
 Worms ]  
 Dumping ]  
 Death ]

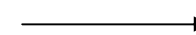


Responsibility  
and Care

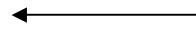


Life Experiences  
Learning

Restraint ]  
 Leashes/Fences ]  
 Theft ]  
 Droppings ]  
 Mating ]  
 Threat to Wildlife ]  
 Barking ]  
 Biting ]

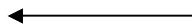


Control



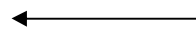
Dominance  
Power

Support



[ Mousing  
 [ Snakes  
 [ Guarding  
 [ Working  
 [ Hunting  
 [ Exercise  
 [ Money Earner/Pups  
 [ Teacher

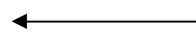
Reward



[ Companionship  
 [ Soothing  
 [ Healing  
 [ Therapeutic  
 [ Comforting

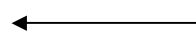
Embarrassment  
 Annoyance  
 Sadness/Loss

Affection



[ Love  
 [ Gratitude  
 [ Fun  
 [ Pride

Obsession



[ Anthropomorphism  
 [ child substitutes

## 2. The pressures of contemporary life favour increased pet ownership

## 2

There are a number of factors in modern day life which can act as triggers to pet ownership, because the kind of unconditional love which pets offer seems to act as an antidote to life's pressures.

Without necessarily being consciously aware of it, people may, thus, remember the feelings associated with owning a pet in the past and seek to reintroduce pets' often calming influence into their lives.

Owning a pet is so therapeutic that individual family members may even have their own pet and, therefore, their own personal and individual source of therapy.

### 2.1 Human relationships are now more complex

The readjustments resulting from divorce, the blending of families, becoming a stepchild or a 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 the love offered or required by a pet can be a welcome contrast to this.

"A dog is better than a person because it doesn't tell you when it doesn't like something. It can't hassle you and it can't ask for money".

"I had a cat for 18 years. He was very loyal"

"A dog is something you can keep with you. It's constant and reliable, not like women or flatmates, and as long as you keep feeding it, it keeps coming back".

"My first husband got at me by not letting me have visiting rights to our Labrador".

### 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 which 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 - even the simple telephone now has a range of options and suppliers. 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 cheesed off everyone else is, he's happy".

"The animals are my security blanket. They are my children, I don't think I could live without them".

"Owning a cat or dog is like buying chocolate in the recession. It comforts you".

"People don't give up their pets just because of the recession".

"You owe it to a pet to see them through and not just turn them out".

### 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 is said, whereas, in fact, people may long to bemoan and stereotype the unemployed and various other groups.

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.

"My father has always said a dog or a cat or a bird can't object if they're being mistreated".

"The smaller the dog, the more aggressive they are".

"If you can mistreat an animal you can mistreat a child. An animal is like an extension of yourself".

#### **2.4 The loneliness and isolation**

The loneliness and isolation inherent in some lifestyles 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.

"The attitudes of people are changing about showing emotions. Once, if you went overboard with a cat you were seen as over the top. Now we know that stroking and touching is good for you and cats are an easy way to do it".

"We were so traumatised when our cat died, we buried her in the garden so she could be near us - my husband was so deeply upset, it's interesting to see Australian men can be like that now, so sensitive about pets".

"Animals make life richer. In our society you don't get much touching, but with an animal you do".

"The number of times the kids have been growled at mercilessly by their mother and then gone and cuddled the dog!".

"It's nice to come home and find some other creature there. It's nice to relate to an animal if only because they don't talk back".

"He loves me even when no-one else does".

#### **2.5 A link with nature**

And finally, owning animals can provide a much needed link with "nature" for those living in a highly-urban 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 die with no-one knowing or caring - but my cat reminds me of living in the country. She cares about me like people do in the country".

### 3. Pets deliver intense therapeutic benefits

# 3

There are a number of different therapeutic roles which pets perform which, in turn, make up the positive and emotional agenda referred to in Chapter 1. It is these factors which are so influential in the process of making decisions about pet ownership.

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

"Dogs are better company than husbands and they don't talk back - or if they do, you can lock them out".

"I like it when your dog waits on the shore for you when you come in from the surf".

"I had old Soxy for 20 years. She was blind but she was my friend all that time".

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

"I'd like a Pit Bull Terrier. They're a one-owner dog. They're really faithful".

"My dogs are faithful and intelligent. When the phone rings they tell me, because sometimes I don't hear it".

"They make the atmosphere warmer. We were all brought up to think we would have a house and a family and a fence and animals, as if we have to have that as a symbol of normality".

"They're like kids, you don't get rid of them because they do something bad. You have your good times and your bad times with them".

#### 3.2 **They 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 one's frustrations, prejudices and anger on an uncomplaining and unvengeful pet can also 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".

"I think having an animal is good for you - and it saves you from strangling the kids".

"If you're feeling grumpy, they calm you down. If the family is at each other's throats, the dog'll be patted by everyone".

"It's good to spend a few minutes a day spoiling an animal. They're soothing. They bring people's blood pressure down".

#### 3.3 **Related to the last point, 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; and for humans, telling animal stories can be a thoroughly enjoyable pastime.

"I cry into their fur. They're not judgemental, they never reprimand you".

"Dogs are good in nursing homes. They're wonderful for the residents, so much better to look at than a fish tank".

"They've got such character, they look sad when you go".

"Our dog hates suitcases. He knows it means we're going away".

"We called in to see some friends. He's got cancer of the throat and he's just had an operation - he's never had a dog before because of the vegetable garden, but now they've got this Silky Terrier, and there he was, pleading with his wife to let it in, it looks to me as if it's the dog he loves the most".

"They're little furry persons to us. They have their own little personalities. First we had a Siamese; he talked, he was so intelligent, then we got a stray

and he's just as sweet and intelligent and beautiful".

"When our dog died after 17 years, my 15 year-old son cried his heart out. We buried the dog under the tree, and placed a cross".

"They give you so much joy, the household wouldn't be the same without them".

### 3.4 Unlike some people, animals are responsive to contact.

"He loves being cuddled. As soon as I sit down he jumps on my knee it's annoying sometimes, but I still let him".

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

"My dog talks to me, he answers back and everything. When he wants food he says, 'Mmm, Mmm'"

"You have to relate to animals to allay their fears".

"When I go to the toilet he puts his paws under the door. If he rolls over and I don't cuddle him, he goes to someone else for a cuddle".

"Our cat sits on your knee and puts his paw up to your face. He's saying, 'cuddle me'"

### 3.5 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.

"They don't answer back and it doesn't matter if you're good, bad or indifferent, they'll love you".

"If you give a dog love, it'll give you love back, with no strings attached. But with a human, you don't necessarily get back what you give".

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

"What you put in is what you get out".

"My husband wasn't allowed animals as a child, now he loves our dog. When he gets home at night he says 'Daddy's home'"

"I'm not an animal lover but my husband is hopeless - the latest addition to the household is a cat which he brought home from a funeral - it belonged to the fellow that died".

### 3.6 Pets can provide structure and ritual in lives which might otherwise be 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 in to yourself".

"If I didn't have my Buck, I wouldn't go for a walk".

"He was a big commitment. Every Sunday we'd walk for miles. He was so lovable and intelligent".

"It's a living thing. You have a responsibility to keep it healthy".

"Once they're out of the cute stage, it's a long while 'til their time is up".

"They're a constant in your life".

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

"The Asians have a custom - they plant something over the grave. They say the spirit goes into the plant".

"Mine died at the vet - I regret not bringing him home".

"The kids didn't like our first dog. There were no tears when he died, but we still had to make a cross and bury him. It was a life experience".

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

### **3.7 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.

"We all know each other's cats and dogs like we know each other's children".

"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".

"My son says animals bring a family together. My eldest feeds the dog and my youngest feeds the cat. They come from anywhere when the right person calls them".

"When our family was breaking up, a safe topic was the dogs. When my ex-husband rings up I ask him about the dogs. It's safe, neutral territory".

"When we broke up my husband said 'I'm having the dog.' When the dog got old he was always talking to Sydney Uni vet service about him. It was to his credit, he could relate to animals better".

### **3.8 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".

"I hate my dog weeing all over my tyres, so I disciplined him every time he did it and now all I've got to do is point to the wheels and he's off into his kennel!".

"They're like a child but you can control them, they're more obedient".

"I'd rather get a dog as a puppy because that way I can drum into it what I want".

Pets, therefore could be said to deliver on some of the most fundamental human needs - companionship, reliability, stress release and order, all of which are basic to human happiness and 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 readily apparent from the tone of *all* the discussions held for this study that pet owners *love* talking about their animals. This is partly because of the inevitable enjoyment which anyone feels when talking about a subject of intense interest to themselves, but there are also some rather more subtle issues at work which help to intensify the enjoyment.

**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 skite about and admire the exploits of one's pets with few inhibitions, whereas lengthy discussions of one's children in the same tones can earn the ire of the listener.

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

"Ralph is a pig. He'll eat lollies, rubbish, pineapple, anything - if you give him an ordinary chip he won't eat it, he wants a corn chip"

"I've got a menagerie at my place and every animal gets on with every other animal. The cat and the dog and the rabbit all chase each other around the back garden. They sleep together"

"I have real trouble getting mine in the bath and she doesn't like the hairdryer. I have to chase her around and around the house".

"Our dog gets in the pool with the kids in summer, and he loves the hose". "Our dog hates the lawnmower" "Ours hates the whipper snipper, I go zoom zoom at him" "You're terrible!".

"My parents' dog knows when they're going away, it's neurotic. Whenever they go, it comes to us and he sulks for two days, he's off his food, then he comes good and makes the best of it".

"Our dog goes and sits in the car the moment I pick up the keys".

"My dog loves spaghetti. When he was tiny he used to suck it up".

"No more animals I said, then my daughter's friend said she had a cat she just wanted to bring around to show me - well, she did a real number on me -

"Catastrophe" he's called, because one night he fell 40 feet".

"My dog howls at The Young and The Restless" "Do you blame him?!"

"She's a terrific dog. When she can't get anyone to play with her, she drops her ball down the stairs, chases it down, then brings it up and does it again".

**Secondly**, as mentioned in Chapter 2, society places considerable pressure on people to be "good" - tolerant, non-judgemental, unprejudiced and so on. Trying to observe these rules in life and conversation can be hard work, as they may run counter to a person's inclinations. 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 uni-dimensional 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 think the dog's personality depends on the family they're with: they take on your personality. Dogs look like their owners, too, if you ever see a pug-nosed dog!"

"One of my mates had a Rottweiler and after seven months it still didn't know its name. The vet said 'don't buy a Rottweiler, they're stupid' ".

"The little one is so aggro, we call him Crypto because he even beats Superman. The big one, he's a Bull Terrier and he's so gentle".

"People have different responses to black dogs because you can't read the expression on their faces so well, so if you're in the park you're more anxious if you see a black dog".

"We used to have a cat called Naughty George, we took him to the vet and after that he was just George".

"Little dogs bite far more than big dogs".

"Shepherds got a bad reputation in the '50s and '60s".

"I was bitten on the hand by a Bull Terrier and it just wouldn't budge - they don't, you know".

"I don't trust people who don't have animals - they're lacking in warmth".

"I hated my daughter's boyfriend and he was the only person the dog attempted to bite".

"I'm a bit concerned about people who don't like dogs. I don't trust people who don't like animals".

**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.

"I took my cat to the vet and while I was waiting I bought a flea collar and some shampoo. When I took her in, the vet said, 'I'll just take her out the back' and I thought, 'Oh, they're going to put some plaster on her,' and then they brought me back the lead. I thought, what?, they've killed her, and I walked out through the waiting room with my shampoo, collar and empty lead".

"He raced up the steps and belted his head on the door because his dog door was shut - God, it was funny!"

"Euthanasia is a privilege animals have which is denied to humans".

"You hate doing it, but sometimes putting them down is kindest".

"I know a bloke who shot his dog and buried it in a hole the dog had dug itself he begrudged paying for it".

In consequence of the above influences, pet stories can become key elements of 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. Death related stories seem to hold a particular fascination (and to cause the most mirth).

"My Mum was suffering from a nervous breakdown and Ringo the dog was the only one who could really reach her. We lost him in the Dandenongs and weeks later he turned up, all thin and drooling at the mouth, in Northcote, Mum's old home, and then he went from there to Thornbury to her new house, but we weren't there Mum was in hospital, and eventually he died".

"We had a cat in Brisbane. When we moved from The Gap to Holland Park it managed to find its way across town - it died after that too".

"The vet said he'd had a heart attack so we bought him home. He died at 4.15a.m. on Friday 13th we were with him when he died and to think he'd been the sickest of the litter and lived the longest".

"My old poodle is 16 now. He came from the pound, he's blind, he can't hear, he's got a pin in his hip, he's been hit recently and got seven broken ribs, but he's tough and he sleeps outside, not on any bed - I'm a country girl, you see".

"When the kids were toddlers, the cat used to follow them around. We could always find them by looking for where the cat was".

"I explained to the children that the cat had gone to heaven and my son said 'do you think God will have chunky tuna? And how does he get from under the ground up to heaven?'. 'Magic', I said!"

"I'm driving her to the vet, all mangled, the children are screaming and I'm crying and saying don't die on me, and she came good - she's even got a boyfriend now".

"The cat is going senile now; he sleeps on the bed and he dribbles in my ear" "Sounds like my husband!"

It was apparent from respondents' discussions that pets can play different roles in their owner's 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 Pet as a teacher of children

This is a common rationalisation for acquisition amongst 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, and the parents will use this as a justification for getting a pet. Apparently, reality rarely fits the expectation as far as the practicalities go.

"The lazy little buggers will be sitting on the couch and the dog will be salivating with hunger and they just ignore it".

"The kids argue so much about whose turn it is to feed him that I end up doing it myself".

Pets are more successful, however, as teachers in the less tangible areas of learning respect and compassion.

"We got a cat to aid the development of our eldest son. It's been a great success, he's responsible for feeding and grooming it and I think it's taught him to respect things which are smaller and weaker than himself. He's learned to sit and pat it".

"Our kids are reasonably fair and I wonder if having animals has helped. We've always had Golden Retrievers and Labradors."

"Emily is an only child and we think having an animal will help. It'll mean there's more than one little person. She won't be the focus of everything and she won't be so indulged".

"The kids drove us mad asking about the dog when we were away on holidays".

"It's good for kids to learn to care for something other than themselves in these times when they have so much".

"When they fill the bowl she drinks, it makes them realise she needs it".

Pets are also believed to be useful instruments in the difficult areas of how to cope with death and the basics of reproductive behaviour.

"It's a life experience. My kids saw the dog next door give birth".

"I think it's important for children to have animals because it helps to introduce them to the life and death process. Because of animals' life-cycles being short, the kids are around to witness it".

"The kids know about the cats being de-sexed and so they said to me 'is that what you're going to do?' My daughter went to school and said 'my mother is being de-sexed!'"

"We have a niece with a terminal illness. Maybe the cat's death will help my son to cope when she goes. He had so much compassion for that little cat".

Overall, pets act as a repository of traditional values and the duty which parents feel to pass these on to 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.

"I always feel for kids who've never had a pet".

"Pets help kids realise there's more to life than 'I want'."

"Parents can give kids phobias - they pull them away when our dog isn't even looking at them".

"A friend's child wanted a dog so badly she started acting like a dog - she eventually got it".

## 5.2 Pet as a family member

In addition to their function as teacher, 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.

"My kids treat your dog like one of the family".

"It's not a family without a dog".

"I came home from hospital with a baby and a pup, the bonding between them has been wonderful - it's not quite the same with the older children".

"My neighbour brings in bones for our dog".

"Whether or not the animals come inside depends on whether or not I want to keep my wife - if she left I'd bring 'em inside".

## 5.3 Pet as a child substitute.

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.

"I've got four children - a boy, a girl and two dogs. One of the dogs is called Kelly. Kelly was the first word our two year-old said".

"My dog is my security blanket, my little child, my baby".

"You're like me. I've never had a dog, we've just got one and I'm dotty about her."

"We've got rid of our teenage children and we've got a dog because we missed them".

"My aunt had dogs because she couldn't have children. The Corgi ate what they did and it got enormous, they took it to the dentist and it had gold teeth, then it got diabetes and when it died, it had a \$500 headstone".

"Before you have children, they're your children".

"My Mum has replaced me with a cat".

"My husband says the dog is his grandson because he doesn't look like getting one any other way".

## 5.4 Pet as a companion.

This function is often associated with owners who live alone, but it can apply more generally as well.

"If we were 80, we'd say cats suit us" "Or now, I live on my own and I wish there was a cat waiting for me at home".

"We had a cat who followed us everywhere. We'd go across the paddocks to get mushrooms and she'd follow us".

"Old Sam used to walk to Drummoyne Rowers every afternoon with his dog. He'd have three schooners and the dog would have a middy".

"If you're on your own, a little dog is wonderful".

"Dogs have their own way of hassling you. If you're driving along with all the windows up and they break wind, the look on their face, I swear they smile; I swear they think it's funny".

"My husband says 'make me an ice-cream and while you're at it get one for Sally' - she loves ice-cream between two wafers".

"She waits for the kids to come home from school, she knows what time it is".

"Pensioners and old people like them for company - if you see them without pets you wonder what they do for company".

"My mother's in a nursing home and there's a dog there - the patients love it. People have this affinity with animals the problem is everybody feeds it and it has to go to the health farm now and then".

"They are human; the only thing they can't do is talk".

"When I was growing up Mum was at Uni, so it was me, the dog and the babysitter".

"You can't tell me animals don't have expressions, my dog grins when I get the lead".

### 5.5 Pet as a fashion accessory or decoration.

There is an element of pet as a 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 30s, for her it's a yuppie thing. It's pedigreed, it's got papers, it's trimmed, groomed and shampooed, all her friends have poncy dogs too"

"Dogs go in fashion. Remember when everyone had an Afghan or an English Sheepdog?".

"My 14 year-old is going through the paper trying to find a Rotty. They're all the rage, like designer jeans, and he's not old enough for a Ferrari".

### 5.6 Pet as a "brand".

This is, perhaps, an offshoot of the previous category. It occurs when a pet is owned because it enhances or clarifies the identity of the owner - it says a little more about their interests and personality. It is in this area that the stereotypes associated with certain breeds are most apparent.

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

"It's like having a V8 car, with a pet, like a car, you go for the most powerful one".

"The smaller the mind, the tougher the dog".

"Cats are for women but men can relate to a dog - they're tough and outdoor".

"We've got a Pomeranian. It's not the sort of dog I would have chosen. It's an inside, yappy dog".

### 5.7 Pet as a demonstration 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".

"My father used to take his dog to work. It lay under his desk and it growled at anyone who walked in".

"I'm hard on my dogs; no tablets, no needles and they sleep outside".

### 5.8 Pet as a playmate and toy.

Here the pet is a malleable object, particularly for children.

"The kids play with the dog in an active sense".

"My daughter dresses our Blue Heeler in baby clothes".

"A dog gives you so much. We play hide and seek with our dog and he'll find us and everything".

"You can play with our dog, he loves it".

"She's a terrific playmate for our seven year old".

### 5.9 Pet as a worker,

as a watchdog, or else as hunting dog, sheep or cattle dog. Mousing and killing other vermin are other functional benefits. It is clear from some "worker" anecdotes that pets do not always perform as anticipated, but are nevertheless integral members of a household - the emotional benefits of ownership supersede the rational.

"I've got a new baby at home and I'd feel a bit vulnerable without the dog".

"I don't like cats, but we have one to keep the snakes away".

"Our dog stays in the backyard, he's a half breed, he cost \$20, he's got a loud bark and a loud bite and he won't let anyone in".

"If you hear a noise and the dog seems relaxed you know it's just a possum, but if the dog seems alert"

"We have a cat to keep the rats down in the barn".

"The neighbour's Silky Terrier was in labour for three days - she gave a pup to us and we haven't been vandalised since".

"I've got a farm with cattle and sheep. My dogs are my livelihood, they're born to be workers".

#### **5.10 Pet as a money earner.**

"We're going to be house and animal-minders. My husband is out of work and we're going into business walking and feeding them, giving them TLC".

"Some of these breeders must earn a fortune".

#### **5.11 Pet as a pure animal**

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".

#### **5.12 Finally, there is pet as a waste bin.**

"The kids leave their food and the dog will eat it, even grapes - it saves wastage".

"There are no scraps in our house - the animals eat everything except broccoli

## 6. Pet ownership is pleasantly basic and simple

# 6

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 (e.g. 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".

"My dog ate my mother-in-law's bromeliads because she wouldn't let him inside"

"My daughter brought this cat home and it scratched me. It had this dominance thing - after I whacked it, it was humble"

"We were interested in Springer Spaniels but we decided against them because they get back problems - that's the last thing you need".

"Ours aren't allowed inside, they know where they belong".

"At least you can tell a dog to shut up and it'll take some notice of you, but not a cat".

"I trained our cat with the hose when he was little not to chase birds".

### 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 straightforward - companionship, child substitute, teacher, watchdog.

Even the notion of 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.

"I had guilt feelings over our first Labrador. He hadn't had much attention because the kids were small after he died, he came to me in a dream and said he was as happy as could be".

"When we were building here the dog had to go to the kennels. When I came home at night he wasn't here to greet me, it was odd, I hadn't realised how much I looked forward to it".

"As long as we don't have any other pets, our dog is happy".

"Our cockie died, aged 50, two days before we went on holidays. It was so convenient, but I felt real guilty, as if I'd willed him into dying".

### 6.3 Indulgence in stereotyping helps the pet/owner relationship to be unidimensional and uncomplicated.

"Dogs take on the characteristics of the people who own them".

"I'm scared of German Shepherds. They can be treacherous".

"I hate Kelpies and Blues. My daughter was bitten by one".

"The smaller they are, the more aggressive and yappy they are".

"You can tell how big a pup will get by the size of his feet".

**6.4 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.**

"A watchdog is comforting if I'm out and the family is on their own".

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

**6.5 Primitivism**

is also inherent in the acceptance of the occasional cruelty of animals.

"Look at the way a cat plays with a mouse, they won't kill it for ages".

"With animals it's survival of the fittest. A bitch will reject a weak pup".

**6.6 As far as cats are concerned,**

there is sometimes another level of primitivism to the relationship, something as basic as the "cave man" connotations of dogs but more subtle, even sinister. It was apparent from some cat owners' conversations that they believe cats may have a form of "second sight", verging on mystical powers. Their perceived aloofness is taken as evidence of this, as if they are above (or beyond, or below) normal motivations and operating on an agenda of their own. This mysteriousness makes some people distrust and dislike cats, while other people respect them for it.

"They're very elusive, like witches".

"My cat's name is Essie. It means 'sacred cat of Burma'. She's got a white nose and feet where they rest on the Buddha's feet".

"Is it true cats won't stay in a house which is haunted?"

"Cats are very perceptive, they'll pick up on ghostly vibes which we don't notice" "And it's not only cats,

my dog wouldn't go into a room which a psychic friend of mine said was full of spirits".

**6.7 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" as 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 can be satisfactorily 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 slap-dash 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.

The "old school" of pet care is thought to have been typified by minimal vet care, no vaccinations or "poofy" pet accessories, no canned food, unwanted pups or kittens drowned, desexing carried out by the gumboot-and-knife method and no registration. Some of these practices still survive, especially in the country, and on occasions the opinion was expressed that "it's not natural for animals to have all this done to them today".

"I was brought up in the bush. In those days, if it was no good, you shot it".

"My father used to dig a hole, hit them on the head with a spade and then shove them in".

"My father-in-law had different sized boots for different sized dogs and cats".

"I've always had dogs and I've always treated them hard. I don't get attached to them".

"Years ago men had rifles more. There was no hesitation about people despatching them themselves, but now we take them along to the vet to do it".

Today, the existence of pet psychologists, luxuriously appointed dog and cat kennels and the wide range of pet accessories which are available are cited as further evidence of the caring lengths to which some owners will go. While some respondents clearly felt all of this was going a bit far, others obviously take it seriously.

"The vet on Burke's Back Yard is often good with his psychology of cats, they might be insecure"

"There's a wonderful gift shop in South Yarra called 'Just Cats'. She had a seminar on Thursday on animal psychologists. She's got cat china and cat pictures in her shop worth hundreds of dollars".

"Cats are big business. I buy an American magazine called Cat Fancy you should see what you can buy" "I'm a cat collector, and most of my expensive jewellery has cats on it".

"We've taken our dog to stay at Sparrows In the Tree Tops. It's a five-star hotel. We're going camping and she'll have a heated trampoline bed, piped music and three meals a day. I was looking for the television in the corner!"

"I bought him a trampoline for his arthritis and he won't sleep on it".

Some *breeders* are believed to check the 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 the money. Indeed, in some instances, a vet seems to have been chosen with as much care as one would choose a doctor.

"We drive miles to get a really good vet. There's a nice young woman in Kew who's very gentle".

"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".

"We had our dog put down with a needle. It cost \$99 but it was better than bringing her home to die".

"She's a \$400 dog, what with the cost of the injections and everything, so we send her to the kennels when we go away. What's the point of hoping the next door neighbour will look after her?".

"If you're going to have a dog, it's all the way with the injections and everything, or nothing".

"This heartworm is a worry, you have to watch out for that. It's going to be like cancer or Aids is for humans, a devastating blow".

"Rusty was bitten by a snake and the anti-venom cost \$200. I thought I can't go home and say I decided not to pay \$200, so I paid".

Dietary requirements were the source of much discussion as well. While canned food is clearly the mainstay of many pets' diets, there are also owners who are willing to go to the trouble of preparing cooked food specifically for their pets. It is a source of pride to some owners that they are prepared to go to the effort of mixing vegetables, rice, and specially cooked meat, fish or chicken for their pets. It is as if their pets are somehow more discriminating if they are fussy; if weight reduction or just variety are behind such effort, it is clear evidence in the owner's eyes of what good "parents" they are. As in human relationships, food and its preparation is a symbol of caring as much as a function.

"Our dogs get fed raw meat and canned food".

"Tinned food, especially cheap tinned food, can make them fat. I'm prepared to spend more".

"We cook up hamburger mince, rice and vegies for our dog, and dried food, but not much because it makes them blow up. We don't give 'em raw meat because people use that for baits".

"A bone every morning is good for tartar".

What constitutes a good diet for an animal is also a wonderful source of prejudices and old wives tales (some of which may even have some truth in them!)

"Don't give 'em raw meat because then they like (human) flesh".

"If you give them raw bones, they'll attack kids".

"If you give cats raw meat, it stops them getting into the birds".

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".

"Twenty years ago the ads. (for pet food) were more factual and earthy, now it's different. Now it's into fantasy land because we pay so much more attention to them".

The above findings present the benefits of the pet/owner relationship and reflect the thrust of the great majority of discussion throughout this study. Inevitably, however, there are cases where the relationship is not a success, for any one, or combination, of the factors detailed below. Interestingly enough, these factors are not necessarily enough to prevent (future) ownership, as negative perceptions are not always shared by all members of a household. The "failure" of one pet may also be a function of the stage-of-life cycle of a family, or the personality of a particular animal.

The inhibitors of a successful relationship, or disincentives to re-acquisition, are as follows.

### 8.1 They tie you down.

They can stop one travelling, or at least add to the complications of it. They impose a daily routine of feeding and care which may not mesh easily with a busy lifestyle. In essence, they are a responsibility which not everyone takes on board easily.

"When our children left home we decided we wanted the freedom to travel, so, no more pets".

"A dog becomes a chore after a while. My mum does all the looking after our dog and we've had it for 15 years. She's done all the work all that time".

"I left my husband years ago, we had a dog and a cat so I tried to be fair and I took the cat because he never seemed to like it, but a few weeks later he rang my daughter and said 'I want the cat', but then later he rang and said 'Tell your mother to come and get the bloody cat', it was the responsibility!"

"The problem is when the children go they don't take them with them".

"I was so busy looking after babies and toddlers the dog was a nuisance, now I feel I'm ready to have another one".

"I'm not an animal lover. We have a cat but only because it was my mother's and she died. I have as little to do with it as possible".

"Once the kids are gone, no more pets, we want to be off".

"My mum uses them as an excuse now. She says she can't go away because of them but really she's a homebody and she likes being at home".

"We're lucky to have two families to look after it when we go away. It's a real tie otherwise. They have to be a good dog to interrupt your lifestyle".

"Birds are so much easier - stick a bell in their cage and they're happy for a week".

"My dream of selling the farm and moving into town is going out the window with all these animals".

### 8.2 They cost money.

The purchase price and food costs do not seem to be the major issues. Rather, it is the ongoing and unexpected maintenance costs. Vet fees are a prime concern:

"You've got to have nothing else to do with a poodle, and no mortgage".

"If anything more happens to our cat we're going to get it put down. We're not going to spend any more money on it".

"The problem with pets is they do cost a lot they used to have Medipet which helped"

"The hardest thing is finding the money to have a female cat desexed".

"It was going to cost \$800 for our dog to have that spinal operation".

"Vets earn more than doctors".

Kennelling is another major cost, avoided in some instances by leaving the pets at home and relying on neighbours, friends or extended family to come in daily and feed them. Pets may also be boarded with other family members, with mixed success.

"I take mine to my mother-in-law's. She hates it, especially if it's raining".

"I went to feed your dog when you were away and he attacked me".

"The hardest part is when we go away. We tried the kennels but she wouldn't eat or drink"

And there is the general cost of maintenance products.

"Even if you buy them at Yagoona, it costs a lot - shampoo, flea stuff"

### 8.3 Some people are allergic to fur

"When a cat puts its fur near me, I sneeze".

"One friend of ours is allergic to fur, we have to shut the animals up every time he visits".

"Our youngest is super allergic to cats, they bring on asthma".

### 8.4 Pets may fail to live up to the owner's expectations

in general terms, as well, the cute puppy turns into a large vandal or a snappy barker; expectations that the dog will "teach" children responsibility through caring for them, or that the children will do anything for them at all, prove unfounded.

"Dogs are really cool when they're puppies but when they grow up you have to walk them".

"If you don't want a dog, don't buy a puppy".

"Dogs are forever, not just for Christmas".

"It's terrible the way people cast pets aside when they're past the cute stage" "I've done it myself with stray kittens".

"That little ball of fluff is now a big ball of fluff and it barks a lot".

### 8.5 And finally, pets can become a heartache.

The distress caused by a loved pet's death can make one hesitate about replacing them, at least for the time being.

"When I lost my cat, Millie, I was heartbroken"

"That's the only trouble with animals, it's devastating when they die. You mourn them more than other people"

"I've had three cats, one got nicked, one got run over, one died of the cat flu. It's so upsetting and I thought that's it, I can't bear it anymore".

"You get too attached and then they go"

"It was so sad, we buried him in the back yard. It was just like someone in the family going".

"If they live a long time and you get really attached, you tend not to get another one".

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 concept is based on another one of those generalisations which can make pet ownership so satisfyingly simple).

### 9.1 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 concede these general points (especially if they are cat owners rather than cat lovers or even cat likers). Cat owners are less happy with dog owners' contentions that dogs are also more faithful, clever and "steady". On the downside, however, there is general acceptance that dogs require more care and attention than cats.

"You don't get as much feedback from a cat".

"You never know what a cat is thinking".

"Dogs are more faithful, cats like places more than people".

"Cats are less of a relationship. If you're on your own, you can have a relationship with them but if you have children and a busy household, you don't have time to put in the investment".

"I wouldn't have got a dog when I was working full-time, you enjoy a dog if you're around to invest in it and make it like you want".

"With dogs you can see the responsiveness, even if you don't know what they want".

"Dogs are loyal, cats aren't. If you go away for two weeks a cat will have forgotten you".

### 9.2 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 part of an "inner sanctum", whereas "a dog'll be all over anybody". Cats are also thought to be cleaner.

"I like cats. They've got more personality, they're more conniving".

"I love cats because they never cower down; they're independent, beautiful animals".

"Cats are cleaner, they dig holes"

"Our cat tells the dogs where to go".

"With cats you reap what you sow, whereas a dog'll be all over you regardless".

"Cats are more intelligent; they own you, you never own them".

"We've got a Burmese Siamese cross who thinks it's a dog. It annoys me, at times, because of its demanding howl but I respect it. It's got a brain".

### 9.3 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.

"We have a friend who hates cats. Every time he comes to the house the cat sits on his knee".

"There's something special about cats"

"I can't stand the way they rub up against you"

"Cats are sneaky".

"Cats have got a wild tiger in them. You never know when they're going to strike".

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".

"A cat is a female sign - you talk about cat women but you don't have dog men".

## Researchers' Postscript

It is no mystery as to why 90's Australians are turning, in larger numbers, towards dogs and cats. They 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 pet ownership can bring. In part, this is because of the demands of contemporary life, the ever increasing pace of social change and the unsettling effect this has on human beings. It is also because now, 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 to satisfy them.

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 they enjoy with their pet is a proper relationship and as such, it involves a balance of rights and responsibilities, pleasure and duties. One of the things many pet owners argue vehemently is 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. But for pet owners the equation comes down strongly on the side of the intangible and many would say immeasurable, positives which a dog or cat provide.



Published by the Petcare Information and Advisory Service  
404/685 Burke Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124. Australia  
Telephone: (03) 9827 5344 Facsimile: (03) 9827 5090

Permission is give to quote or reproduce this material provided the source is identified  
ISBN 0 646 11824 2