

PROJECT

Australia has long been a nation of pet lovers, but the past 15 years have seen a steady decline in the number of 'owned' pet dogs and cats. Research continues to demonstrate the social and health benefits of pet ownership, but is increased regulation and social change making it all too hard? This week MEG WARD considers whether community education and a more strategic approach to regulation could help put pets back in our lives.

'We give residents the physical help to get up, but we need our activity program and our pet therapy to give them a reason to. Having their own pets would give them a purpose, and that is what we tend to take away from (elderly) people.'

— Jo Goodear, Dubbo Nursing Home manager

ABOUT 12,000 years ago an elderly lady was buried with her hand cradling a small puppy. Her burial site, at Ain Mallaha in Israel, is considered the first archaeological evidence of dog domestication and a powerful statement about humans' affinity for animals and need for their companionship.

But while medical, social and psychological research continues to identify benefits of pet ownership, many different pressures are causing a decline in pet numbers in Australia.

One section of society that experiences tangible benefits from pet ownership is the elderly, for whom pets provide comfort and companionship and give purpose to life.

For those whose health forces a move out of home and into aged care accommodation, the pain of separation from their much-loved pets is acute.

DUBBO NURSING HOME'S new manager Jo Goodear is one aged care professional who would like to ease that transition into residential care by allowing people to bring their pets with them.

While the home is not set up to handle residents' full-time pets, Goodear believes more aged care facilities will be in the future.

"It must be terribly difficult to have to come into residential aged care without your animals," she says.

"I've worked in this industry for nearly 30 years and I've always encouraged pet visits at the facilities I've managed, especially if family members can bring in the residents' own pets for visits.

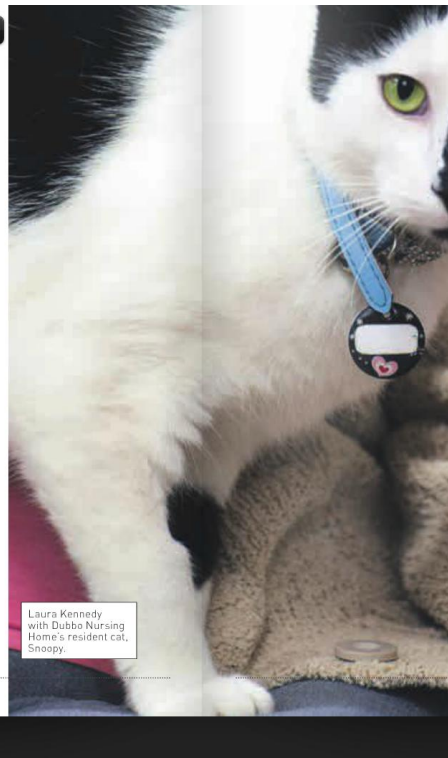
"There are an increasing number of facilities around Australia that have pets now, and I think in the future more pets will be able to live with their owners in nursing homes.

"All the studies show the therapeutic benefits of having pets and you can imagine that if you became ill, leaving your pets would be a huge stress on you. We don't want that.

"If you can bring your pets into an aged care facility then it does become home."

Dubbo Nursing Home has two pets of its own: a live-in cat and a Labrador who resides with a staff member and drops in once a week.

Goodear has seen first-hand the power that pets can have to transform the lives of elderly residents and believes the benefits of having pets in aged care facilities far outweigh the costs. ▶



Laura Kennedy with Dubbo Nursing Home's resident cat, Snoopy.

ORY



▶ She also thinks people would be surprised by how much the elderly would be able to do for their own pets, if they had support.

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"Having their own pets would give them a purpose, and that is what we tend to take away from (elderly) people."

Over the years Goodear has witnessed nursing home residents who appear not to respond to human contact, give that response to animals.

"My own dogs are two little Maltese-shih tzu crosses – pretend dogs," she laughs.

"They are very passive so they're happy to sit on chairs with people.

"People who haven't responded or who don't appear to respond at all, you'll see them pat them or just move their hand onto them.

"It's amazing."

VETERINARY behaviourist Dr Kersti Seksel loves the thought of aged care facilities opening their doors to pets, particularly in the case of independent living and retirement villages.

As president of the Australian Companion Animal Council (ACAC), the nation's peak body for the pet care industry, Seksel is tasked with promoting socially responsible pet ownership while also addressing the decline in pet numbers across Australia.

"It depends on the type of aged care facility and whether they have the ability to properly care for pets, but I absolutely agree that people should be able to have their own pets in independent living facilities and retirement villages," she says.

"I think we forget how often pets are really essential in people's lives and the link pets have with where the people used to live.

"Looking at these sorts of changes for aged care is a step forward."

Barriers to pet ownership within the aged population are among a range of factors ACAC is investigating in an attempt to arrest the declining level of pet ownership in

dren aren't growing up with pets.

"Gone are the days when kids had a friend or relative with a farm that they visited in the holidays, so now kids don't have any contact with animals at all, except perhaps when the show comes to town.

"What they get is stories from the media that are all about dogs being dangerous, with a picture of some rabid looking dog that's going to come and bite you.

"So the kids and the parents are becoming afraid of dogs and they're missing out on a lot of the benefits of pet ownership."

ACCORDING to Seksel, one of the keys to overcoming declining pet ownership is to start a community-wide discussion and get everyone working together.

"We need to sit down and have a conversation about the fact pets are really important to Australians. More than a third of households own a cat; that's a lot of voters. We need to get together so politicians listen to us as much as they listen to the other things that make the front-page headlines.

"We need to have an ear in to politicians so they can understand some of the knee-jerk legislative decisions they make about banning breeds or not allowing dogs on public transport aren't actually benefiting the community, because research tells us the community feels safer when there are pets around.

"We need to have an ear in to the media so they run positive dog and cat and bird stories as often as the horrible stories about attacks.

"We need to promote the health benefits to the medical profession; talk to the doctors and nurses and explain to them all the research that has shown mental and physical benefits of owning animals."

BUT while ACAC is trying to pull down the barriers to socially responsible pet ownership in Australia, other groups are questioning why, with so many animals surrendered to pounds and euthanased each year, we need more pets.

The NSW Companion Animals

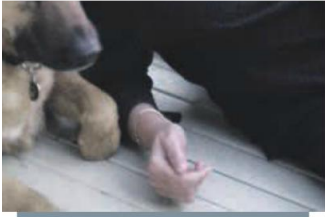
The price of irresponsible pet ownership:

Dubbo dog statistics for 2010/11 financial year

- Number of micro-chipped dogs in Dubbo: **13,390**
- Number of companion animals impounded at Dubbo Animal Shelter: **approx. 2000**
- Number of dogs impounded at Dubbo Animal Shelter: **approx. 1400**
- Number of cats impounded at Dubbo Animal Shelter: **approx. 600**
- Number of stray dog-type customer requests to council: **900**
- Number of dangerous animal-type requests to council: **130**
- Number of dog attack incidents reported: **61** [A dog attack can include any incident where a dog rushes at, attacks, bites, harasses or chases any person or animal – other than vermin – whether or not injury is caused.]
- Number of people involved in serious dog attacks: **8** [These are attacks where the injury resulted in medical treatment, hospitalisation or death.]
- Number of full-time rangers employed by Dubbo City Council: **3**

(Sources: Dubbo City Council and NSW Department of Local Government)





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– Dr Kersti Seksel, veterinary behaviourist and Australian Companion Animal Council president

gating in an attempt to arrest the declining level of pet ownership in Australia.

According to the non-profit organisation, between 1994 and 2009 Australia experienced a 22 per cent increase in its human population while, at the same time, there was a 10 per cent decrease in the number of pet dogs and a 20 per cent decrease in the number of pet cats.

ACAC is now asking: are Australians turning their backs on pet ownership by choice or, in the face of increasing regulation and social change, is it simply getting too hard to be a socially responsible pet owner?

"We are making it very difficult for people to own pets in a lot of urban, suburban and even semi-rural areas, because there is lots of legislation in different areas," Seksel believes.

"If you travel to Europe and the UK you can get your dog on the train, you can take your dog to the restaurant with you, in the US you can walk around the Grand Canyon with your dog; you can't do any of that in Australia.

"Renting with pets is extraordinarily difficult in Australia because landlords think pets will destroy the house, when in fact we know that's not true.

"Because we're leading such busy lifestyles we often think we can't own a pet, so a lot of young chil-

each year, we need more pets.

The NSW Companion Animals Taskforce was established by the State Minister for Local Government and the Minister for Primary Industries to advise on key companion animal issues and, in particular, reduce the current rate of companion animal euthanasia.

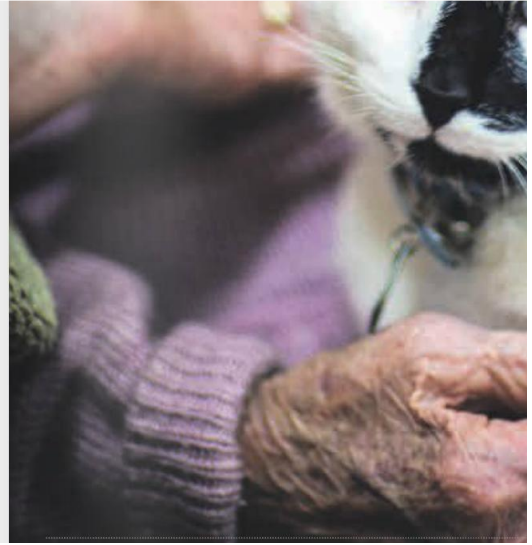
Taskforce data shows that in 2010/11 more than 30,300 cats and 21,600 dogs were euthanased in NSW animal welfare facilities.

According to Seksel, who is ACAC's representative on the taskforce, the responsibility for many of these deaths can be laid at the door of people who breed dogs and cats without thinking of the consequences.

"ACAC wants to see people breeding pets responsibly, not saying 'I'll have a litter of puppies and see what happens'.

"We need to breed animals that are suitable as pets and that's a big issue. You can breed them, but are they actually what the community wants?"

"We should be breeding for temperament and personality; animals that will fit in with families." According to Seksel, who is also a veterinary behaviourist, one of the implications of irresponsible breeding is the persistence of genetically-inherited anxiety disorders in pets, an issue she regularly witnesses as an animal behaviour expert. ▶



COVER STORY



People need to be responsible for the animal they have – they have to be able to afford to keep it and give it the attention and the exercise it needs. That doesn't mean you can't have a pet; you just have to choose the right one for you."

– Debbie Archer, Dubbo City Council's environmental control manager

▶ "It's true that euthanasia rates are high, but what we also have to recognise is that 20 per cent of animals have some sort of anxiety disorder.

"Anxiety is the underlying reason for aggression and who wants an aggressive dog?"

"Good breeders are breeding out hip dysplasia and other physical problems, and they should also be breeding out anxiety.

"Everybody looks at the euthanasia rates and says 'oh no, we're killing all these animals' but nobody wants to own the aggressive dog; it shouldn't have been bred in the first place."

Seksel believes many pet advocates are misguided in their wish to save all animals.

"Many people want to save every animal and you just can't.

"Who is going to want the dog that attacks you as soon as you walk in the cage? Or is so scared that it is terrified of walking out the front door?"

"Some dogs with anxiety disorders can be helped with behaviour modification, but not all. And who in society is going to pay for it?"

"Someone has to be the advocate for the animals and that's what I see as my role.

"If we really care about pets then sometimes euthanasia is the kindest thing I can do for a pet."

THE NSW Companion Animals Taskforce has released a discussion paper with a number of key findings, including the option of introducing a breeder licensing system to try and help overcome the issue of unwanted companion animals.

Annual registration fees have also been identified as a means of allowing councils to keep track of how many animals are in the community and where they live.

There is also the option of creating a community-wide education campaign to promote socially responsible pet ownership, covering issues such as appropriate housing and confinement, and how to choose an appropriate cat or dog.

They're propositions that could have great implications for the day-to-day activities of Dubbo City Council's manager of Environmental Control, Debbie Archer, who oversees the city's animal rangers.

"The big issue for us (in Environmental Control) is people who over-commit," Archer says.

"They want a certain type of dog so they get it without considering whether they can meet the responsibilities that come with pet ownership.

"This may mean they can't contain it, afford it or give it enough exercise. This often leads to the animal straying or having to find someone else that wants it.

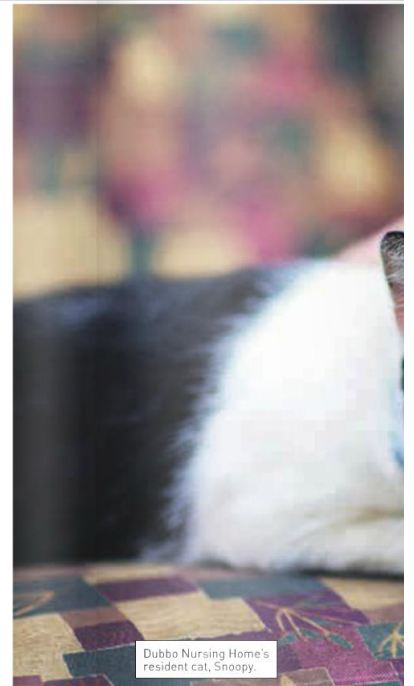
"Unfortunately many are dumped as a result and pets that are not de-sexed only (lead to) more unwanted animals.

"We also have incidents of attack situations where dogs are off lead or not contained within their yard and are attacking other animals or people.

"Although not often of a serious nature, it's a constant issue.

"People need to be responsible for the animal they have – they have to be able to afford to keep it and give it the attention and the exercise it needs.

"That doesn't mean you can't have a pet; you just have to choose the right one for you." ■



Dubbo Nursing Home's resident cat, Snoopy.