GLOBAL QUESTIONS

Do Animals Have Rights?
Is it cruel to keep companion animals?

Even if you do not keep a pet or a companion animal at home, you probably know someone who does. In the United States and Australia, 63 percent of households have at least one animal living with them. In the UK, 52 percent of families have a pet living with them, such as a dog, a cat, a bird, a fish, a reptile, or a rodent. Just counting the hounds and the felines, that adds up to 85 million dogs and 100 million cats in the United States, the UK and Australia alone.

American celebrity Paris Hilton has been accused of setting a bad example by treating her pets, which include a chihuahua, a ferret, and a kinkajou (rain forest mammal), as fashion accessories.

Expert View

Some animal experts say keeping pets is not a problem provided they are cared for properly:

“If you provide the best possible environment for your animal and enrich its life, it will enrich yours in turn and that is a good partnership. It’s owners who don’t know how to look after their pets, don’t bother to find out, and couldn’t care less who are unethical, in my view. Sadly, I see a lot.”

David Grant, Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals vet
Animal lovers?
Pets keep us company, encourage us to be more active, and protect and entertain us. Numerous research studies have also shown that they are good for our health. In return, we invest a lot of money and time on their care. In the United States alone, people spend an estimated $41 billion a year on pet food, veterinary bills, and medicine, equipment, grooming services, toys, shelter, and temporary care. The majority of people with companion animals would describe themselves as animal lovers and see no problem with ownership as long as the animals are well cared for.

Not ours to own
Some animal rights advocates support the abolition of all forms of animal ownership. They say that to keep companion animals is to treat them as commodities. An animal can never have rights if it is the property of humans because it cannot choose when or what it eats or where it lives. It cannot exhibit its true personality if its behavior conflicts with its owner’s interests. If an owner decides that he or she no longer wants the companion animal, it faces life in a shelter or death by gassing or lethal injection.

Other animal rights activists and welfarists support the view that keeping certain animals is ethical provided that we act as responsible owners. Not only should owners meet the individual needs of animals in their care, but they should make sure that their actions do not have a negative impact on other animals.

Problems with pets
Animal rights advocates agree that although companion animals enjoy “special status” and often have greater legal protection than farm or wild animals, keeping them creates significant welfare problems. General neglect by owners, routine cruel practices, strays and abandoned animals, overbreeding, ill health caused by inbreeding, and the keeping of exotic pets are all areas for concern.
Neglect and cruelty
While most owners look after their pets responsibly, there are people who neglect their animals' needs. For example, some chain their dogs for hours at a time; others leave animals to roam the streets, provide the wrong diet, offer inadequate shelter or do not bother to exercise their pets or give them a stimulating environment.

Stray and unwanted animals are a huge problem because they face starvation, disease, and early death. They are more likely to be ill treated because they run wild and pose a danger to human health and safety. The World Society for the Protection of Animals estimates that there are 600 million dogs and almost as many cats in the world. Of these, it is estimated that 80 percent are stray or unwanted. Even in countries with strong animal welfare laws and a long tradition of pet ownership, there are too many dogs and cats, and as a result, shelters are filled with millions of unwanted animals. Some are adopted by new owners, but millions of others have to be destroyed.

Animal welfare and rights organizations believe that neutering a pet is one of the essential principles of responsible pet ownership. They also urge people to adopt pets from shelters rather than buy them from a pet store or commercial breeding facility.

Commercial breeding
Animal rights activists insist that commercial-breeding facilities make the overpopulation problem worse by producing animals for profit. The animals are often forced to live in grim conditions that affect their physical and psychological health. Dogs reared on puppy farms are kept in cramped, dirty cages and have few opportunities to socialize with humans. This means that they may be dangerous when later placed in family homes. Female dogs kept on puppy farms are bred continuously, which exhausts them and affects their health.
People differ in their views about the rights and wrongs of keeping companion animals:

“Domesticated animals] are perpetually dependent on us. We control their lives forever. They truly are ‘animal slaves.’ We may be benevolent ‘masters,’ but we really aren’t anything more than that. And that cannot be right.”

*Gary L. Francione, legal academic and animal rights theorist*

“Animals, and nature in general, are a marvelous health tonic. If we include them in our lives, if our physiology is set in a way that includes the rest of the living world, then we shall live longer and certainly more rewarding lives.”

*James J. Lynch, psychologist and director of the Life Care Foundation*

**What is your view?**

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**Exotic species**

Humans have been domesticating cats and dogs for thousands of years, so these animals have adapted to live alongside people. Wild animals, however, are often difficult to train. They may be cute and cuddly when they are young but aggressive when they reach maturity, and they often need a large, extra-secure shelter to live in. Many owners do not understand the complex dietary and behavioral needs of exotic animals and end up letting them loose in the wild or handing them over to zoos or rescue sanctuaries.

![A dog peers out of a hole in a door on a farm in Pennsylvania where puppies are bred to supplement the farmer's income. Dogs bred commercially are treated like farm animals, not pets.](image)