

A modest proposal: reduce pets for a sustainable future

With the world's resources under increasing pressure, Erik Assadourian argues that pet ownership needs a drastic rethink. Could sharing and repurposing pets be the way forward?



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theguardian.com, Friday 25 April 2014 13.02 EDT



Can pet dogs be part of a sustainable future or are they a drain on the world's resources? Photograph: G Robert Bishop/Getty

Early last month the Pet Industry Sustainability Coalition [launched an update](#) for its Pet Industry Sustainability Toolkit (yes, it's called [PIST](#)). Touting a partner like [Natural Capital Solutions](#), this toolkit, in theory, should offer some bold ways the industry could become sustainable – such as promoting small dog ownership (as they eat less) – but instead it offers remedial advice like how to reduce packaging waste, make buildings more efficient, and remove toxic chemicals from supply chains.

Meanwhile, less than two weeks later, [hundreds of companies and entrepreneurs](#) convened in Orlando for the 10th annual [Global Pet Expo](#) to sell more useless stuff to pet owners – everything from remote video camera treat dispensing systems (for the guilty pet owner who spends all day at the office) to designer pet clothes, toys, even burial caskets – helping to stoke the [annual \\$55.7bn pet industry](#) in the US.

As our pets increasingly adopt the consumer habits of their owners, it's clear that no matter how "green" this industry becomes, it will never become sustainable. But even if we severely restrict what pet products can be sold, and even if we stop overfeeding our increasingly overweight pet populations – 53% of dogs and 58% of cats are overweight or obese in the US, [according to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention](#) – can pets be part of a sustainable future?

The short, if unpopular, answer is probably not. Two German Shepherds [use more resources](#) just for their annual food needs than the average Bangladeshi uses each year in total. And while pet owners may disagree that Bangladeshis have more right to exist than their

precious Schnookums, the truth is that pets serve little more societal purpose than keeping us company in an increasingly individualistic and socially isolated consumer society.

Thorstein Veblen observed way back in 1899 that dogs' "value to their owners lies chiefly in their utility as items of conspicuous consumption". Granted, few dog - or other pet owners - would self-identify with this - thanks in part to the pet industry's effective marketing strategy to humanize pets (83% of pet owners now consider their pets part of the family).

Instead, many would argue that pets provide people with companionship, improve health, reduce stress, and even provide a reason to get out and meet people. But would this still hold true in a society where robust levels of social capital existed? And more so, is the continued ownership of pets actually preventing the rebuilding of community ties (after all, why invest one's time and energy in opinionated people with differing views when one can instead spend time with a faithful dog that will enthusiastically amuse you any time you want)?

But our pet population consumes a huge amount of resources which, in our climate constrained reality, are no longer available. With a human population of 7.2 billion and a dog and cat population now in the hundreds of millions (it's estimated at 179m in the US alone), the Earth cannot sustain these populations – especially as a growing percentage of pets live their lives as ravenous consumers.

So fast forward to a climate disrupted future, which the new IPCC report suggests is coming faster than we thought. Where do pets fit in? When climate change disrupts grain supplies, shoots food prices through the roof and also eviscerates the global consumer economy, pets may be abandoned in droves, as families suddenly can no longer afford their upkeep. We've seen this happen in times of economic crises, hence the large feral dog population in Detroit today. But perhaps at that point the pet issue will solve itself – as these packs of dogs become a bridge food for the hungry unemployed masses.

Of course, far better than eating unwanted pets would be to follow Bob Barker's long-standing advice to spay and neuter your pets so their offspring never put extra burden on the planet in the first place. Governments could facilitate this by strengthening the pet licensing system, for example, creating a very steep tax on pets (along with pet products and pet food) and tripling that tax for pets that aren't spayed or neutered (so that only breeders would choose not to fix their pets).

At the same time, marketing of pets and pet products should be tightly regulated (or banned outright), and polluting veterinarian services like chemotherapy should be reserved only for service animals. Sorry, but if Bangladeshis (and much of the world's population) cannot afford advanced healthcare, should Fido? Not in a world of limited resources.

In other words, as we prepare for the contracting future ahead, a low-hanging fruit is to change the culture around pet ownership. Not just by putting the above barriers in place to discourage overall ownership, but to help shift the norms around what pet ownership means.

Imagine, for example, if the pet culture shifted away from owning one or more pets per household to more of a "time-share" or Zipcar model? Reserving a play date with your favorite Golden Retriever once a week would reduce pet ownership – and the resulting economic and environmental costs – dramatically as people felt comfortable occasionally playing with a shared pet instead of owning one. While we're a long way from that future, a few services that promote

pet sharing among pet lovers do already exist, like the online pet sharing platform, [Pets to Share](#), and Californian-based nonprofit, citydogshare.org.

And imagine if pets that people owned once again provided a productive service – not just guarding the home, but also laying eggs (geese are both good security systems and egg layers), giving milk, or even providing meat in the case of a pig, rabbits, or [guinea pigs](#) (just ask Peruvians how tasty these can be).

Finally, perhaps the best way to shift norms around pet ownership is to simply start working to rebuild community interactions. Community gardens, book clubs, resilience circles, neighborhood tool and toy libraries, church groups, and transition towns: all of these might go a long way in providing the social engagement that a walk with the dog currently provides. And unlike a dog, community ties will play an essential role in helping people get through the disruptions climate change will bring.

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