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LIFE-CYCLE STUDIES

Pets

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Pets

Overview

Human domestication of animals probably began with dogs about 17,000 years ago, although some experts believe the association is much older. Dogs got an assured supply of food and shelter, and in return they offered ingrained tracking, hunting, and guarding skills. It's been argued that dogs selected humans, not the other way around, but one way or another a symbiotic relationship developed.

Other species were tamed later during the Neolithic period, which saw the spread of farming and the domestication of goats, sheep, pigs, and cows. Chickens have been "kept" crea-

tures for at least 8,000 years. The cat was domesticated 9,500 years ago in Cyprus, when wild cats came in from the cold to eat the rodents infesting the grain stores of early farmers. It took a couple of millennia more before donkeys and horses were harnessed for transport. Some animals, despite apparent potential, can't be domesticated; the zebra is a notorious case of one that can't be drafted. But almost any creature can, and has been, kept as a pet, including rats, scorpions, and cockroaches. Low expectations widen the range of possibilities.

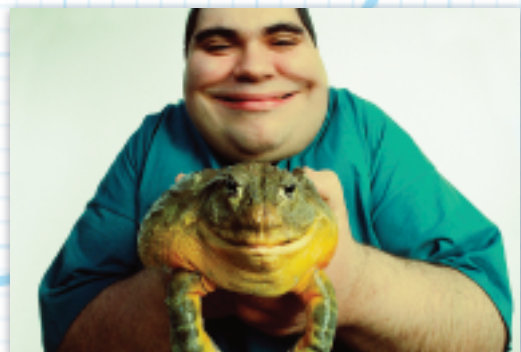


Pets Today

Pets (companion animals) are a huge industry, worth about US\$40 billion per year in the United States and \$10 billion per year in Japan, where a rare dog like a teacup poodle can cost \$10,000. The allure of even more-exotic pets plays a big part in the global trade in illegal wildlife, worth \$6 billion a year.

People clearly love pets, and studies suggest that pets confer health benefits such as lower blood pressure. There is a tragic side to this phenomenon, however. Trade in illegal animals

has led to species extinctions and to disruption of natural ecosystems. Many pets suffer and/or die of neglect, abuse, or simple carelessness; in the United Kingdom, for example, 50 percent of domestic pets are clinically obese. The pursuit of exotic traits by breeders has created many genetic defects. Overbreeding and a lack of neutering drives 6–8 million cats into U.S. animal shelters each year. Perhaps half are euthanized because there are not enough homes for them.



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Environmental Impacts

The first commercial dog food was invented in 1860, but before the 1950s most pets seemed content with kitchen scraps. The pet food industry has boomed since then, accounting for about \$15 billion of the U.S. pet industry's \$40 billion in annual revenues. Most of this food comes from the same factory farms and confined animal feeding operations that supply human needs, and thereby contributes to the waste loads and suffering inherent to these production methods.

Animal waste, especially from dogs, is another problem. It can be composted or put in toilets, but mostly is discarded in the trash or simply left lying where it's deposited (large shares

of dog owners don't clean up after their pets). Studies suggest that 95 percent of fecal coliform bacteria in urban stormwater comes from non-human animals, including pets. Apart from harmful bacteria, pet waste can contain other organisms such as worm eggs—a single gram of waste from an infected animal can contain 15,000 eggs—that can sicken humans.

Some studies suggest that roaming housecats are a major cause of songbird deaths. One wind-energy consulting firm put the figure at 100 million a year, about the same number killed by human hunters but probably far fewer than die in collisions with glass windows.