

# The Power of Pets

The benefits of companion animal ownership



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Veterinary Nurses' Council of Australia Inc

**Australian Companion Animal Council Inc**

Unit 40, 6 Herbert Street, St Leonards NSW 2065.

Telephone (02) 9431 5000. Facsimilie (02) 9437 9068. Web: [www.acac.org.au](http://www.acac.org.au)

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## Executive Summary

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With more pets living in Australia than people, pets continue to be a significant part of our lives. Australia has one of the highest levels of pet ownership in the world with almost two thirds of Australian households currently owning at least one pet.

Not only are pets wonderful companions they also provide significant psychological and physiological benefits to owners. In addition, pets engender caring and responsibility in our children, improve feelings of safety and help create social bridges in our communities.

The importance of the pet industry to Australia's economy mirrors the importance of pets to people.

The pet industry is one of the largest industries in Australia, contributing around \$4.74 billion annually and employing over 44,700 people. Although the traditional dog and cat pet population is declining,

the amount of money spent on our pets continues to rise. This suggests that we are moving towards owning fewer pets, but spending more on them and a reflection of our changing lifestyles.

Regrettably, increased high density living, changing lifestyles and government legislation are creating an environment in which pet ownership is under threat.

Because of the considerable benefits pets brings to individuals, the community and the economy, serious attention must be given to the issues limiting pet ownership. The needs of pets, pet owners and non-pet owners are all legitimate. These needs must be considered, appreciated and integrated with society and the environment, to ensure that people and pets can live harmoniously in our communities.

Socially responsible pet ownership in Australia is an important part of Australian culture.



*Sheep farmer 2003. FairfaxPhotos.com*

# Pet Ownership in Australia

Australia continues to have one of the highest levels of pet ownership in the world with an estimated 63% of households owning some kind of pet (53% owning a cat or dog)<sup>1</sup>. In 2007, 37.1 million pets were owned throughout Australia<sup>2</sup> including 3.7 million dogs and 2.2 million cats<sup>2</sup>. In addition, approximately 20 million fish, 7.8 million birds and around 3 million other pets including horses, rabbits, guinea pigs and other small animals<sup>2</sup>.

Despite all the known benefits of owning a pet, over the past ten years data collected tells us that the dog and cat population has peaked and is now slowly declining<sup>2</sup>. The cat population has continued to decline year on year since 2002. Cat numbers have

declined from a high of 3.2 million in 1988 to the current levels of 2.2 million<sup>2</sup>. Since a decline in 2005, the national average of dog ownership per 100 people has remained steady at 18 dogs per 100 people. National and state estimated pet populations in 2007 are detailed in Table 1 and number of pets per 100 head of population by state is presented in Table 2.

With more pets than people in Australia, clearly owning pets is of significant interest to our communities and involves the majority of Australians. Pet owners need to be educated and supported by the community to ensure that facilities and services encourage them to own their pets in a socially responsible manner.

**Table 1: Estimated Australian pet population in 2007 ('000)**

State	Dogs	Cats	Birds	Fish	Other *	Total pets
NSW/ACT	1,209	730	2,550	7,900	1,050	13,439
VIC	906	581	1,800	4,900	750	8,937
QLD	794	386	1,500	3,500	500	6,680
SA/NT	357	251	1,000	2,000	300	3,908
WA	321	217	700	1,700	200	3,138
TAS	105	78	250	500	75	1,008
Total	3,692	2,243	7,800	20,500	2,875	37,110

\*Other pets includes pleasure horses, rabbits, guinea pigs etc... Source: TNS and BIS Shrapnel estimates

**Table 2: Number of pets per head of human population, by state 2007**

State	Human Population ('000)	Dogs: no. per 100 people	Cats: no. per 100 people
NSW/ACT	7,268	17	10
VIC	5,246	17	11
QLD	4,228	19	9
SA/NT	1,810	20	14
WA	2,019	16	11
TAS	496	21	16
2007	Total 21,067	National Average 18	National Average 11
2005	Total 20,385	National Average 18	National Average 12
2002	Total 19,705	National Average 20	National Average 13
1998	Total 18,748	National Average 20	National Average 13

Source: TNS, ABS and BIS Shrapnel estimates

# The Human/Companion Animal Bond

Humans have been living with domestic animals for thousands of years. In actual fact, the entire history of civilisation has been accompanied by, and in many ways dependent on, the animals that live in our communities. Therefore, the modern popularity of keeping a pet, despite no longer having regular contact with other animals, is not surprising.

The roles animals play in our lives appear to shift in emphasis as we move through different life stages. Since the late 1960s these roles and their impact on us have been studied by scientists and researchers. Such work has contributed to the growing literature on what we now call the study of Human/Animal Interactions (HAI), or anthrozoology\*. The most interesting and important fact about the human/animal interaction is that it can actually improve the quality of our lives.

## Pets as companions

Almost all pet owners say they often talk to their pet and believe that their pet communicates with them<sup>1</sup>. 81% of owners say they never feel alone when they are with their pet<sup>1</sup>. The reliable and unconditional companionship provided by pets results in 91% of owners feeling 'very close' to their pets - almost as many say they feel as close to their families. In actual fact, 56% of women and 41% of men say their pet is more affectionate than their partner<sup>1</sup>. Studies have shown that with pet ownership there is a marked increase in social contact. This has shown to be significantly important with disabled people who have an animal with them. It seems that pets are not only wonderful companions but they also act to break down communication barriers<sup>3</sup>.

## Pets as helpers

Pets serve us in so many ways - not only as companions but also as workers. They have proven to be invaluable in a number of roles,



*Mark and Heather the guide dog 2008.  
K Geraghty/FairfaxPhotos.com*

including such examples as guide dogs for the blind, 'hearing' and assistance dogs for the disabled, 'sniffer' dogs used by police and customs, sheep and cattle dogs for stock work as well as horses for riding for the disabled.

## Pets as social enablers

The increased research interest in pets in health is now exploring the idea that pets help people to build social bridges in communities, acting as social lubricants with neighbours or strangers, or as motivators for walking and use of parks. This allows pet owners to feel more involved through greater contact with others around them, reducing any isolation they might feel. A study by the University of Western Australia's School of Population Health found that over 50% of dog owners and 40% of pet owners in general meet people in their neighbourhood as a result of their pet and over 80% of dog owners talk to other people when out walking their dogs<sup>4,5</sup>. These social bridges might be referred to as 'the glue that holds society together' also known as social capital. The building of social capital is known to have positive effects on the health and economic viability of a society.

*\* For more information visit [www.anthrozoology.org](http://www.anthrozoology.org)*

# Health Benefits of Pet Ownership

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Research has shown that pets provide owners with both psychological and physiological benefits and the majority of these owners are healthier than those without pets.

## Cardiovascular health

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in Australia, accounting for 34% of all deaths in 2006<sup>6</sup>. The positive impact of pets on cardiovascular health was first recognised in the early 1980s when a study found that pet owners were much less likely to die in the 12 months following a heart attack than non pet owners<sup>7</sup>. The results were then replicated in the mid 90's. It is this specific area of research that made the medical community take notice of the 'pets are good for you' premise.

In 1992 a study of 5,741 participants attending a free screening clinic revealed that pet owners showed lower levels of risk factors for heart disease, including lower blood pressure and lower cholesterol, than non pet owners<sup>8</sup>. The results amounted to a possible

4% reduction in risk of heart disease and were equivalent to starting a low-salt diet or cutting down on alcohol.

In 2008 a study examined changes in socio-demographic, environmental and intrapersonal factors associated with dog acquisition and found evidence to suggest that dog acquisition leads to increased walking levels and motivation by owners<sup>9</sup>.

## Less visits to the doctor

Studies have also shown positive relationships between pet ownership and general human health. An English scientist showed that minor illnesses and complaints were substantially reduced in people who owned pets. In the case of dog-owners, the positive impact remained for the duration of the 10 month study<sup>10</sup>.

Several studies have shown that pet ownership may influence the need for medical services. They have clearly demonstrated that dog and



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cat owners make fewer annual visits to the doctor and spend less time in hospital<sup>11</sup>. It follows that pet owners use the health system less than non-pet owners, resulting in savings in national health expenditure. In 1995 a study estimated that dogs and cats saved up to \$2.227 billion of current health expenditure<sup>12</sup>.

### **Stress and bereavement**

Owning a pet has been linked to a reduction in mental stress and 79% of owners find it comforting to be with their pet 'when things go wrong'<sup>1</sup>. This knowledge has been applied to therapy where the introduction of a dog was found to relax patients and improved their therapy sessions. Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) and Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) are currently used in a wide range of therapeutic and institutional settings.

Pets also appear to provide a powerful buffering effect against grief. In one study of elderly people who had recently lost a spouse, having a strong attachment to a pet was associated with significantly less depression<sup>13</sup>. Another study found that the health of widows without pets deteriorated significantly in comparison with those with pets<sup>14</sup>.

### **Pets and the elderly**

Pets have been shown to greatly increase quality of life for the elderly including reduced tension, fatigue and confusion and increased feelings of enthusiasm, interest and inspiration<sup>15,16</sup>. The role of pets is particularly significant for those who live in a nursing home or in some situation of assisted care. Numerous studies show pets provide one of the few interventions capable of permanently lifting the atmosphere of hospices and nursing homes.

Research undertaken in nursing homes and private residences shows pets delay the aging process. This is achieved through increased physical exercise and socialisation and increased mental functioning attained through talking to pets and having the responsibility of caring for them. Pets also

boost the activity levels of the elderly, and dogs especially help people keep an active routine providing a reason to get up in the morning.

### **Children, social development and family life**

Today, pets are being treated more like 'one of the family' than ever before and a family pet is a great addition to a child's life. More than being a simple playmate and confidante, pets may also aid childhood development especially nurturing and social skills.

It has been shown that growing up with a dog (and other pets to a lesser extent) during infancy helps to strengthen the immune system and reduces the risk of allergies linked to asthma<sup>17</sup>.

In addition, young children, aged five to six in a family who own a dog are 50% less likely to be overweight or obese compared with those who do not own a dog. Even the incidental play that children undertake with their dog in the backyard or house contributes to increased levels of physical activity<sup>18</sup>.

Self-esteem has been shown to be higher in children or adolescents who have a pet<sup>19</sup>. School children who own pets have also been shown to be more popular with their classmates but also more empathetic<sup>20</sup>. Children with family pets take more family walks than those without<sup>21</sup> and teenage girls report feeling safer when walking alone with their dog, an important finding when as a society we are increasingly concerned about community safety. These factors may explain why teenagers with dogs also believe life is more fun and have a more positive outlook<sup>22</sup>.

In the twenty-first century as family sizes drop, pets are also becoming more important as an outlet for the human nurturing instinct. For children who no longer care for large groups of siblings and women who are delaying or choosing not to have children, pets are an integral part of the family that provide an essential outlet for this powerful instinct.

## Value of the Pet Industry

The popularity of pet ownership has created one of the largest industries in Australia, contributing around \$4.74 billion to the economy in 2007 and providing employment for around 44,700 people<sup>2</sup>. This huge industry covers not only the manufacture of pet food and veterinary products, but also a wide variety of services provided by veterinary practices, pet shops, breeders and pet specialists.

To provide a comparison, sales of other major Australian industries are as follows<sup>2</sup>:

Meat for human consumption	\$4,856 million
Poultry and poultry products	\$3,196 million
Cheese and curd	\$1,953 million
Bread	\$1,661 million
Chocolate confectionery	\$1,514 million

### Dog-related expenses represent<sup>2</sup>:

- 58% of total consumer pet care expenditure
- the average yearly expenditure per dog is \$746

### Cat-related expenses represent<sup>2</sup>:

- 28% of total consumer pet care expenditure
- the average yearly expenditure per cat is \$583

The greatest spend on pets comes from the food sector. \$2.0 billion was spent on food in 2007 on both manufactured (76%) and non-manufactured (24%) food<sup>2</sup>. Pet food accounts for 43% of all expenditure on pets<sup>2</sup>.

Veterinary services total 24% of expenditure on pets, estimated at \$1.16 billion<sup>2</sup>.

The total expenditure by pet owners on pet care products and equipment, non-veterinary services (such as grooming, training and boarding) and other items (such as dog and cat registration and aquariums) is estimated to be \$1.1 billion<sup>2</sup>.

Details of expenditure by main pet types and industry segments are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3: Expenditure on pet care by pet/service type, 2007 (\$ million)**

Expenditure type	Dogs	Cats	Other pets	Total
Food - Manufactured	880	510	150	1,540
Food - Non-manufactured	295	185	-	480
Subtotal	1,175	695	150	2,020
Veterinary charges*	700	330	125	1,155
Products/equipment	220	110	225	555
Services (not veterinary)	400	140	-	540
Pet purchases	105	20	162	287
Other expenses	155	12	12	179
Total	2,755	1,307	674	4,736
% total	58.2	27.6	14.2	100.0

\* Including drugs, prescriptions, other products and services provided by veterinarians. Source: BIS Shrapnel estimates

In assessing the value of the pet care industry to the overall economy, all states and territories benefit (Table 4). Their market share is roughly equivalent to their share of the total pet population with the assumption that expenditure is fairly even across the states.





**Table 4: Summary of Australian expenditure on pet care by state, 2007 (\$ million)**

State	Dogs	Cats	Other pets	Total	% Total
NSW/ACT	902	425	249	1,576	33.3
VIC	676	339	161	1,176	24.8
QLD	592	225	119	936	19.8
SA/NT	266	146	71	484	10.2
WA	240	126	56	422	8.9
Tasmania	78	45	18	142	3.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,755</b>	<b>1,307</b>	<b>674</b>	<b>4,736</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: BIS Shrapnel estimates

Even though the dog and cat population in Australia is declining, the amount spent each year on these animals continues to increase. Lifestyle changes are accelerating giving the potential for more childless, dual income households to own pets. These households may have access to a high disposable income and a desire to own pets.

It would seem likely that these and other socio-economic factors will lead to continued growth in expenditure on pets and their needs despite the pet population decline. As an approaching \$5 billion industry employing almost 44,700 people, the importance of the pet industry to Australia's economy mirrors the importance of pets to society.



# Threats to Pet Ownership

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## City living and hectic lifestyles

Pet ownership is being increasingly compromised by the push for urban consolidation. Smaller backyards and apartment living tend to discourage people from owning dogs and cats and place more demands on public open space.

Our hectic lifestyles and city living simultaneously place more stress on people whilst making it harder to own pets. Longer working hours, less precious free time and more single person homes means that people don't believe they have enough time at home to look after a pet. This is all happening at a time when the benefits of owning a pet are exactly what are required to live well in today's fast-paced world. Sadly, pet ownership is being compromised at the very time that it could be most beneficial.

Dogs are often prohibited from parks and beaches. For dog owners to be able to manage their pets successfully they need ready access to public areas within walking distance of home. Planners need to consider the social benefits of pet ownership and allow for the inclusion of pets into public open space and into housing and community developments.

People who do not own pets cite unsuitable accommodation, such as rental properties or

accommodation without outdoor living space, and lack of anyone at home to care for a pet as the key reasons for their lack of animal companions<sup>23</sup>.

People change their accommodation many times in their lives. Sadly, pets are actively banned from many retirement villages and new apartment developments. As a result, many pet owners may be asked to forfeit their pets as they move home.

## Rental accommodation

Finding pet friendly rental accommodation can be difficult for companion animal owners; in fact many rental agreements simply prohibit the keeping of pets as a matter of course. A survey conducted on behalf of ACAC found that even though 63% of Australian households own pets, when it comes to rented premises that figure drops to less than 17%.

In response to this problem ACAC continues to develop the brochures 'Renting with Pets' and 'Tenants with Pets' to help landlords and tenants deal with the issues which arise when tenants own pets. The brochures highlight that a well managed pet policy can enhance a property's profitability, and also help tenants demonstrate that reliable and socially responsible pet owners make good tenants.

## Finding the right fit

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It is a common misconception that the type of home we live in is important to successful pet ownership. Some people incorrectly believe that dogs can only live happily in houses with large backyards. Dogs can, in fact, successfully live in highly urbanised areas. Similarly, cats can be kept permanently indoors if needed because of close proximity to busy roads or native bushland, or even in high-rise apartment living.

Enriching a pet's environment to include physical and mental stimulation is more important for both dogs and cats than space. Exercise and interaction with an

owner is far more beneficial (for both owner and pet) than loneliness in a big backyard. Sometimes keeping more than one pet can help provide acceptable levels of stimulation and companionship for pets.

As housing density increases and lifestyles change so too does the need to select the right type and breed of pet to suit the housing environment and lifestyle of the owner. Training of both pets and educating those who regularly interact with them is crucial to ensure that pets are part of a harmonious community.



# Legislation and ACAC Objectives

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## Legislation

The various tiers of government can hinder or help pet ownership. Hindrance may vary from restrictions on access to open spaces, to limits on pet ownership through to increased council registration costs.

Help can be provided through informed decision-making that takes into account the popularity, value and place of pets in society. Education programs which encourage a thorough understanding of the needs of animals and teach pet owner responsibility can also help pets, their owners and even non-pet owners.

Pet owners should not be made to feel guilty about their decisions to own pets, nor should they be given the perception that pet ownership is the domain of the wealthy. They are the vast majority of the population and their choices to own cats, dogs and other animals is based on what is now scientifically validated - pets make us feel good.

Increases in pet-related charges by government authorities could potentially place pet ownership out of financial reach of some lower socio-economic sections of society, who in many cases may benefit most from pet ownership.

Workable legislation should be the norm. Animal welfare will be improved through greater understanding and consideration of the issues surrounding companion animal ownership in Australia.

## Our Purpose

The purpose of the ACAC is to provide a forum for the pet care industry to promote the benefits of socially responsible companion animal ownership to the wider community.

## Our Objectives

To achieve this purpose the Australian Companion Animal Council will:

- Promote socially responsible pet ownership by endorsing or implementing community education programs and conferences
- Provide an effective voice against those who oppose socially responsible companion animal ownership
- Organise, co-ordinate and publicise studies and surveys about companion animal ownership.
- Be a spokesperson for socially responsible companion animal ownership
- Participate in the legislative process where it affects companion animal ownership
- Endorse or conduct national events promoting socially responsible companion animal ownership
- Seek and maintain affiliation and co-operation with national and international organisations with similar objectives

# Membership and Activities

## ACAC Education

ACAC and many of its member organisations are involved in educational initiatives to promote socially responsible pet ownership. These programs include:

- Safe Pets Out There (SPOT) - a NSW school education campaign ([www.spot.nsw.gov.au](http://www.spot.nsw.gov.au))
- PetPEP - a national program for school children on the responsibilities of pet ownership
- Canine Good Citizen Instructor Course - producing qualified dog trainers

## ACAC Activities

ACAC was established in 1995 and since then has undertaken a wide range of projects and participated in an advisory capacity on many industry committees. Council activities include:

- Submission of papers to all levels of Government on pet related issues

- Representation on the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy Committee; a Federal Government initiative administered by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
- Community and industry education programs such as SPOT, PetPEP, Canine Good Citizens
- Publication of Contribution of the Pet Care Industry to the Australian Economy (Editions 1-6)
- Distribution of the Australian Directory of Human Animal Interaction Programs
- Publication, promotion and distribution of pamphlets on 'Renting with pets' and 'Tenants with 'Pets'
- Development and maintenance of [www.acac.org.au](http://www.acac.org.au)



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