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Elevating Our Animals

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elevating OUR ANIMALS

From man's best friend to sleeping in our beds, are companion animals being upgraded to human-class?

BY KELLY STRATTON

Research, says Dr. Serpell, suggests that this perspective on animals is growing stronger.

"Trends suggest that our attitudes toward animals in western society have changed in the last 30 to 40 years," he said. "We see that reflected in memberships in animal protection organizations and the money donated to them, and in changes to laws that regulate animal testing and animal cruelty."

While it looks like attitude shifts in favor of animals are taking place, Dr. Serpell admits that in tough economies, animals can be one of the areas where people cut back. In extreme cases, like home foreclosures, dogs and cats may be given over to the care of shelters.

"Economy affects everything, including how people feel about dogs. When the economy bites, people cut back and expenses related to pets is one area that's re-evaluated."

Eating...

When money is no object, however, pet parents don't shirk providing the very best of everything for their pets. Cuisine included. And the sheer number of types of food available signifies a trend that's been growing since the 1970s.

"There's no question that specificity foods have started to get more shelf space," said Dr. Kathy Michel, associate professor of nutrition at Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania (Ryan-VHUP). "Nowadays, companies are marketing for added value. And food is something we all can understand. Eat this; don't eat that. It's good for you; it's bad for you. People understand that. It's one thing people can take into their own hands. It makes perfect sense to translate over to pets."

While much of the attention here is from food production companies' marketing initiatives, the shift also illustrates the advances and attention paid to the field of veterinary nutrition.

"In the 1970s, veterinary nutrition got serious, but there's still a lot to do," said Dr. Michel. "What's the optimal level of intake? I don't think there's any question we've gotten

Anthropomorphism.

It's a buzz word that's picking up steam in the media and tells pet owners we're treating our animals more like children than, well, pets. But is it a true trend? Have people's perceptions of pets shifted and elevated animals to a human status? Or is it something marketers have dreamed up to profit from once-thought-ridiculous items like doggie galoshes and kitty cat sweaters?

It may be a little bit of both.

Whether you call yourself a "pet parent" or are sticking with the classic role of "owner," there is evidence of improvements to the status of companion animals in the last half-century or so, including a shift in how we think about our relationship with animals, what we feed our pets, how we train them and how we rescue those that are homeless.

Thinking...

"To me, animals are just another group of dependents, and this creates certain moral obligations and duties," said Dr. James Serpell, director of the Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. "If we accept that we use animals to serve our own interests – companionship, as a food source, as a workforce – if we accept that, I strongly believe we have an obligation to safeguard their welfare."

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better in designing diets for optimal nutrition and in offering people an array of food options for their pets.”

Types of formulas that have been on the upswing for several years include those that claim to support joint function, whole food options that include real bits of chicken, blueberries or some other ingredients, or foods that eliminate a particular protein or grain for owners seeking hypo-allergenic and organic options.

One step further from finding a functional food is those owners who cook for their pets.

“It’s still the minority, no question,” said Dr. Michel. “But some people do cook for their pets – it satisfies a personal need – whether the pet is ill or a person just wants to do what they feel is best for their animal. It takes a committed owner, it’s not cheap, but their pet is worth it.”

Training...

Much as the stigma of going to see a psychologist has been lifted with time, so has the stigma of seeking help from a veterinarian trained in the science of behavior medicine when owners can’t get their pets under control.

“There’s been an awareness about behavior since the 1980s, but it didn’t become a specialty until the mid-90s,” said Dr. Ilana Reisner, assistant professor of behavioral medicine and director of the Behavior Clinic at Ryan-VHUP. “And animals didn’t change between now and then, so it must be a cultural shift in the owners’ thinking.”

Dr. Reisner has seen her caseload steadily grow since the specialty was officially recognized. Additional evidence of people’s growing interest in training techniques and behavior modification is seen with television shows and other popular media, touting various methods and solutions to behavior problems. But more education is needed, Dr. Reisner warns.

“It’s important for people to recognize that, in some cases, trainers are not using behavioral science as a basis for their methods,” said Dr. Reisner. “When possible, a behavior specialist should be included, especially in cases involving dog aggression.”

Behavioral medicine, she said, applies humane and rational training methods. Punishment is avoided, while positive reinforcement and other humane methods are used for changing the behavior of dogs and cats.

Rescuing...

In addition to owners’ relationships with their pets, rescuing and sheltering homeless animals has become en vogue. As a result, animal shelters are sprucing up their spaces.

“Shelters are now competing with pet stores and other outlets,” said Dr. Michael Moyer, V’90, Rosenthal Director of Shelter Animal Medicine. “In the past, that didn’t happen. But now, because of that competition, shelter properties have

upgraded their reception and viewing areas to make them open, brighter and more airy.”

“Today,” said Dr. Reisner, “the trend to adopt from shelters is more popular than ever.”

But with that trend comes a higher likelihood of returning dogs and cats to the shelter, a cycle that’s hard to break.

“Behavior problems are the number-one reason that dogs and cats are relinquished to shelters,” said Dr. Reisner. “So pets can get caught in this cycle of being adopted and then returned if owners don’t know how to manage the pets’ behavior or get help.”

To ensure families and individuals select a pet appropriate for their temperament and lifestyle, shelters have implemented adoption counselors.

“They talk about what animal would be the best fit for a family, about crate training, behavior and the possibility of adoption returns. It’s a one-on-one counseling approach rather than a handout of materials,” Dr. Moyer said.

“One of the more important concerns is matching a pet to a family,” said Dr. Reisner.

As a result of these efforts – making reception and viewing areas brighter and working hard to find a good owner-animal match – shelter euthanasia rates have decreased dramatically.

“In the 1950s, 60s, 70s, shelters had a lower rate of life-saving,” said Dr. Moyer. “There was no incentive to go there for a person. Today, cats especially are still struggling with the euthanasia rate.”

One way to keep improving shelters and continue to bring down euthanasia rates is to have veterinarians in leadership roles within shelters.

That’s a shift since the 1950s, said Dr. Moyer. While early shelters included veterinarians, today vets are stepping up and engaging in policy, population management and training staff. They’re also taking on visible leadership roles as CEOs and working hard to implement changes to living quarters, especially for cats.

“We are learning about cat housing,” said Dr. Moyer. “When they’re stressed, they get sick. And nobody wants to adopt a sick cat.”

Marketing? Media? Me?

Whether you’re a pet parent, an owner or a veterinarian with clients of both types, it’s interesting to note the clear and steady changes taking place in the way society-at-large views animals and values our relationships with them. Of course, we may never really know what’s driving these changes.

It may well be the marketing and the media. Or maybe it’s us and our personal exchanges with our beloved pets and wanting the best for them, which may just include those cute kitty sweaters for cold nights, adorable galoshes for wet days and a home-cooked meal for picky eaters. ■