



Companion Animals

What do we mean by ‘companion animals’?

Companion animals are pets, or animals kept for pleasure (rather than working animals). When we talk about companion animals, we mostly think about dogs and cats, but any animals kept as pets come into this category – rabbits, gerbils, guinea pigs, pet reptiles, birds, even some horses and ponies.

Companion animals – the facts

It is estimated that 7.8 million dogs, 9.5 million cats and 1 million rabbits are kept as pets in the UK.¹ In the USA, there are approximately 70 million dogs, 74 million cats and 8 million horses kept as pets.² There are thought to be 33 million animals kept as pets in Australia, including 3.4 million dogs and 2.4 million cats.³

There are an estimated 2 million stray cats in the UK, though the true figure may be even higher.⁴ In 2006, there were estimated to be just over 100,000 stray dogs in the UK,⁵ the number today is probably higher. Approximately 7.6 million companion animals are taken into animal shelters in the USA every year.⁶ There are nearly 3,000 horses and ponies being cared for in rescue centres in the UK because they have been abandoned by their owners.⁷

In the UK, only 38% of pet owners are aware of the Animal Welfare Act and the five welfare needs for pets that it mandates.¹

Why do we keep companion animals?

Companion animals provide company and love, and they can be a source of joy and delight. Companion animals can help children learn about responsibility and caring for and relating to animals. Unfortunately, some people keep (often inappropriate) companion animals as status symbols.

Why do people abandon companion animals?

The costs associated with keeping animals can be very high, and this is often a reason that animals are abandoned. Most pet owners substantially underestimate how much a companion animal will cost over its lifetime.¹

What do animals get in return?

Where owners are responsible, companion animals receive love, care and companionship, together with a safe environment in which to live, a reliable supply of food and water, and veterinary care that ensures that they remain in good health or receive appropriate treatment when they fall ill.

What does the law say about companion animal welfare?

UK law specifies that people keeping animals have a responsibility to ensure that an animal's needs are met. These needs include, “the need for a suitable environment, suitable diet, the ability to exhibit natural behaviours, to be kept with or apart from other animals [as appropriate], and the need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury, and disease.”⁸

In the USA, laws relating to animal welfare differ from state to state, but most states have laws relating to the welfare of domestic animals.



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What does the Bible say?

The Bible has very little to say about companion animals. In most cases in ancient Israelite society, household animals would have been farm or working animals, so this is not surprising. But there are biblical principles expressed elsewhere that can be applied to companion animals.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. (Genesis 9.8–10)

We often think of a covenant as a two-way agreement, with responsibilities on both sides (such as the covenant between God and the people of Israel). But the covenant God makes with Noah and all the creatures from the ark is different. In this case, God makes a covenantal promise without requiring any action or promise in return from his covenant partners, either human or animal. In taking an animal into our home and family, we do much the same thing. There is an implied covenant of care and responsibility.

For six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief (Exodus 23.12a).

This passage applies specifically to working animals, but it shows that the Bible recognises that animals have needs, such as the need for rest, and that the humans who keep animals are responsible for ensuring those needs are met. Jesus refers to the above passage (Luke 13.15) to shame the leaders of the Synagogue – not because caring for animals on the Sabbath is wrong, quite the opposite. Jesus is emphasising that the rightness of caring for one's animals, even on the Sabbath, also implies a need to care for fellow humans. A truly godly person will have compassion for all.

What can Christians do?

- Pray – include companion animals and their welfare in both public worship and private prayer.
- Be responsible pet owners – make sure that you are providing for your companion animal's welfare needs, including routine veterinary care (such as vaccinations). Instead of buying a companion animal, adopt from a rescue centre: overbreeding is a serious problem, and there are many stray animals in need of loving homes.
- Support – there are charities, such as the RSPCA, the RSPCA Australia, the ASPCA, and local animal shelters, that work to prevent cruelty and to care for abandoned animals, and they deserve our support.
- Make your voice heard – write to your representatives in local and national government to make them aware that you want animal welfare legislation to be robustly enforced. In the UK and other European countries, you can write to your MEP and ask him or her what they are doing to help stray and abandoned animals in the EU.
- Spread the word – tell friends, colleagues and others about the problems of overbreeding and stray animals, and encourage anyone thinking about getting a companion animal to adopt rather than buy. Gently remind those you know who have companion animals about the need to meet their animals' welfare needs.