



4-1-2004

The Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society

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Americans, it seems, are a pet-happy lot. According to a recent survey by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 77 million cats, 65 million dogs, 17 million birds, 16 million “pocket pets” (rodents, ferrets, rabbits, and more exotic species), 9 million reptiles, and approximately 200 million aquarium fish are kept as pets in the United States—triple the country’s pet population in the mid-1960s. Even considering that the human population has grown during that same period, there still are twice as many dogs and cats per American today than in 1967. And all of us millions of pet owners share an almost-universal trait: we anthropomorphize our pets—we attribute human thoughts, feelings, and motivations to them.

We give them human names, regard them as family, provide them with the best nutrition and medical care, and often experience devastating grief when they die. But why do we do this? What purpose does it serve?

These are among the questions that **Dr. James Serpell**, Marie A. Moore Professor of Humane Ethics and Animal Welfare, and his colleagues study every day at the multidisciplinary **Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society (CIAS)**. The Center was founded in 1979 (and re-established in 1997) on the belief that there is something both special and therapeutic about the relationships people have with animals, and that animal welfare issues are a significant concern. Because this is a still-developing field that straddles traditional academic disciplines, the CIAS strives for an interdisciplinary approach, drawing in scholars and researchers from a wide variety of different backgrounds and interests.

The CIAS seeks to further our understanding of human–animal interactions and relationships, including those occurring with animals in homes, farms, laboratories, zoos, and the wild. More specifically, the CIAS studies how relationships with animals influence our health and well-being, investigates the impact of these relationships on the animals, and encourages discussion on the ethics of animal use—and applies knowledge gained from this work to benefit people and promote humane

treatment of animals.

So, again, the question is, why do so many of us keep pets? The answer is at once simple and obvious: companion animals add important dimensions to our lives. Researchers have shown that, among other benefits, pets can help us feel less lonely, more effectively handle stress, and survive heart attacks. Given all this extraor-



dinarily rich information, the CIAS has actively committed itself to three types of programs—community outreach, education, and research.

Community Outreach

One of the Center’s most visible community outreach programs involves a partnership with Penn’s School of Social Work. Together, the two provide grief and pet loss counseling, referral services, and a support group to clients and nonclients of the Ryan Hospital. Another ongoing public service project involves bringing in an evaluator from Therapy Dogs International to the School to certify handler–dog teams so that they may visit schools and various healthcare facilities. Pets are particularly therapeutic for the elderly or infirm, who have become socially isolated. According to Therapy Dogs International, “The dogs bring sparkle to a sterile day, provide a lively subject for conversation, and rekindle old memories of previously owned pets.”

Education

The CIAS has developed a seven-week *Careers Working with Animals* educational program that teaches students about animal-related careers, including veterinary medicine and nursing, humane education/shelter work, laboratory animal science, dog training, and careers at the zoo. *Kids Caring for Pets* also is an educational program developed by the CIAS, in con-

junction with the School of Social Work, which teaches children about the responsibilities of adopting and caring for pets. The program began visiting schools in November 2002, and hundreds of children have already participated.

The CIAS also periodically hosts conferences geared toward people who work in a wide range of human services and animal care fields. This year’s conference, *Can Animals Help Humans Heal? Animal-Assisted Interventions in Adolescent Mental Health*, took place on March 28. Experts in the fields of healthcare, social services, psychology, and education presented on topics such as “Animals in the lives of adolescents: A biocentric perspective on development,” “The effectiveness of equine-facilitated therapy with at-risk adolescents,” and “Animal-assisted therapy for at-risk youth and families.”

Research

Of the thousands of dogs bred each year by guide and service dog agencies, more than half fail to graduate as working dogs, mostly due to behavior and temperament problems. In collaboration with several national guide and service dog agencies, the CIAS is involved in projects that seek to clarify developmental and genetic causes of these problems in potential working dogs.

Behavioral problems in companion dogs are the largest single cause of canine abandonment, relinquishment to shelters, and premature euthanasia in the United States. The CIAS investigates behavior problems in pet dogs, focusing on the role that early experience may play in their development. To evaluate dogs’ temperament and behavior in a standardized way, the CIAS has developed a unique questionnaire (C-BARQ©) for dog owners and handlers. Already, several national guide and service dog organizations have adopted the C-BARQ© as a routine behavioral screen.

Through these programs—and others—the CIAS continues to make tremendous progress in helping us understand more about our unique relationships with animals and the mutual benefits of human–animal interactions. If you would like more information on the CIAS or its programs, contact Dr. Serpell, director, at cias@lists.vet.upenn.edu, or go to the Center’s website at www.vet.upenn.edu/research/centers/cias/index.html.