

Serpell, J, & Paul E. "Pets and the Development of Positive Attitudes to Animals". *Animals and Human Society*.
 Extract from *Pets and Positive Attitudes to Animals* "Discussion and Conclusions".

PETS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF POSITIVE ATTITUDES TO ANIMALS

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Scientific studies of the so-called 'human-companion animal relationship' have become increasingly widespread during the last decade. Much of this research has been largely anthropocentric in focus, concentrating particularly on the putative benefits that humans derive from living or interacting with their animal companions (see, e.g., Serpell 1991; Rowan 1991). In this chapter we have examined one way in which human-pet relationships may also confer benefits on other species, albeit indirectly through their effects on people's attitudes and values.

Positive attitudes to animals are promoted through a sense of familiarity or closeness. In the case of people and their pets, expressions of closeness or kinship are an unusually prominent feature of the relationship. Pets are given personal names, they are spoken to as if they understand human speech, and they are generally treated as honorary members of the human social groups to which they belong (Midgley 1983; Serpell 1986; Council for Science and Society 1988). The question we have tried to address in this review is whether, in the process of acquiring quasi-human status, pets can also serve as ambassadors; nonhuman representatives of the interests and moral claims, not only of their own species, but of animals in general.

The answer to this question must ultimately depend on whether attitudes to companion animals ever generalize to include other species or more abstract animal-related concerns. Cultural and historical comparisons certainly provide circumstantial evidence that pet-keeping is associated with more humane and respectful attitudes to animals. Conversely, where pet-keeping is actively discouraged, its absence typically denotes a more ruthless and exploitative approach to the treatment of non-humans. In medieval and Renaissance Europe, for instance, theologians and moralists evidently regarded the keeping of pets as heretical, or even diabolical, precisely because of its tendency to subvert the notion of human superiority or uniqueness. Anecdotal and autobiographical accounts further suggest that the opinions of many early humanitarian thinkers were influenced by their relationships with pet animals. Indeed, at the level of individual development, an association between pet ownership and the development of more sympathetic attitudes to animals has long been assumed, and a small number of recent research studies have now

Serpell, J, & Paul E. "Pets and the Development of Positive Attitudes to Animals". *Animals and Human Society*. Ed. Manning A. & Serpell J.
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provided some empirical support for a link between the two phenomena. Although none of these fragments of evidence is convincing on its own, taken together they represent a reasonable case for arguing that relationships with pets can at least contribute to the process of positive attitudinal change.

Clearly, it would be misleading to conclude from this that affection for pets provides some guarantee of concern for other classes of animal. After all, many lifelong pet owners appear content to disregard or contribute to the suffering or demise of other species (including humans), despite their ardent devotion to dogs and cats (see e.g. Arluke and Sax 1992). Nor can it be assumed that human-pet relationships necessarily provide the best or most reliable means of fostering respect and compassion for animals or nature. Many people with no previous history of pet ownership are nevertheless passionately concerned about animal-related issues, such as conservation or animal welfare. Conversely, like Henry Salt a century ago, some critics would argue that pet-keeping perpetuates a distorted, patronizing or dominionistic view of animals that is inappropriate in the modern context. Still others might point out (with some justification) that the depredations of free-ranging domestic pets pose a significant environmental threat to rare birds, reptiles and small mammals, particularly where they have been introduced to oceanic islands (Merton 1977). All of this serves to underline the complex and often conflicting origins of people's concerns about animals, but it does not necessarily refute the central theory.

Animals are currently exposed to greater threats to their welfare and survival than ever before. On farms and in laboratories they are subjected to increasingly intensive or invasive production systems and procedures. In the wild, they are at risk from overexploitation, environmental pollution and unprecedented habitat losses. Such trends will only be reversed through the promotion of more respectful attitudes and behaviour, and anything which appears to aid in this process of attitudinal change is therefore worthy of detailed and urgent investigation. Bowd (1989) has pointed out that: 'if we are to change the way people behave towards animals, we must learn about the origins of that behaviour in childhood'. For many children, companion animals are almost the equivalent of adopted siblings, and it is difficult to imagine how such early and significant familial bonds could fail to engender at least some sense of affinity or kinship with other nonhuman species.