

## Sustainable Pet Ownership

**Document author: Grace Darke; RCVS Small Animal Veterinary Nurse, BSc (Hons) Animal Science. PGCE Lecturer of Animal Studies and Veterinary Nursing**

Cats and Dogs are the most popular pets in the UK. The latest statistics recorded by the PFMA: Pet Population report, show there are 7.5 million pet cats and 9 million pet dogs, over 40% of all households own a dog or cat.

The journal of Science (2019) stated that meat production produces 60% of agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions, avoiding meat and dairy has been stated to be the 'single biggest way' to reduce your impact on Earth.

What does this have to do with cats and dogs? Have you ever considered how much of the meat we produce is consumed by our pets? How many times a week do you eat meat? How many times a week does your cat / dog eat meat?

A quarter of the impact of meat production comes from the pet-food industry. Meat eaten by pets creates the equivalent of about 64 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> a year, which has about the same environmental impact as a year's amount of fumes from 13.6 million cars.

The biggest impacts our pets pose include:

- Consumption of meat
- Emissions produced from commercial food production
- Waste produced from commercial food packaging
- Predation on native animals (particularly cats) – It is estimated that cats kill around 188 million wild animals a year.
- Polluted waterways caused by dog faeces
- CO<sub>2</sub> production from burning dog faecal waste, clinical waste and body cremation
- Plastic bags used by owners to poo pick
- Carry diseases that impact native animals

Impact also comes from other pets, including fish and reptiles that require electricity fuelled housing (heating, pumping, humidifying, lighting etc.)

We are a nation of pet lovers and though they bring so much joy to our lives, it is important to acknowledge that they do cause an environmental impact to our planet. However, the good news is there are many things we can do as owners to reduce this impact.

How can pet owners reduce this impact?

### **GENERAL**

- The single biggest thing we can do is to **NOT BREED** unnecessary litters of cats and dogs.
- **Neuter / de-sex / spay / castrate** cats and dogs to prevent unnecessary litters as more cats and dogs will only make the impact worse
- Rescue or foster animals rather than source from breeders, there are already animals needing homes so we should not be encouraging the breeding of more.
- Rabbits, guinea pigs and hamsters are better pets in terms of sustainability as they are herbivores (do not eat meat).

### **FEEDING**

- Do not overfeed your pets (it is estimated that 40% of dogs in the UK are overweight; and obesity can lead to major health problems including diabetes)
- Ensure foods and other items purchased have been locally sourced where possible
- Source 'sustainable' diets which use 'by product' meat – it is not necessary to feed human grade meat
  - o <https://www.ethicalpets.co.uk/dog> (some of the diets and products on this site are sustainable)
- Avoid foods containing Beef – as beef has the largest environmental impact of any meat
- Choose a product whose packaging can be composted / recycled / TerraCycled

- Avoid 'grain free' diets for dogs - Current 'grain-free' diet trends are about selling pet food, not about pet health, and can lead to less sustainable diets as they'll replace the grain with more meat.
- **Insect based food** for dogs; e.g. **Yora Dog Food**, UK based company  
<https://www.yorapetfoods.com/> look just like normal dog kibble, packaging is biodegradable, high nutritional value, highly recommend.
- Avoid meat based treats and instead opt for vegetable treats e.g. carrots
- Dogs can be fed a vegetarian diet as long as this is highly researched and also discussed / planned with your vet and sourced carefully, there are some good vegetarian diets available: e.g. Ami, Benevo, V-Dog, Yarrah
- Feeding a homemade diet can be a sustainable option and if done correctly can lead to a healthier pet, however, good research and good hygiene is key.
  - Source 'by product' meat from a butchers (as long as it does not include hair, horns, teeth or intestinal contents), these may be organ meats or less-pretty trimmings e.g. tripe, heart, kidney, spleen, brain, pancreas, thymus, testicles, and ovaries.
  - You do not need to buy 'human grade' meat (e.g., beef mince, steak) as this is expensive, unnecessary and unsustainable. It also means you are competing for the same meat as humans, which just increases demand. There is equal and in some cases more nutritional value for dogs and cats in organ meats / trimmings / bones.
  - Avoid beef
  - Source locally grown vegetables and herbs OR grow your own
  - Good vegetables to feed dogs include: lettuces, dandelion leaves, parsley, coriander, basil, beetroot tops, carrot tops, kale, sprouted seeds, courgette, celery, green beans, green peas, beetroot, orange fleshed sweet potatoes
  - Example recipes:
    - <https://sustainablesuburbia.net/hollys-homemade-dog-food/>
    - <https://www.favorablethings.com/33-best-homemade-dog-food-recipes-that-are-vet-approved/>
    - <https://pets.webmd.com/dogs/guide/homemade-dog-food#2>

It is important to note that cats **NEED** meat in their diets; while dogs can live a long and healthy life with a mixture of meat and veg / vegetarian and in some cases vegan diet, cats are strict carnivores and must be fed meat so **DO NOT** feed a vegetarian / vegan diet to your cats

If feeding homemade diets or treats ensure that you **DO NOT** include foods that are toxic to your pets, e.g. Xylitol, a sweetener used in many foods, including peanut butter is toxic to dogs, and also onions, grapes etc.

- <https://www.vets-now.com/2017/02/foods-poisonous-to-cats/>
- <https://www.vets-now.com/2017/01/foods-poisonous-to-dogs/>

### **LOCAL IMPACT**

- Prevent cats from hunting native wildlife
  - o limited outdoor access after dusk until dawn as this is the time cats are more active
  - o bells on collars (this alone may not be enough)
  - o keep indoors (also keeps cats safe from road traffic) but be mindful of providing alternative stimulation to prevent boredom
  - o Take stray cats to a shelter for rehoming to prevent the feral cat population from increasing.
  - o Report stray cat populations to the RSPCA as they can usually neuter and release or rehome to cap the problem
- Avoid driving to walk the dogs, walk your dog's locally.

### **WASTE**

- Recycle pet food packaging in recycle bins or TerraCycle
- Opt for biodegradable packaged food / goods or homemade diets
- stick and flick faeces into the undergrowth when in a large rural area
- Use biodegradable poo picking bags / nappy bags
- Poo pick for your dog and for others – dog poo can spread many harmful diseases to humans, it is best to pick it up, even if it is not your dogs.

- You can even consider flushing your dog's poo down the toilet as an even greener alternative.
- Make or buy a dog poo composter / wormery, e.g.
  - o <https://thegreenhubonline.com/2017/08/08/how-to-make-a-diy-dog-poo-compost/>
  - o [https://www.amazon.co.uk/Original-Organics-Standard-Composter-Stacking/dp/B074KFCN7F/ref=sr\\_1\\_1\\_sspa?hvadid=8876389489&hvbm=be&hvdev=c&hvgmt=e&keywords=dog+poo+composter&qid=1563411859&s=gateway&sr=8-1-spons&psc=1](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Original-Organics-Standard-Composter-Stacking/dp/B074KFCN7F/ref=sr_1_1_sspa?hvadid=8876389489&hvbm=be&hvdev=c&hvgmt=e&keywords=dog+poo+composter&qid=1563411859&s=gateway&sr=8-1-spons&psc=1)
  - o You can also offload your waste or take on other peoples waste by joining this global 'Waste sharing' group: <https://sharewaste.com/>
- Minimise buying new bowls / toys / bedding – instead wash existing ones to refresh them or source second hand (lots of people sell / give away on online selling sites e.g. marketplace / free cycle or Eco Essex Recycle Community), use old mattresses/cot mattresses, blankets etc.
- For stimulation enjoy long dog walks outdoors; a well exercised dog is a happier and more content dog, and then there is less need for toys and treats
- Use household items as toys e.g. toilet roll tubes or cardboard box (can be composted after or used to line the cat litter tray!)
- Use ecofriendly cat litter, e.g. wood chips, sawdust, corn kernels. You can also make your own using recycled materials such as old newspapers, wood shavings, and nutshells. Clay is very unsustainable and must be avoided.
- Consider natural litter such as the soil from your garden
- Use chemical free pet shampoo. Parabens, dyes, fragrances, stearylalkonium chloride, and sodium laureth sulphate are just a few of the ingredients that can be harmful to your pet and the environment. Consider making your own pet shampoo from castile soap, vinegar, and olive oil. Add a few drops of essential oils for fragrance.
- Avoid chemical household cleaners (you can buy earth friendly ones or make your own)
- Use green energy providers especially for pets that require housing to be lit, heated etc.
- Use energy efficient equipment, bulbs etc.

- Use recycled plastic items where necessary
- Source second hand caging, aquariums, vivariums and accessories

You may not be able to do everything on the list, but any small changes can make a difference.

**References:**

<http://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/the-truth-about-cats-and-dogs-environmental-impact>

[https://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/2018/02/petfood\\_sustainability/](https://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/2018/02/petfood_sustainability/)

<https://learn.eartheasy.com/articles/7-easy-ways-to-reduce-your-pets-impact-on-the-planet/>

[https://seors.unfccc.int/applications/seors/attachments/get\\_attachment?code=1ARGVIGK6QLQ144FU7FELE9OAZUHRWRS](https://seors.unfccc.int/applications/seors/attachments/get_attachment?code=1ARGVIGK6QLQ144FU7FELE9OAZUHRWRS)

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/31/avoiding-meat-and-dairy-is-single-biggest-way-to-reduce-your-impact-on-earth>

<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/carbon-footprint-animal-dogs-cats-america-study-meat-vegetarian-a7878086.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/jun/26/pet-food-is-an-environmental-disaster-are-vegan-dogs-the-answer>

<https://www.ethicalpets.co.uk/dog>

<https://www.vets-now.com/2017/02/foods-poisonous-to-cats/>

<https://www.vets-now.com/2017/01/foods-poisonous-to-dogs/>

<https://sustainable suburbia.net/hollys-homemade-dog-food/>

<https://www.favorablethings.com/33-best-homemade-dog-food-recipes-that-are-vet-approved/>

<https://pets.webmd.com/dogs/guide/homemade-dog-food#2>