

Pet Ownership and Wildlife: The Do's and the Don'ts

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Pets are beloved members of thousands of homes across Australia and the world. Two of the most popular species include domesticated dogs and cats raised traditionally from a young age, all the way to being an elder. Pets elevate our mood whenever we're down, may provide a source of physical activity, or a comfortable cuddle buddy on the couch. It's estimated that there are over 1 billion domesticated pets worldwide that aren't just canines and felines.

Not every dog and cat gets to keep a forever home; some are left behind in rural farmlands or native forests once they have 'used up all their worth'. Some of the main issues with this are firstly the pet's safety, but also the effects on the natural wildlife and farm animals in the ecosystem the new pet inhabits. This article will explore the tasks of responsible pet ownership that you can do at home in just general life, and if you ever want to 'throw out' your pet, I will provide some helpful advice for other solutions that may protect both your pet's happiness, your happiness, and the wildlife.



Figure 1. Pets in a field, photographed by Andrew S.

How do dumped pets impact the environment in the first place? Domesticated dogs and cats may become wild or feral after being rapidly taken from the care of their human owners, dumped in circumstances from long-term dependence on their owners, to now forced into independence with skills they haven't developed. This may build up frustration or fear within the pet and cause them to act impulsively. If they are left in the native bush, for example, they'll need a source of food. If the bush was full of a native animal like the cockatoo and one happened to land on the ground within perfect distance, a frustrated cat may attack the cockatoo to feast on it for survival. With the need to fill their bellies so often on rotation due to previous dependence, a singular cat could bring down 2-5 cockatoos a day. This may not seem like a lot, but with a continuous decrease like this every day across multiple species and thousands of native bushes, the biodiversity of our lands will be reduced.



Figure 2. Feral cat with attacked bird in mouth, photographed by Gregory Atkats.

Not only does the decline of native species affect their own species and their potential for repopulation, but it also impacts the entire food web within their ecosystem. If the cockatoo species is decreased every day, other birds of prey that feed on them for themselves and their young will lose their food source and will have to choose another prey to feast on. If this prey is predominantly eaten by another predator, it will become a continuous fight for resources across the feral cats, wild dogs, and predators of the native ecosystems.

Farmland animals can also suffer significant harm from abandoned pets. All the sizes of possible dumped dog breeds can affect the smallest farm animals, like ducks and chickens, to slightly larger animals such as sheep and lambs. It's common that with sheep species, feral dogs often don't have an intent to eat the sheep, but it is a primal instinct that drives them to kill. A feral dog may not kill every animal they encounter; sometimes they hunt for sport, but they may carry a disease or parasite that passes onto a farmland, or native species, and this could affect the rate of birth, resource production, and increase mortality across the farm. It's also increasingly unsafe for the previously domesticated animals, as it's entirely likely they will be attacked by some of the larger farmland species or injured by farmers out in the field.

With new knowledge on how different environments and wildlife species are impacted by feral cats and wild dogs, how do you increase your pet ownership skills so that you won't leave the same impact?

Understandably, sometimes a pet and an owner don't have or lose the connection between each other, or the owner is no longer able to care for the animal that they have adopted or bought in their current conditions (whether they are health or financial reasons). As a responsible pet owner, the removal of your pet from your family life should be in kindness and compassion for that animal as well. Don't allow yourself the 'easy' solution of dumping and just forgetting the pet's existence. Not only does it contain a sense of guilt for yourself, but you are also essentially abandoning the pet for conditions that weren't of their doing and participating in the degradation of the environment. Instead of dumping the pet, consider finding a rehoming program, putting out your own advertisements for rehoming or taking them to an animal rescue, shelter, or pound. Just because you can no longer care for the pet doesn't mean no one else will be able to or will want to. There are plenty of people out there looking for their forever pet, and plenty of businesses to support you in finding the right fit.

Sometimes the pet may have a behavioural issue that is causing you stress as an owner, it may be affecting the family and other people, and pets, outside the family. You may feel like dumping your pet would be the best solution as the dog or cat has become too much of a problem for you. Firstly, consider training for your animal with a professional trainer or consult a veterinarian for their view of the behavioural issue. This step may have already been completed before, but sometimes it's also helpful to do your own research on what a vet may say is possible, and how a trainer says they may train the pet to decrease the cause and effects for the behavioural issue in your pet. Sometimes, there are even simple remedies you can do at home to treat the behavioural issue that you can discover through your research. If nothing is changing through these actions, or you don't have time to dedicate to the care of the behavioural issue, you can also reconsider a rehoming service or surrendering to a shelter or animal pound. Just note that if the behavioural issue is severely aggressive, the pet may be ethically euthanised to protect families, shelter staff, and to allow the pet some relief for its anxiety, causing the aggression. It's a sad reality, but with the number of animals being dumped both at animal shelters' doorsteps and in the bush, sometimes there isn't enough room. So, if you are able, find a way to rehome your pet to someone willing to provide the patience and care your pet may need to develop.

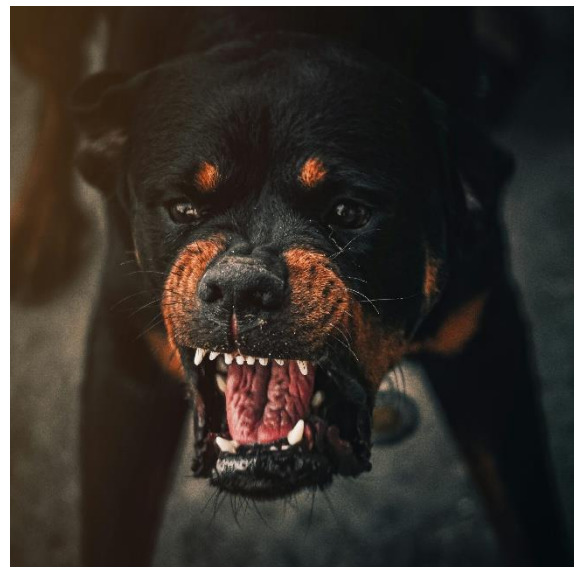


Figure 3. Aggressive rottweiler, photographed by Artistic Frames.

Another major issue for wanting to dump a pet would be a family concern, such as expecting a new baby into the family or any familial arrival. Some pets can become very possessive of their owners, anxious or behave immaturely with the arrival. Animal Welfare Victoria has a program that can support you in developing a good relationship between the baby and pet with their '[We Are Family](#)' program. It offers advice about raising children and pets together, making sure it is not just physically and emotionally enriching, but a safe environment for everybody involved. Again, if you are ever concerned about the pet just not fitting into your family life, consider rehoming and surrendering before you resort to dumping your pet.

It should be noted that dumping or abandoning animals is an offence in Australia under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986*; there are penalties involved, such as heavy fines or imprisonment, that you can avoid with safe rehoming and surrendering of your beloved animals.

Something else to consider with responsible pet ownership is the ethics of allowing pets off-leash or free-roaming in bush tracks or just in your neighbourhood in general. For example, domesticated cats allowed

to roam outside are not only a danger to themselves but can also affect local bird and ground-dwelling populations within your neighbourhood. This can be through killing for entertainment or food, or just injuring the wildlife in general, out on the streets. This puts the young of those species at risk and decreases the biodiversity of the neighbourhood, which may be relevant to keep the ecosystem alive and relatively healthy.

It's common to allow a pet dog to free roam alongside or ahead of you in bush tracks if they are well-trained.



Figure 4. Panting dog in the bush, photographed by Aleksandra Lesniak.

There is no issue with this if your pet is visible to you and is not darting too much off the bush track's path. The biggest recommendation that can be provided is that if your dog isn't completely trained to come back to you or heel at your command, keep them leashed in these wildlife areas. Even just one sniff of an open tree trunk home of a species or a disturbance to a ground-dwelling nest can affect the lives of the species that live within the Australian bush and their protection within the ecosystem. Remember, unleashed dogs aren't inherently bad for the environment, only if they aren't trained correctly and especially if they are destructive.

Responsible pet ownership is difficult. Every pet is made of their own unique personality and quirks in the behaviours that make it special and different from each other. One solution isn't a solution for all. It's understandable to be frustrated sometimes with your pet, to be concerned or to be frightened of the overwhelming nature of having a pet, but there are options for you out there. There is support for you to find the best way to take care of not only your pet, but also the native and farm wildlife that exist within Australia and around the globe.

Don't be ashamed to be struggling. Just remember, in the case of wanting to abandon your pet, don't! Rehome or surrender, and make sure they are leashed up in appropriate circumstances.

If you are ever seeking more information about this topic, the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment, and Water has an article linked [here](#) all about the topic. There are also additional resources, such as [PestSmart](#) and the [Western Australia's Government of Primary Industries and Regional Development](#).
