

### Box 9–1. Environmental Impact of Pets

Along with the human population, another population has been growing rapidly around the world: pets. Today, the large population of dogs, cats, and other companion animals is having a serious impact on the world's environment.

In the United States, for example, there are now 61 million dogs and 76.5 million cats. Just in terms of food, a large dog uses 0.36 global hectares of resources per year, a small dog 0.18, and a cat 0.13 hectares. For comparison, a person in Bangladesh uses on average 0.6 hectares of resources a year in total—less than what two German Shepherds use in a year. Thus, in a conservative estimate, feeding American pets has as much of an environmental impact as the combined populations of Cuba and Haiti.

Many pets today also use more resources in the form of clothing, toys, and elaborate veterinarian care. A small percentage of pets even get treated to costly services like dog walkers, grooming salons, and private pet air travel service. One analysis finds that an American dog owner typically spends anywhere from \$4,000 to \$100,000 on a dog over its lifetime.

This is not just an American phenomenon. Pet ownership is a global phenomenon, with pet food alone costing \$42 billion worldwide each year. The pet industry has worked hard to spread a culture of pet ownership around the world. Brazil has the world's second largest dog population at 30 million, along with 12 million cats. China has the third largest dog population (23 million dogs), and dog ownership is growing so fast that Shanghai passed a "one pet policy" in 2011 in reaction to such problems as dog bites and rabies.

Ultimately, shrinking the population of pets will have the same benefits as stabilizing the human population: it will free up more ecological space for development and for

restoring Earth's systems. Several key strategies, if implemented, will help this process.

First, all pets that are not intended for breeding should be spayed and neutered early in their lives—common practice in some countries but not all. This will prevent unwanted pets as well as feral animal populations, which can damage bird populations and even threaten people. Adopting animals from shelters (and sterilizing them) instead of buying pets from breeders will also help.

Second, policymakers should recognize that pet ownership is a luxury and should make it costlier to own pets, perhaps through a steeper pet license fee or a tax on dog and cat food. Including the costs of ecological externalities in all products—including pet products—would increase the expense of pet ownership further.

Third, there should be better oversight of the pet industry, which has an industry strategy of "humanizing" pet populations so that people will seek out pets to fill companion gaps and spend more on them. Better regulation of marketing efforts may help curb pet populations and over time make pet ownership less normal.

Finally, pet owners (and children—the pet owners of tomorrow) should learn about the significant ecological costs of pets. This may curb some pet purchases and may also reduce excessive purchases for current pets—whether that is extra food (many pets are overweight due to overfeeding), clothing, fancy toys, pet spa treatments, and end-of-life medical care that is more sophisticated than many people in developing countries have access to. Over time, people may also shift to smaller pets, productive pets (like chickens or goats), or pets shared among a community.

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Source: See endnote 4.