



Animal Ethics and Well-Being
with Dr. Frank McMillan, DVM

Frank McMillan DVM

Eye of the Beholder

The value we place on animals varies widely

Picture this: A dog breaks free from his fenced yard and attacks a cat. The cat is horribly injured and barely clinging to life. A witness to the attack, having no idea if the cat is somebody's pet or simply a neighborhood stray, rushes the cat to the local animal hospital. The hospital staff quickly starts the cat on an IV drip containing emergency drugs, begins a transfusion of fresh blood, and connects the cat to heart and blood pressure monitoring devices. The veterinarian begins to operate, and after two hours of painstaking surgery to repair the massive trauma, the cat is placed in ICU for a closely monitored recovery. With all this high-tech, state-of-the-art medical care, the cat survives.

Now consider this: If this cat were to do to a mouse the exact same thing the dog did to him, almost nobody would care. There would be no high-tech — or even low-tech — anything put into action to save this mouse's life. On the contrary, the cat that caused the injuries would be hailed as a "good mouser." Why would two animals with virtually identical capacities to suffer be treated in such drastically different ways?

Imagine another situation: After some cataclysmic event, you find yourself having to choose between saving the last two breeding pairs of two species of animals to prevent their extinction: the African elephant and the muskrat. What are you using to make your choice, and why is that important?

Or let's say you're running an animal rescue organization, and your board has allocated \$1,200 for the medical care of birds. The next day, two people each bring in a bird found by the roadside, and both birds have a broken leg. Your money will only pay for one of them to be repaired. Neither bird is an endangered species: One is a great horned owl, and the other is a crow. Whose broken leg will get fixed?

The fact is, the value we place on animals and the deservedness we bestow on them for care varies widely among the world's creatures. Clearly, there are reasons that animals are placed high or low on the list. Bigger generally rates higher than smaller; a

wild horse would get priority over a chipmunk. Attractive rates higher than unattractive; a snow leopard outranks a wart hog. An animal who is "like us" rates higher than one who is "not like us"; mammals are treated better than non-mammals. And, of course, cuddly wins out over non-cuddly; the koala rates much higher than an African long-tongued fruit bat.

But let's go back to the mouse. It's not just rated low on the list of animals we're concerned about; it isn't on the list at all. The mouse has been given the rank of "vermin," a term that has come to mean an animal species that is a pest or a nuisance and associated with carrying disease. The dictionary states that vermin refers to noxious, objectionable or disgusting animals collectively, especially those of small size.

It's how these animals are treated that raises serious concerns. Millions of rodents are killed each year as pests, and a recent scientific study published in the respected journal *Animal Welfare* looked at the humaneness of methods used for killing them. While acknowledging the legitimate need for rodent control (annually the animals spoil or destroy billions of

dollars worth of crops and contribute to the spread of disease), the researchers studied the degree of suffering inflicted upon the animals by poisons, glue boards and other methods. They note that the anticoagulant poisons, the most common means of controlling rodents, generally take several days to kill, during which time they cause distress, disability and pain. Glue boards cause the rats and mice to become adhered by the feet and fur until they are killed or eventually die. The researchers contemplate the question of why these inhumane methods of killing are allowed, and suggest that it is because of the public's generally unsympathetic attitude toward vermin.

This lack of sympathy is what's behind the disconnect: The cat attacked by the dog gets cutting-edge medical care, and the mouse attacked by the cat gets no care at all. But there's more going on with the inhumane rodent-killing methods than just a

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lack of sympathy. My discussions with people who use rodent control reveal a vindictiveness, an attempt to seek revenge against the animals, as if the little scurrying creatures are misbehaving and deserve punishment. The way some people talk, it's as if the little creatures are evil. The pest control businesses even promote this mindset. The logo for one of America's largest pest control companies is a man leaning over a mouse while holding a massive sledgehammer behind his back. The message: This mouse deserves to be squashed.

But the mouse in your house who chews holes in your baseboards, tears open bags of dog food and leaves little mouse poop all over is not trying to make your life miserable. He's just

doing what we all are doing: trying to stay alive, avoid hunger and pain, stay warm and be comfortable. He doesn't intend you any harm whatsoever. He's just trying to make it in this world of threats, challenges and potential hardships. No matter what you do to him and his companions, he won't come to despise humans; he'll just continue trying to survive in the face of the new hardships thrust upon him.

He's got a hard enough life: Don't we owe it to him to treat him with kindness? 🐾

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Ask the Vet
with Dr. Michael Dix,
Best Friends Medical Director

Q: *My new rescue group will be operating on a shoestring budget, so how do I find affordable veterinary care?*

A: Shop around. Some veterinarians work off volume (high numbers of animals) and are less expensive, while other vets provide more services per animal, which can be more expensive.

In general, most vets want to help out and don't want healthy animals getting euthanized. They do have to run a business and make a living, though, so they can't offer services for free.

You might be able to get a discounted rate — but not by playing on their sympathies. Instead, try getting a deal by promising them a large volume of spay/neuters or other surgeries and thus a steady stream of business.

You can promise to promote their business in any fundraising materials you create, such as putting their clinic name and phone number on calendars or flyers. You can refer adopters to this vet. You might even suggest that the vet donate a certain amount of services per year and use it as a tax write-off.

Keep in mind that not all veterinarians will be willing or able to help, for any number of reasons. So have patience when you're shopping around.

Since veterinary costs are going to be part of your rescue's budget, it's a good idea to find out the costs for routine services in your area before you get started on establishing a rescue group.

One other point: When choosing your vet, consider attitudes and policies as well as costs. Make sure you agree with your vet about issues such as euthanasia, FeLV- and FIV-positive cats, pet population control and pain management for animals.

Q: *How much water should my pets be drinking?*

A: Enough to maintain hydration. There are many simple ways to tell if your cat or dog is hydrated. The first is the skin "tent test." This is most useful in cats. Pull up the skin between your cat's shoulder blades, then let it go. If the skin stays "tented," he is not adequately hydrated. The problem with this test is that some conditions result in mild dehydration in which the skin goes back to its normal position right away. It is also not a good test for overweight pets.

Another test is to check your pet's mucous membranes. If you feel his gums and they are tacky or dry, your pet may be dehydrated. This is a better test for dogs, but can be used for cats, too. You need to be careful, though, because this test can be dependent on activity. For instance, if your dog has just run for 30 minutes and has not had a drink, his mucous membranes will be a little dry.

A general rule: An animal should drink about 1 1/2 to 3 cups of water for every 10 pounds of body weight each day. The amount varies depending on how active the dog is: A Labrador who goes hiking for hours will drink a lot more than a Chihuahua who sits around in a cool house all day. Also, animals with certain diseases (such as diabetes or kidney disease) will drink more water than normal. Excessive drinking is one of the first signs people notice when an animal has one of these or a similar condition. Your veterinarian can do simple blood and urine tests to confirm. 🐾



Got a question for Dr. Mike?
E-mail editor@bestfriends.org
and put "Ask the Vet" in the
subject line.