

BRIEF REPORT

‘Kookaburras, kangaroos and my frilly-necked lizard’: The value of wildlife, nature and companion animals for older community-dwelling Australians

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Abstract

Objective: With little research investigating older Australians' experience of companion animal (pet) ownership or wildlife encounters, this paper focuses on the value of animals in their lives.

Methods: Three online focus groups explored 103 older adults' lived experience of home and community, with this paper focused on interactions with animals—companion animals and wildlife.

Results: Most (60%) had at least one pet, which brought love and joy into their lives. Reflexive thematic analysis identified three themes: pets as family; challenges of pet ownership; and connection to everyday wildlife and nature.

Conclusions: In addition to valuing companion animals (typically cats and dogs), this research is among the first to show that some older people also develop ongoing relationships with local Australian wildlife, such as kookaburras, kangaroos, lizards and birds, which raises the possibility that fostering connections with wildlife may enhance well-being.

KEYWORDS

aging, Animals, Australia, companion animals, nature

1 | INTRODUCTION

Australia has one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world: 61% of households own pets, primarily dogs (40%) and cats (27%).¹ As a large body of research links these human–animal relationships with mental and physical health,^{2–4} older adults may derive critical benefits from pet ownership. Pets can provide companionship, structure and meaning in daily life,^{5,6} reducing loneliness by filling ‘the emptiness of the house’ with ‘unconditional love’.⁷ Dog owners also find dog-walking provides a reason

to leave the house, fostering both physical activity and social connections.^{7–9}

However, the expense of pet ownership, combined with age-related illnesses (e.g. arthritis, diabetes), can make owning and caring for pets challenging, with older owners concerned about what may happen if they enter aged care or die.¹⁰ Most human–animal research has focused on interactions with domestic pets, with some recent research showing that access to greenspaces supports well-being¹¹ and that people watch and interact with the wildlife that visits their suburban gardens and nearby greenspaces.^{12,13} Drawing

[Correction added on 18 May, after first online publication: CAUL funding statement has been added.]

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on the biophilia hypothesis, the argument is that humans have an innate tendency to connect with nature and living things—and by connecting us to the flows and cycles of nature and animals, these interactions have health benefits.¹⁴ To date, only a handful of studies have investigated the value and experience of companion animals (pets) for older Australians, with little research focused on local wildlife. Australia is an ancient country with unique and diverse wildlife quite different to what is considered ordinary elsewhere—compare, for example, kangaroos, kookaburras and frill-necked lizards with the native fauna of other countries. Thus, this research asks: What is the value of companion animals and wildlife in the lives of community-dwelling older Australians?

2 | METHODS

This study was part of a larger multi-modal qualitative research project on contemporary older adults' experience of home and community, following best practice (COREQ) qualitative research processes. Three online focus groups (OFG) were conducted, via a private contractor who recruited participants from an existing database (Queensland University of Technology ethical approval no. 1600000983). Data collected in OFG have been shown to be similar to in-person focus groups, increasingly used as a cost-effective means to gain input from people from geographically distant locations.^{15,16} Invitation emails were sent via the contractor to 132 people aged 50+, purposively selected from a range of age, sex, region and locality backgrounds, with no additional exclusion criteria. Participants provided informed consent and received a nominal ten-dollar credit per day, up to a maximum of thirty dollars, redeemable for gift cards (funded by the project funding body). [Table 1](#) illustrates how 103 people, aged between 50 and 92, from across Australia participated.

To maximise comparability of data, three separate focus groups ran during the same four-day period. Discussions were facilitated across all groups by the same researcher around identical stimuli and prompting questions such as 'How important are pets and animals in your life? What role do they play?' As the groups ran asynchronously, participants could log on and off, read and interact at times and locations that suited themselves over the four-day period. Text from participants' typed posts was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2013)¹⁷ to develop and construct an understanding of the natural world and animals (both domestic and wildlife) in participants' lives. The first author used NVivo 12¹⁸ to identify themes in the large data set (1800+

Practice Impact

Older adults' engagement with companion animals and wildlife facilitates social connections, and physical and mental well-being. Policymakers, urban planners, designers and practitioners working with older adults must acknowledge (1) the value of animals as an integral aspect of the household and (2) the need to maximise opportunities for engagement with greenspace and native wildlife.

posts), with all authors using manual approaches to iteratively identify, group and discuss nuances, themes and patterns.

3 | RESULTS

Participating older Australians explained that companion animals, wildlife and nature played a significant positive role in their day-to-day lives. The three themes and indicative quotes are described in detail below, and in [Table 2](#).

3.1 | Theme 1: Pets as family—'someone to care for, who loves me'

Most participants (60%) reported having at least one pet, with 14 per cent having two pets and 23 per cent three or more. Dianne, aged 55, for example, owned '2 dogs, a cat, 5 ducks, 6 chooks (chickens), a rooster'. As 69-year-old Geoffrey explained, having his pet for company is 'just like having another member of the family around'. After having up to 20 show dogs at a time for nearly four decades, 71-year-old Rod felt 'dogs have ... always had my abiding love'; similarly, 72-year-old Valerie described her cat as 'the love of our life. She can "talk" to us and is such a comfort'. Pets were especially valued for filling a void in later life, as children left home or a spouse died, critical during times of loss and grief. After her partner died unexpectedly, 67-year-old Margaret found great comfort from her dog, who gave her a reason to leave the house:

Has been with me 24/7 since I lost my partner...sleeps with me and doesn't let me out of her sight...I often wake up and think 'what on earth am I going to do today all on my own' but once I get out walking with my dog and get among people, I feel much better. I would desperately like some support to help

TABLE 1 Participant demographic characteristics

Variables	Possible responses	n = 33	n = 37	n = 33
Sex	Female	17	18	17
	Male	16	19	16
Age	50–59	10	11	9
	60–69	11	6	9
	70–79	10	14	10
	80+	2	6	5
Education	Primary/high school	8	12	8
	Trade/postsecondary	16	14	13
	University/postgraduate	9	11	12
Relationship status	Married/partnered	22	27	20
	Divorced/single/widowed/never married	11	10	13
Household income	Under \$20,000–\$39,999	14	17	15
	\$40,000–\$79,999	12	10	12
	\$80,000 +	7	10	6
Primary income source	Government pension	18	19	19
	Work full-time/part time/casual	9	12	8
	Savings/investments/independent income/other	6	6	6
Home tenure type	Own outright	22	27	24
	Own part	5	6	9
	Rent or lease/live with others	6	4	0
Retirement status	Retired now	19	24	23
	Retire in the next 10 years	6	8	4
	Retire in 10+ years/Don't expect to retire	8	5	6
Location	Capital city inner/suburb	18	21	21
	Regional city/Regional town/Rural	15	16	12

me through some of my down times. I am slowly making a few more friends ... but they are not always available when I really need somebody, so I just shrink into my chair and hope the evening will pass quickly ... Thank goodness for my lovely dog.

3.2 | Theme 2: The challenges of pet ownership

While pets can facilitate exercise and social connections, they are a significant commitment. Many older people explained that despite loving their pets, as Linda, aged 81, observed '*losing them meant freedom*' – to travel, to start new adventures and from caring demands. 64-year-old Vicki explained that, when the kids left home, she was:

...the main carer of all pets and had most of the work to do. A cat that aged with us... while I loved him dearly...when he did pass away it

was with sadness but also relief... we made a conscious decision that we didn't want to have any more pets. I still miss them - but not miss them too.

The loss of a much-loved companion animal could be so distressing people chose not to have another pet. Linda, aged 81, explained their last cat was with them for 13 years and they '*will not get another one; no other cat could give us as much joy as Bubbles did*'.

The 40% of participants who did not own pets were not necessarily pet-free by preference, citing cost, challenges of securing pet-friendly rental accommodation and reliable pet-minders as barriers. Ann, aged 59, reflected on the trauma she felt giving up a much-loved companion because she could not find a pet-friendly rental home:

I want pets but I rent and the risk of not being able to get appropriate rental accommodation in the future because I have pets, makes it not worth the emotional attachment... I couldn't go through that again.

TABLE 2 Interactions with companion, wild and native Australian animals

Theme 1: Pets as family	Theme 2: The challenge of pet ownership	Theme 3: Everyday wildlife and nature
My little dog is hugely important in my life—he's a great companion and when he passes on, I will miss him desperately... I love my dog, he is a great companion and I would be lost without him. Jenni	What pets? I want pets but I rent and the risk of not being able to get appropriate rental accommodation in the future because I have pets, makes it not worth the emotional attachment. It has happened where we had to find a new home for our little dog and I couldn't go through that again. Ann	We can have up to seven kangaroos in our backyard, I used to hand feed the Kookaburras until I realized it wasn't good for them...I love being able to go outside and see the animals... such fun watching all the animals' antics... We have a frilly-necked lizard who appears every time we are on the veranda having coffee and I am sure he hears our voices and rustles through the grass to let us know he is there. I usually give him a bit of apple. Elizabeth
Most of my time is taken up with work, but I love to spend my spare time with my dog or reading the ever-growing pile of novels next to my bed. Carolyn	If I am likely to be away for any length of time, it is hard for someone to look after your place if you have a large garden or pets. We would love a dog but what do we do with it if we travel? Des	...the swans that fly across every morning and return of an afternoon. Pretty much a home body love my garden and of course my family including our animal families. :) Marlene
Pets are great friends to have in your house and are great company. We have had small dogs all our life and they just give us so much pleasure. Colin	I'm with Des - having a pet (particularly an old one) is quite confining. I'm leaving my trips away until he passes on. Jenni	We no longer have pets, but listen to the kookaburras, watch the blue wren and his harem flit around and say good day to the skinks and bluetongues when they come out. Graeme

3.3 | Theme 3: Connection to everyday wildlife and nature

Interactions between wild and native Australian animals gave many older people a way to connect with animals, without the labour and commitment of ownership. As Shirley explained, at 81 she currently does not have any pets, *'apart from my skink that lives under my air-conditioner on the patio'*. Gerry was the same, noting there was *'no need for pets. I have wild birds that I water and feed sometimes'*. These interactions with wildlife provided a connection with the non-human world that was greatly valued:

My dog passed away about 6 months ago. It was sad but it has untied us to be able to travel more. We have geese on our dam and although they are wild, we can hand feed them and they always waddle up to us. At the moment it's nice to have 'pets' without the worry of having to look after them.

(Tracy, aged 57)

Additionally, the natural non-human environments that people could see, hear and interact with provided a sense of belonging, whether vast areas of bushland, small

pockets of native plants, a backyard garden or local public greenspace. Sixty-four-year-old Glenn appreciated the *'birds singing all day'*. For others, like Allan (aged 61), the journey was the destination, embarking on a new life post-divorce *'exploring the Australian bush and desert, looking for flora, fauna and tranquil night skies'*.

4 | DISCUSSION

This qualitative study suggests that older adults' ongoing relationships with companion animals and wildlife contribute positively to well-being and quality of life: it is among the first to identify that older adults appear to develop a similar emotional bond with native wildlife as they do with domestic companion animals (e.g. cats and dogs). This is an unusual, but promising, finding, given that many older people worry about the costs and commitment associated with pet ownership. While we could speculate that bonds between older adults and wildlife may be qualitatively different to relationships with companion animals because: wildlife (generally) does not live in the domestic home; does not share close intimate space with the human; is not totally dependent on the human for its survival; and that 'feeding' wildlife is optional, it is clear that some participants in this study described

their relationship with local wildlife in similar terms. Potentially, instead of owning a pet, older people could be encouraged to engage and connect with the native wildlife surrounding them.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

While further research is needed, especially on the role older citizens play in conservation activities involving wildlife, flora, and fauna, our findings support the growing call to redesign our built environment to be biophilic,¹⁹ and to better connect people with their natural world and native wildlife.

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CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Authors elect to not share data.

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