

# Proposal

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## Desexing of domestic pet rabbits

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This proposal is put forward by Bryce and Judi Inglis who have been working with domestic rabbits for eight years. The proposal for discussion draws on their experiences with pet owners, vets, shelters and the pet industry to propose a solution to the growing number of domestic rabbits presenting at shelters or abandoned by owners. The proposal seeks to address backyard breeding and responsible ownership that will meet the needs of the pet industry, the rabbit owner and provide for the appropriate care of the pet rabbit.

## INTRODUCTION

Bryce and Judi Inglis started Rabbit Run and Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage to meet the needs of domestic pet owners and to care for and rehome abandoned and lost domestic pet rabbits. Dr Judi Inglis examined the relationship between humans and animals as part of her PhD research. They have nine of their own rabbits and have seen a marked increase in the number of abandoned domestic rabbits presenting to shelters. They hear daily of domestic rabbits dying in backyards due to heat, predators and inexperienced owners, or being let go in the wild to fend for themselves.

Codes of Practice in relation to domestic rabbits for consideration by the Department of Primary Industry (Vic) are currently under development by Bryce and Judi Inglis as follows:

- Code of Practice for the Private Keeping of Rabbits.
- Code of Practice for the Boarding of Rabbits.

## RABBIT RUN-AWAY ORPHANAGE AND RABBIT RUN

### *Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage*

Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage Inc is a registered charitable organisation. The goals of the organisation include the rescue, rehabilitation and rehoming of orphaned rabbits. (Refer to attached brochure for further information on the work done by this charity).

Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage also works to educate the public on responsible rabbit ownership and care and discourage families from breeding their rabbits that are often brought from pet shops where they are given no information on rabbits as pets. The charity provides information to potential rabbit owners and encourages people to make informed choices about a rabbit as a family pet. They provide information and referral services to new and existing rabbit owners and actively work to rehome as many bunnies as possible.

Each year many bunnies are abandoned or surrendered to animal shelters. While the animal shelters do what they can, the sad fact is that there are too many bunnies for the capacity of the shelters and many healthy, lovable and friendly bunnies are killed, many do not even reach their first year. The shelters often do not have the networks and resources to rehome the number of bunnies that are presented there weekly and most are euthanised.

### *Rabbit Run*

Rabbit Run was set up to board domestic rabbits so that responsible rabbit owners would have a safe place to leave their treasured pets. Dog and cat boarding establishments are not suitable accommodation for domestic rabbits due to this species being a prey animal by nature. They are shy, intelligent benign animals. Once trust is established with their human carers (and the rabbit desexed), they are inquisitive, interactive and affectionate house pets. They frighten easily and have delicate health needs. They are at risk from predators such as foxes and can contract myxomatosis and Calici virus from mosquitoes and other means. Rabbit Run will be the first dedicated, purpose built rabbit boarding facility of its kind in Australia and we suspect the first of its kind in the world.

Rabbit Run is unique in bringing bunny orphans in contact with responsible rabbit owners and is an intricate part of their rehoming service through Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage.

## **THE DILEMMA**

Laws to introduce legislation regarding desexing of animals due to over population are hitting a brick wall due to opposition from commercial interests. Shelters are killing more animals each year as a result.

The relationship between rabbits and man goes back over 3,000 years and they are used for food, fur, sport, research and as companion animals. Rabbits are increasing in popularity as pets, and in the UK is the third most popular mammalian pet after cats and dogs (Pet Food Manufacturer's Association 2002). Although traditionally [seen as] a children's pet, rabbits are now more commonly kept by adults as a true companion animal in the home, taking the place of cats and dogs. There is a plethora of information sources for owners about companion rabbits, on the internet and in publications; however, there are still many welfare issues present, especially regarding diet and its effect on dental and gastrointestinal health, housing and behavioural problems. The number of unwanted companion rabbits rescued by welfare organisations is still high, with owners purchasing young animals on impulse, especially at Easter time, with scant regard to their requirements and the cost of veterinary care, or the behavioural changes that can occur at puberty if animals are not neutered. (Meredith)

Similar to the United Kingdom, domestic rabbits as house pets in Australia has increased rapidly over the last 2 years, and as such so have the number of rabbits that have been abandoned, escaped from back yard or surrendered / dumped at shelters where they meet an early death. Unregistered backyard breeding is prolific and plays a major role in the deaths of these young rabbits. Most domestic rabbits presenting to shelters are under 12 months old.

A case of one such breeder, was a 14yr old girl breeding rabbits and guinea pigs in her backyard for sale on Gumtree. She proudly informed us that her mother breed birds to sell on Gumtree also. The rabbits were advertised as good breeders. We retrieved three rabbits from her to desex and rehome to responsible owners. The young girl rang us the following day to enquire if the rabbits were OK, as all of hers had died the previous day and she was unaware of the cause. The rabbits were kept in small metal hutches in the full sun. The previous day was hot... Other examples can be found on sites such as Gumtree and Trading Post.

## **RABBITS AS DOMESTIC PETS**

Pet rabbits can have an important function in influencing a change for compulsory desexing of all domestic pets. Rabbits world wide are the third most popular pet, however, they are regarded by many as pocket pets and then left to running around in the back yard. Pet rabbits that are relegated to backyards are either taken by predators, succumb to myxomatosis or calici viruses, die from the heat or escape and some end up in shelters and are killed there.

Informed pet owners view pet rabbits as delightful and wonderful animal companions when desexed, living inside the home as an important part of the family. The move from the backyard to house rabbit will happen more overtime with the shift by Australians to higher density living. This demographic change will also make rabbits more popular as a pet as people are educated about their gentle and intelligent nature. Singapore has a population who live in high density

environments and rabbits are very popular as a companion animal sometimes costing a weeks wage to acquire.

In Australia, pet rabbits are regarded by people who are not rabbit owners, either as pests (likened to the wild rabbit populations) or as pets for children. For businesses, rabbits are of importance for the economic gain in selling goods and accessories for the rabbit, most of which are totally inappropriate. Lobby groups opposing law changes often cite economic reasons to maintain the status quo.

### **FERAL POPULATIONS**

If we compare feral rabbits with feral cats, we find that rabbits cause a large amount of economic damage to Australia with large impacts upon the land and little or no damage to other forms of wildlife. Cats on the other hand devastate wildlife, but cause little or no economic damage.

### **OPPOSING VIEWS**

The anthropocentric view that human needs come before anything else, is in opposition to an ecocentric view which considers nature (plants and animals) as having intrinsic worth within its own existence. Animal welfare advocates regard animals as having intrinsic worth therefore take an ecocentric view.

Both viewpoints are diametrically opposite with the extremists on both sides thinking that the other view is crazy or evil.

If an argument for change is to be made to animal law, it must be framed in such a way that it considers anthropocentrism in its argument for change, such as improving the economy in a human centred world.

Dr. Judi Inglis wrote her PhD to examine this relationship using the biosphere township of Mallacoota. The PhD examined the human/nature relationship for Parks Victoria and found that the business people with anthropocentric views are often the ones who propose changes of a commercial nature. This small group were able to have a large influence over both other businesses as well as the majority of the population, who had an ecocentric viewpoint to varying degrees. Whilst the PhD was examining the human centred/nature centred relationship in regard to park management the same philosophy can be found in animal welfare laws.

### **DOMESTIC PET LAWS**

Do we frame our domestic pet laws in line with the wishes of the few commercially oriented groups, citing economic ruin or the majority of pet owners, who wish only for the better treatment of animals?

Legislation for a ban on the sale of pets was recently defeated in NSW as lobby groups felt it would have a large negative economic impact on industry.

The welfare of pet rabbits is a unique fit into the category of domestic pet, and we must ask why there are no restrictions on the breeding or sale of an animal which potentially can cause a high

level of economic damage if they escape? In Queensland an on the spot fine of \$30,000 is imposed for owning a pet rabbit.

### **REQUIRED CHANGES TO LEGISLATION**

We believe that to break the cycle from breeder to pet shop, to impulse buyer to rabbit surrender and then death, both at the retail and breeder level, then legislative changes should be introduced as follows:

- Breeders of rabbits to be regulated and licensed to control the numbers of rabbits sold.
- Breeders of rabbits to desex rabbits prior to sale either to pet shops or by other means such as the internet.
- Animal farms that focus on baby animals be restricted from breeding rabbits and leaving them at schools at 2 days old with inexperienced teachers. These practices encourage impulse buying as the teachers and children are encouraged to take the surviving rabbits home.
- Pet shops are not to sell intact rabbits.
- Pet shops to be responsible for the distribution of educational material prior to sale, so that potential owners can make informed decisions about the most appropriate pet for their lifestyle.
- Purchasers to demonstrate knowledge of responsible rabbit care prior to sale of buying a restricted pet.
- Owners to desex rabbits prior to resale or presenting their unwanted rabbits to pet shops.
- A fine of \$30,000 to be imposed for breaches to the above.
- A fine of \$30,000 to be imposed for the abandonment of rabbits into unauthorised places.

We ask for breeders to desex rabbits sold to the pet industry and that fines be increased to a significant level that would deter breeders from breaking this law.

### **Reasons for desexing prior to sale include:**

- Rabbits cannot be sexed correctly until they reach puberty and many unsuspecting new owners are then faced with a litter of kittens (baby rabbits), or two males that fight and require separation.
- New owners are unaware of the change in behaviour of the intact rabbit when it reaches puberty.
- New owners are not aware of the size that the rabbit will grow to.
- To stem the uncontrolled and unregulated breeding of rabbits in backyards for sale over internet sites such as Gumtree or to show children “the miracle of birth”.
- To prevent the exploitation of kittens (baby rabbits) bred for show at mobile animal farms.
- To prevent female rabbits with two day old kittens being left in the care of inexperienced teachers in schools to show children the “miracle of growth of the babies”, if the kittens survive. The babies are then sold to teachers and children at the school encouraging impulse buying.

Legislating for the compulsory desexing of domestic rabbits is unlikely to receive significant opposition from lobby groups, as rabbits are a much smaller market segment of the pet industry than cats and dogs. Lobbyists would need a different argument to counter the economic arguments used about domestic rabbits.

## **MOVING TOWARDS A RESPONSIBLE PET INDUSTRY AND RESPONSIBLE PET OWNERSHIP**

It is expected that compulsory desexing of rabbits would change the dynamics of the pet trade by:

- **Breaking the cycle of unregistered breeders churning out rabbits** (i.e. in a similar fashion to puppy farms). It is expected that breeders will question the viability of their product if forced to desex rabbits and be responsible for the care of their rabbits for a longer period (3 months for a male, 5-6 months for a female) and be responsible for the cost of desexing or alternatively face a heavy fine. Most backyard breeders will find that their professed love of their animals will be tested and withdraw from the market.
- **Restricting pet shops from selling undesexed cute baby rabbits.** Pet shops use impulse buying techniques to sell a \$45 pet with follow up sales of hundreds of dollars of pet products (usually unsuitable). Pet shops will no longer have a cute baby to sell to impulse buyers but will have a more expensive product with a higher value. They will also have to sell bigger hutches in line with the true potential size of the rabbits and this will minimise any perceived losses or mean no economic loss for them. It may actually increase their overall profits.
- **Limiting impulse purchasers.** Impulse purchasers are often unaware of the rabbit's needs. Impulse buying forms part of the cycle of surrender and then early death. Pet buyers will have to purchase a rabbit at a higher price and this, in some cases, will reduce impulse buying. As a restricted purchase, potential rabbit owners will need to demonstrate their knowledge about their purchase.
- **Turning shelters back to their original purpose.** Animal shelters could focus on their aspirations, rather than just being a slaughter house due to the number of rabbits surrendered daily. It is expected the number of rabbits surrendered to shelters will increase initially as breeders look at the economic factors. This should be followed by a drop in admissions as the supply/demand chain adjusts.

The effects of this change to law would overtime be able to be used as a tool to help introduce similar change for other species such as dogs and cats, as shelter surrenders of pet rabbits would noticeably decrease.

## **EXEMPTIONS**

Exemptions should be allowed by registered breeders who breed rabbits for sell to other **registered** breeders and are interested in such factors as breeding for "the purity of the race", or "creating new breeds" selling at higher prices (even though these stated aims are in opposition) or for show rabbits.

Exemptions should be allowed for existing pet owners who can justify grounds based on morality or religious grounds ( e.g. Buddhism) . Veterinary evidence where it can be shown that desexing would endanger the animal's life (due to age of the rabbit etc), should also be considered.

Concessions are required in order to minimise opposition to its introduction. The main aim is to get the law passed and expansion to a law covering other species by using this as a tool at a later date.

## **CODES**

A code of practice for the "Private Keeping of Rabbits" is in development by Rabbit Run and Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage and a draft will be submitted to the DPI (Victoria) in the future. A meeting with RSPCA inspectors, revealed their concerns that a code for domestic rabbits is needed and that fines are too low. The code will also be of use as a guide for RSPCA inspectors investigating cruelty complaints. The document will also educate potential rabbit owners on what to expect regarding rabbit ownership.

## **EXISTING RESTRICTIVE PRACTICES**

The Trade Practices Act section 4 - restrictive trade practices(with its anti competitive sections) should be investigated to find if it places shelters at a competitive disadvantage to pet shops who are allowed to sell animals intact, while the shelters are required by law to desex, vaccinate and microchip animals.

## **OTHER CONCERNS**

Anecdotal evidence from 300 Rabbit Run clients, over two years has found that education about pet rabbits from pet shops in Victoria is non existent and that pet shop owners and staff are providing ignorant or false and misleading information about rabbits at enquiry or sale. We have also experienced this first hand on many occasions.

Rabbits are commonly being sold with genetic defects (particularly teeth). We have experienced this first hand. This results in the animal either being surrendered to a shelter resulting in compulsory death of the rabbit, the release of the rabbit into the wild or veterinary expense to responsible rabbit owners, usually ongoing for the life of the rabbit. There is no system in place to recover these costs, and no method to trace the breeder being made available to the purchaser.

Loopholes in local laws allow unregistered rabbit breeders to proliferate in the suburbs of Melbourne legally.

The websites Gumtree and Trading Post are examples of rabbits being sold by backyard breeders and demonstrates first hand the number of young bunnies being sold as breeding stock. Additionally, these young rabbits are sold with no information, or misinformation about their care and needs, and so begin the cycle of destruction and death of these young rabbits. We have experienced this first hand and urgent action is needed to address this matter.

## CONCLUSION

As a Rabbit Behavioural Consultant, Proprietor of Rabbit Run and Vice President of Rabbit Runaway Orphanage, and on behalf of Rabbit Run and Rabbit Runaway Orphanage I ask that this proposal is considered and that:

- Breeders of rabbits to be licensed and regulated to control the numbers of rabbits sold.
- Breeders of rabbits to desex rabbits prior to sale either to pet shops or by other means such as through the internet.
- That legislation forbids all rabbits to be sold as live snake food.
- Animal farms that focus on baby animals be restricted from breeding rabbits and leaving them at schools at 2 days old with inexperienced teachers. These practices encourage impulse buying as the teachers and children are encouraged to take the surviving rabbit's home.
- Pet shops are not to sell intact rabbits.
- Pet shops to be responsible for the distribution of educational material prior to sale, so that potential owners can make an informed decisions about the most appropriate pet for their lifestyle.
- Purchasers to demonstrate knowledge of responsible rabbit care prior to sale.
- Owners to desex rabbits prior to resale or presenting their accidental unwanted rabbits to pet shops.
- A fine of \$30,000 to be imposed for breaches to the above.
- A fine of \$30,000 to be imposed for the abandonment of rabbits into unauthorised places.

Animal law in general were initiated in the 1900's when animals were regarded as machines. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century animal law will be regarded as the next social justice movement and commercial interests that use animals without regard to their welfare to generate profits will be challenged.

I humbly offer this proposal for your consideration.

Mr Bryce Inglis  
**Rabbit Run & Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage**

### Reference Sources:

Meredith, A. Head of Exotic Animal Service, Royal School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh, Hospital for Small Animals

Sankoff, P and White, S (ed) 2009, *Animal Law in Australia*, The Federation Press. Australia