

Lagomorphs in the U.S., Australia and Japan: A Comparison of Attitudes Toward and Treatment of Rabbits

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The wild rabbit, like most any wild creature, displays a variety of behaviors and characteristics that make it a fascinating creature in its own right: complex social systems, intricate communication methods, odd biological quirks and a tenacious ability to survive and reproduce despite the worst of odds. In fact, the wild rabbit can teach us plenty about how we as humans can simultaneously love, hate and be totally ignorant about one species of animal, and how those opposite reactions can lead to wildly contradictory human behaviors.

~from *Stories Rabbits Tell* by Susan Davis & Margo DeMello

The ways in which rabbits, both wild and domestic, are regarded and subsequently treated can vary greatly from one culture to the next. In this sense, the United States, Japan, and Australia contrast markedly.

In many countries around the world, rabbits have been utilized for a food source, for fur, scientific experimentation, and as pets. This has led people to have divergent views of these creatures depending on what individuals are most familiar with: rabbits as meat, fur, lab animals, or companions. It has also led to a lot of people who have experience with more than one of those aspects having some ambivalence about what rabbits are or what role they play. Are they livestock, or are they beloved members of the family?

This multi-faceted view holds true for both domesticated rabbits as well as wild rabbits and hares. The wild varieties can be thought of as pests, a hunter's prize, or as delightful creatures gracing the landscape. In legend and lore cross-culturally rabbits and hares have been portrayed in an array of ways, a small sampling of which is as follows: innocent and vulnerable (think children's stories), a clever trickster (such as Bugs Bunny and Br'er Rabbit), magical (often appearing in the company of fairies and other fanciful beings), a symbol for rebirth and renewal (the animal familiar to different pre-Christian goddesses), and associated with the moon and lunar cycles. Are lagomorphs¹ then a nuisance or an inspiration?

Australia

Many human residents of Australia would resoundingly declare rabbits a nuisance. No lagomorphs are native to that land. The British brought domesticated rabbits with them to Australia on the First Fleet in 1787. However, the problem did not begin until 1859 when British colonist Thomas Austin took it upon himself to bring and release into the Australian countryside two dozen European wild rabbits. He released them on his property in Winchelsea, Victoria for the purpose of sport hunting. Being adaptable, lacking predators, and finding a habitable environment, these rabbits rapidly multiplied into a virulent invasive species. Any pet caretaker who has seen her bunnies decimate a salad or any gardener who has stepped out in the morning to find his vegetables or flowers mere stubble can well imagine what millions of unchecked

¹ All rabbits and hares are of the order lagomorpha and of the family leporidae.

rabbits could do to a landscape. Already by the 1880s they were a major problem. To this day, they are the most abundant, widely distributed, and despised mammal in Australia.

In spite of this, domesticated rabbits are still raised and kept in Australia. They are primarily bred for meat and as pets. Most pet rabbits are housed in outdoor hutches instead of as part of the family as a dog or cat more likely would be. There is a passionate minority of bunny lovers who share their lives with house rabbits.

Concerns about domestic breeds posing a risk to wild rabbit population control have varied from place to place within the country and over time as more information is obtained. Queensland, home of the Rabbit-Proof Fence, still has an all-out ban on pet rabbits to the tune of a \$30,000 AUD fine as punishment. Other states have relaxed restrictions on the keeping of domesticated rabbits over the last several years, although with more of an eye toward breeding and farming rather than pets.

Regarding rabbits overall, Australian governing bodies concern themselves much more with pest control and the productivity of the farming industry than they do with pets or humane welfare. Several means are employed for the purpose of wild rabbit population reduction, none of them particularly humane to rabbits or other affected non-targets. Among those are: “lethal baiting, warren destruction and fumigation, shooting, trapping, exclusion fencing and biological control with [the release of viruses] RHDV and myxomatosis.” (Sharp & Saunders, 2005, p. 6) Here is a key juncture at which pest control goals and the well-being of domesticated rabbits are at odds: All domestic breeds originate from the European wild rabbit (in other words, they are all of the genus and species *Oryctolagus cuniculus*); therefore domestic breeds are equally if not more affected by RHDV and myxomatosis. These afflictions result in slow, agonizing death. RHDV (also known as RHD or VHD) is rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus, which causes fatal internal bleeding. Myxomatosis causes fatal swelling and anorexia. There also occurs painful encrusting of all cavities, including the eyes, preventing the victim from being able to locate nourishment. The animal can suffer in this way for up to two weeks.

Vaccines that can protect domesticated rabbits are available for both viruses; however, the Australian government does not allow for the myxomatosis vaccine. It is a “live-virus” vaccine containing a weakened form of the virus. The fear is that, once inoculated, domestic rabbits could come into contact with wild rabbits and spread the weakened virus, thereby immunizing them and defeating the purpose of myxomatosis. In fact, myxomatosis has been used long enough that some wild rabbits have begun to develop immunity; therefore new strains of the virus are being developed. However, domesticated rabbits have no immunity whatsoever and the death rate of the infected is 100%. By comparison, the death rate can be considerably less among wild rabbits that have developed immunity.

“Most [Australian] people that have not had a rabbit as a pet in their adult life believe rabbits are pests....” Thus it is not particularly surprising that “government funding and grants are readily available for rabbit farming but are non-existent for rabbit welfare purposes.” (Inglis, 2010, p. 2) The task of rabbit welfare is then left to grassroots organizations such as Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage and Boing. Advocates have a steep hill to climb what with prevailing attitudes and existing official policies.

Rabbits have no legal status unless used in laboratories or for meat farming where they are covered by various codes of practice. Vets are legally obliged to kill all rabbits brought to them if found and there is no one to claim ownership (they are classified as feral), whether they are domestic or wild. The State Department of Primary Industry (DPI)...classifies all rabbits as feral unless microchipped. (*Ibid*, pp. 1 & 3)

Laws regarding rabbit control are based on the fear of pest species overpopulation. The law requiring veterinarians to euthanize all feral rabbits is based on a common misconception that domestic rabbits can survive for long in the wild. Rabbits were domesticated centuries ago; far too many generations have passed for them to still be equipped with all the same instincts as their wild ancestors. They also lack the coat color that provides protective camouflage. Most strays will quickly succumb to starvation, exposure, or predation. The lawmakers are unfortunately depriving strays the opportunity to either be reunited with their caretakers or adopted out to new homes.

There are exceptions to every rule, though, and there are indications that pockets of feral domesticated rabbits are surviving in semi-protected areas such as parks and schoolyards. For example, the Sydney Harbor Bridge was, up until recently, home to a colony of about thirty-six rabbits. They were removed, spayed and neutered, and placed up for adoption. Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage is about to conduct a census of the Melbourne Docklands area using the building and dockworkers unions. They are also researching other areas such as Struan in Tasmania, where there are reports of feral domestic rabbits living in this small town.²

When Australians are told that in other parts of the world there exist endangered species of rabbits, they have an attitude of disbelief. The average citizen finds unimaginable the concept of a rabbit that is rare, treasured, protected, and sought after....

Japan

Picture a rabbit species so exceptional it is worth risking one's life to hike through poisonous snake infested thick forests in the middle of the night just to catch a glimpse. Meet the Amami black rabbit (*Pentalagus furnessi*) of Japan's isolated Nansei Shoto Islands. Also known as the Ryukyu rabbit, it is the only living species of the genus *Pentalagus*, dating back ten or twenty million years. Some call the Amami a "living fossil" due to its similarity to fossil species from the Miocene era. This elusive nocturnal creature has been the subject of fascination, study, writing and photography.

It is perhaps fitting then that rabbits are popular in Japan. Images and products of them are ubiquitous. As pets, they are numerous. The Japanese, along with those of several other cultures, see a rabbit in the moon rather than "the man on the moon."

There could be any number of reasons for the rabbit's popularity in this culture. The Japanese seem to love that which is cute and there is after all no cuter being than the bunny. There is something about Japanese culture that conjures up thoughts of grace, subtlety, quiet, peace, beauty and intelligence. Rabbits embody all of those qualities. Much of Japan is made up of dense urban environments with the majority of housing being flats instead of the sprawling suburbs we are used to in the United States. Rabbits make ideal pets in such environments since they don't need much space and won't annoy neighbors by making noise. Having more flats than stand-alone houses also means Japan is more likely to have house rabbits than other countries would.

Domesticated rabbits may have been introduced from Portugal as early as the 14th century; however they did not take off until the Meiji period, which began in 1868. At that time rabbits were being imported from China, Italy, France, and the U.S. The Japanese developed

² Information provided by Bryce Inglis, personal communication, November 17, 2010

their own breed, the albino Japanese white. Also known as the Japanese jumbo white, it is a cross between the New Zealand white and Flemish giant. This large breed was being raised by farmers for meat and fur, but the idea of rabbits as pets followed soon after. It quickly became a custom of the upper class to have fancy breed rabbits imported from Europe. In 1876 the government decided to profit from this trend by placing a high tax on rabbits. This resulted in them—rabbits that is, although probably government officials as well—losing popularity. The tax law was later repealed.

In wartime, rabbits made a comeback as livestock. This began in 1894 with the start of the Japan-Sino War, continuing through World War II. (It is estimated there were about six million farm rabbits during the Japan-Sino War and, during World War II, it is believed Japan had the highest population of angoras in the world.) Once peace returned to this country, life improved not only for people, but also for rabbits as they trended away from livestock toward pets. In recent decades, rabbit meat has not been regularly consumed and these gentle creatures are preferred left alive. Small breeds are favored as pets, resulting in the Japanese white population dwindling and gaining protected status under the Japanese Agriculture Association.

Many of the world's cultures, including Japan, have some association of the rabbit with the divine. For one thing, the Japanese white was so common it became the nation's archetype for rabbits. White happens to also be the color that represents the divine. Although more of a secular culture today, Japan has a rich religious legacy featuring Buddhism and Shinto. A tale of the Shinto god Ōkuninushi tells of his being rewarded for helping a hare who is a god in disguise. The early 8th century text *Kojiki*, a collection of Japanese myths and creation stories, relates the story of "The White Hare of Inaba." An ancient Buddhist symbol dating back to 581 C.E. depicts three hares chasing each other in a circle, their interlinked ears forming a perfect triangle. There is a well-known *Jataka* story dating back to the Heian period (794-1185) in which Buddha was a hare in an earlier incarnation and Sakra (or Taishakuten 帝釈天), ruler of the Trayastrimśa Heaven, honored him by drawing his image on the moon.³ On the list of Japan's national treasures is a painting by Takuma Shoga dated 1191 and titled "Twelve Devas." In it, the moon goddess Gwatten is shown holding a crescent moon with a white rabbit nestled in the curve of the crescent. The earliest mentions of a rabbit on the moon date as far back as 475 B.C.E. In Japanese lore, it is said the rabbit is pounding the ingredients to make rice cakes (mochi, which is also the word for full moon). Alternatively, the rabbit has been described as keeping the moon clean by rubbing it with a bunch of horsetails. To this day, rabbits factor heavily in each September's Moon Festival.

"Why are you rabbits jumping so?
Now please tell why, tell why."
"We jump to see the big round moon
Up in the sky, the sky."
Japanese nursery rhyme

Today rabbits are desired as companions, not just as symbols or livestock. People are now getting to bond with rabbits and know them intimately in a way that cannot occur when rabbits are living in outdoor hutches or are serving as cultural symbols, limited to what the

³ There are several versions of this tale. Sometimes the hare is a faithful follower of Buddha whose piety is tested when Buddha disguises himself as a Brahman in need of help. Sometimes the hare is granted immortality on the moon.

human imagination projects onto them.⁴ Unfortunately for these vulnerable beings, Japan currently has an abundance of rabbit breeders and pet shops capitalizing on their popularity, which is not yet balanced out by animal welfare organizations or animal rights movements. There is no equivalent of the Humane Society. There is the JSPCA (Japanese Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals), which is primarily involved in educating the public. There also exists a small rabbit rescue group, the name of which translates as Japan Rabbit Humane Society. It was founded in 2005 and runs a small shelter in Tokyo. Finally, there is a social networking website called “Mixi” with a forum “Usagi No Wa” (circle of rabbits) facilitating rabbit rescue and adoption. There are several small, informal groups made up of bunny lovers who individually foster rabbits until they are adopted or who go places together where strays have been spotted and try to rescue them. That said, the efforts on behalf of rabbit welfare are not yet adequate in the face of a large, lucrative pet industry.

One regrettable outcome of this imbalance is breeders taking baby bunnies away from their mothers much too soon in order to get them on the market while they are still tiny and irresistibly cute. This way customers can also be deceived that their pet will stay small. There are obviously reasons why kittens (or kits) aren’t normally weaned from does until about eight weeks of age. When they are separated too soon it can have lasting if not fatal effects on the health of the young. Breeders have been known to remove kittens for sale to pet stores at merely 2-4 weeks old when they have not yet developed the microflora in the hindgut and pH levels of the stomach to be able to process solid food. Ironically this has resulted in rabbits gaining a reputation for being too delicate and difficult to care for as pets.

Baby bunnies are sold at places as divergent as outdoor shrine festivals and home improvement stores (well, house rabbits do improve homes...). Rabbits sold in these settings are not accompanied by sufficient, if any, information on rabbit care or appropriate supplies. Many schools have rabbits living in hutches on the property. The quality of care they receive varies greatly, which is highly dependent on individual teachers—how they feel about rabbits and how much they know about them. The lack of animal rescue groups means abandoned pets can easily end up as strays.

The situation has improved notably in recent years. Japanese veterinarians are getting trained in rabbit health and reputable books on rabbit care have been published. A rabbit-only clinic opened in Tokyo in 1999. In addition, a few exotics-only clinics have opened in and around Tokyo within the last ten years or so. A 2008 book, the title of which roughly translates as *Rabbit Massage Encyclopedia*, provides detailed information on massage, acupuncture, Tellington Touch, and more. An annual domestic rabbit festival/conference has been held in Tokyo for ten years. It is a big event with speakers, seminars, display booths, sales of rabbit supplies, and a rabbit show sponsored by the Yokohama Bay Rabbit Club. The event is sponsored by a pet store called Rabbit’s Tail that has three locations around the city. In some ways it is a great educational opportunity, but one to be taken with a big grain of salt since the sponsor is by its very nature motivated by profits instead of genuine animal welfare.⁵

Being as enterprising and occasionally over-the-top as they are, perhaps it should be no surprise it was the Japanese who came up with the Rabbit (Usagi) Café. Located in the city of Nagoya, it not only has rabbit-themed decorating and so forth, it has actual bunnies hopping

⁴ For a much deeper exploration of this topic, see Margo DeMello’s *Becoming Rabbit: Living with and Knowing Rabbits* (2010).

⁵ Much of the information on domesticated rabbits in Japan today was provided by Kotoyo Hoshina and Koushi Amano, personal communication, October 30, 2010.

around. Customers can either enjoy the company of the resident rabbits or BYOB (bring your own bunny). *I can't wait to go there someday!*

Japan is also home to one of the world's only non-fiction celebrity rabbits. Oolong became an Internet phenomenon fueled by photographs taken by his human caretaker Hironori Akutagawa. Although he has since passed away, Oolong lives on via his website and a 2009 book entitled *In Almost Every Picture 8: Oolong*. He has had ample media coverage, including an article in *The New York Times*. Akutagawa's rendition of adopting Oolong is illustrative of the stray pet population in the country: "Oolong...was born in an outdoor rabbit group in a park in Hokkaido." From feral waif to stardom! Would that every rabbit were so fortunate.

United States of America

Before the formation of the earth, there was only water; that, on the surface of this vast expanse of water, floated a large raft on which were the animals of the various kinds which are on the earth and of which the Great Hare was the chief. They sought a fit and firm place on which to disembark; they requested the beaver to dive for the purpose of bringing up some earth from the bottom of the water. He remained without returning for so long a time that the supplicants believed him drowned. Finally they saw him appear nearly dead and motionless. After examining carefully his paws and tail, they found nothing. [Next] the otter dived. He remained in the depths of the waters a longer time than did the beaver, but, like him, he came to the surface without success. The muskrat then cast himself into the waters and bravely dived into the depths. After remaining therein nearly an entire day and night he appeared motionless at the side of the raft. The other animals carefully took him out of the water, opened one of his paws, where there was a small grain of sand between his claws. The Great Hare, who was encouraged to form a vast and spacious earth, took this grain of sand and let it fall on the raft, which became larger. He took a part and scattered it, which caused the mass to increase more and more. When it was of the size of a mountain he willed it to turn, and as it turned the mass still increased in size.

The Great Hare is honoured by the Indians, and they regard him as the god who has formed the land. ~"one version of the prevailing Algonquian cosmogonic story" excerpted from the *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico* (1907)⁶

Among the many different Native American story traditions, trickster tales featuring Coyote or Raven tend to be best known to non-Native audiences, but there are also a large number of tales that feature a trickster Rabbit or Hare, particularly among the Algonquin-speaking peoples of the central and eastern woodland tribes. Nanabozho (or Manabozho) the Great Hare, for instance, is a powerful figure found in the tales of the Algonquin, Fox, Menominee, Ottawa, Ojibwa, and Winnebago tribes. In some stories, Nanabozho is a revered culture hero — creator of the earth, benefactor of humankind, the bringer of light and fire, and teacher of sacred rituals. In other tales he's a clown, a thief, a lecher, or a cunning predator — an ambivalent, amoral figure dancing on the line between right and wrong. In Potawatomi myth, Wabosso is the Great White Hare (and the younger brother of Nanabozho) who travels north to become the greatest of magicians among the supernaturals. The Utes tell the story of Ta-vwots, the Little Rabbit, who shatters the sun and destroys the world, all of which must be created again; and an Omaha rabbit brings the sun down to earth while trying to catch his own shadow. The Cherokee, the Creek, the Biloxi and other tribes tell humorous stories of a mischievous Rabbit who is cousin to Br'er Rabbit and Compair Lapin, outwitting foes and puncturing the pride of friends with his clownish antics. (Windling, 2005)

In addition to the rich Native American legacy of rabbit and hare stories, characters, and even deities, later the colonizers, immigrants, and slaves would bring their own. Those who came from Europe had a host of lore behind them. Several pre-Christian goddesses had hares as familiars or could shape-shift into them: Artemis, Aphrodite, Freyja, Holda, Selene, Persephone

⁶ Source: James White, ed., *Handbook of Indians of Canada*, published as an appendix to the Tenth Report of the Geographic Board of Canada, Ottawa, 1913, pp. 331-335.

and Kaltes for example. What most notably remains in American culture today is the springtime story of goddess Eastre,⁷ which gave us Easter and the Easter Bunny. Although many contemporary religious would like to believe it is a Christian holiday, the word Easter appears nowhere in the Bible and is directly derived from the goddess name. Meanwhile, the slave ships brought us a treasure trove of African trickster rabbit/hare lore featuring the character Kalulu. These tales evolved into the American Br'er (Brother) Rabbit stories.

Modern American versions of these traditional figures include such characters as: Bugs Bunny, Peter Rabbit, Winnie-the-Pooh's Rabbit, Thumper, Harvey, Roger Rabbit, the Trix rabbit, the Energizer Bunny, and the Cadbury Bunny, as well as a host of bunnies featured in contemporary children's literature such as the "nutbrown hares" of *Guess How Much I Love You*. Oddly, some children are so accustomed to the rabbits of cartoons, children's books, and advertisements that they do not know what to make of it when they see a real rabbit. Sometimes they are disappointed; sometimes they are even frightened.

One would think with the incredible collection of rabbit lore in this country—largely portraying them in a positive light—that Americans would be fond of rabbits in much the same way as the Japanese. However, our image of lagomorphs is so fractured it is as if we were looking at the image reflected in a broken mirror. This is in part left over from the spread of Christianity across Europe all those years ago. One of the methods used to put down pre-Christian religions was to denigrate their deities and symbols. Some goddesses were absorbed into the new religion by being adapted as saints while other goddesses along with traditional wise women and midwives were called evil witches. Likewise, rabbits and hares were given a role reversal. Once the familiar of goddesses, now they were the witch's familiar or animal incarnations of witches. "People also used to burn hares in May Day rituals in medieval Europe because, like cats, hares (white ones in particular) were thought to be the incarnations of witches." (Davis & DeMello, 2003, p. 133) Rabbits were at times demonized such, while at other times they were simply reduced from divine figure to a benign character such as the Easter Bunny. Long affiliated with women and sexuality, when early Christian leaders decided sex and, by extension, women were to be avoided, it provided another reason to disparage the lagomorph.

"The Hare"

In the black furrow of a field
I saw an old witch-hare this night;
And she cocked a lissome ear,
And she eyed the moon so bright,
And she nibbled of the green;
And I whispered "Whsst! Witch-hare,"
Away like a ghostie o'er the field
She fled, and left the moonlight there.

~Walter de la Mare

This is not to say that polytheistic cultures just lovingly cherished rabbits and hares. Some of these cultures practiced animal sacrifice as a part of religious rituals. Hares were sometimes sacrificed to the aforementioned goddesses. Other times they were eaten with the hope that, by doing so, the individual would gain some of the attributes associated with them such as fertility. "Totemistic rituals always involved the sacrificing and eating of the animal at

⁷ Eastre was Germanic. Belief in this goddess migrated, thereby also becoming Eostre (Celtic) and Ostara (Anglo-Saxon). The hare was companion to all three.

the major festivals so that its strength might pass into the celebrants. The strength of the hare became characterized as an aphrodisiac....” (Rowland, 1973, p. 89)

Americans can readily accept the idea of rabbit as meal, fur coat, angora sweater, lab animal, gardener’s and farmer’s pest, hunter’s target, classroom pet, outdoor hutch occupant, embodiment of cuteness, symbol of childhood, and household companion. Amazingly enough, we do not appear conflicted or confused about this.

That we see rabbits as both pets and products is unusual, because the species we use as commodities generally are not the same species we keep as companions. In this culture at least, we don’t eat pet species like cats, dogs, horses or guinea pigs. That means that rabbits are the only animals in this culture that we both fancy as pets and kill for a multitude of other purposes. (Davis & DeMello, 2003, pp. 225-6)

The following conversation captures this phenomenon. Recently I was seated at a lunch counter reading articles as part of the research for this piece. A man was seated next to me and asked what I was reading. I told him and the rest of the exchange went like this:

“Have you ever eaten rabbit?”

“No.” (I’m a vegetarian.)

“My best friend and I used to hunt rabbits. Tasted real good. My mom knew how to prepare them just right.”

“Eating rabbit may give you a few moments of pleasure, but having one as a companion can give you about ten years of joy.”

“My grandson has a pet rabbit.”

In a matter of seconds we had gone from rabbits in culture to rabbits as food to hunting them for sport to having them as companions to childhood pet. He did not seem to pick up on the peculiarity of it. Had we been discussing virtually any other species, the conversation would not have gone all over the place like that. For Americans, dogs and cats fit fairly neatly into one category while cows and pigs fit into another and squirrels and foxes into another still.

Our dominant culture is one of buying and disposing. Unfortunately this habit is not always limited to material things. Many Americans think nothing of getting their child a baby bunny for Easter with no plans to be responsible for it much beyond the holiday. Ours is also a culture that allows for using others, the land, natural resources, and animals as means to a profitable end. The pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries are huge and incredibly lucrative, so why not exploit rabbits and other animals in laboratories? There are wild rabbits and hares all over North America, so little attention is drawn to the species whose populations are dwindling dangerously low, namely the pygmy rabbit, swamp rabbit, and the New England cottontail. Lastly, it is a culture of short-sightedness—before acting we don’t often enough stop to think about the potential long-term effects of our choices.

Thanks largely to the House Rabbit Society (HRS), Humane Society and ASPCA things have come a long way for domesticated rabbits. Before Marinell Harriman founded HRS in 1987, house rabbits were merely anomalies. Few and far between were the likes of writers Beatrix Potter and William Cowper, who were house rabbit pioneers (the former having shared her life and home with the real Peter and Benjamin Bunny a.k.a. Bounce; the latter having shared his with the three hares Puss, Tiney and Bess). Today the House Rabbit Society and its philosophy of rabbits as cherished family members has become international with chapters and affiliates in many countries. Its website is first rate and other excellent educational materials such as the *House Rabbit Handbook* are readily available. The numbers of people who lovingly share their homes with rabbits has increased at a wonderful rate.

When I had my first house rabbit in 1977, I knew no one else with the same situation. There was also nowhere to turn for good information on rabbit care and veterinarians did not seem to know much about health maintenance. These days when the subject comes up in conversation, I am impressed at how frequently other people will say, “I have a house rabbit too!” or “I know someone who has house rabbits!”

While checking out at the grocery store today, the cashier asked, “Would like me to remove your carrot tops?”

I said, “Goodness, no! I have rabbits.”

Just then, he and I remembered out loud that we had run into each other at this same spot a few months ago and discovered that we both have house rabbits.

The young man bagging my groceries said, “Wait a minute! Do mean to say all three of us have house rabbits?!” And he proceeded to tell us about his two.

Conclusion

Wild rabbits and hares are indigenous to almost every land, with the notable exceptions of Australia and New Zealand. In nearly all but those countries, they have a long tradition of being used as a cultural symbol. Some associations with rabbits and hares are just about universal. In the human imagination they were connected to both women and the moon. Many ancient religions had moon goddesses—there were rarely moon gods—and those goddesses were frequently portrayed either with or as hares. In ancient Egypt, the same hieroglyph represented both hare and the moon. Humankind also made an enduring association between rabbits and springtime, rebirth, renewal, and fertility. Another common theme is the rabbit as traveler and sometime messenger between this world and the next—hence the link to Persephone as well as the rabbit of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The old Buddhist symbol of the circle of three hares spread worldwide, starting out traveling to other lands via the Silk Road.

The [Three Hares] Project has revealed the motif to be an extraordinary and ancient archetype, stretching across diverse religions and cultures, many centuries and many thousands of miles. It is part of the shared medieval heritage of Europe and Asia (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism) yet still inspires creative work among contemporary artists. (Chapman, 2004)

In the countries where rabbits are invasive species and thus unwelcome, sometimes the symbolism is unwelcome as well. For example, there is a movement in Australia to replace the Easter Bunny with the bilby, a marsupial native to the land. Bilbies look somewhat like rabbits; they are similar in size and have virtually the same ears. The campaign was started by the Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia (RFA). From their website:

The Easter Bilby is an Australian symbol of Easter, to replace the Easter Bunny. Very young children are indoctrinated with the concept that bunnies are nice soft fluffy creatures whereas in reality they are Australia’s greatest environmental feral pest and cause enormous damage to the arid zone. ...the idea of the Easter Bilby [is] to dispel that myth and at the same time promote and raise awareness about the damage that rabbits cause. (Newland, 1991)

Many of the qualities rabbits and hares were used to personify are actual qualities they inhabit. This fact has become more widely recognized as rabbits have grown in popularity as household companions. Those who live with rabbits realize they are indeed clever, sensitive, obstinate, sensual, graceful, capable of humor, and magical in a way. Bunny people also realize

rabbits can, in fact, be contradictory as they have historically been portrayed. They can be both bold and timid, innocent and conniving, passive and manipulative, weak and strong, submissive and dominant, cute and formidable, silly and intelligent, comical and noble. That is a big part of what makes them so fascinating and engaging; it may also be why they have served so well as a variety of cultural representations.

In several countries around the world, rabbits are the third most popular pet after cats and dogs. However, “pet” does not always mean companion as countless rabbits still are confined to outdoor hutches (or in the garage or the basement). Rabbits are also the third most abandoned pet after cats and dogs, and the third most euthanized – killed – at shelters. On the bright side, they are rapidly growing more popular as animal companions. Knowledge about them is increasing all the time; subsequently, quality of care for rabbits is improving all the time. Human-rabbit relationships and the quality of rabbit care are reciprocal: The more a person cares about his or her rabbit, the better the care the rabbit will receive. In the process of taking good care of a rabbit, human and rabbit have the opportunity to become closer. Also the rabbit’s life expectancy will increase, lengthening the time the relationship has to develop and deepen.

A rabbit’s attitude to its human companions is a barometer of the level of trust built, overcoming its basic instincts as a prey animal. When trust is established and reaffirmed to the rabbit by its caregiver, the rabbit’s secure feelings will give back rewards in ways that only those who are trusted can feel. The exquisiteness of this relationship is only possible when the rabbit lives closely with humans.

Bryce Inglis, 2010
Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage
Olinda, Victoria, Australia

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