

Welfare Implications of Selective Breeding in Companion Animals

In its recent report addressing the welfare impact of selective breeding in companion animals, the UK's Companion Animal Welfare Council, explores the remarkable range of traits that have been selected for, deliberately or unwittingly, in the breeding of companion animals. It seems that no sooner do animals start to reproduce under human stewardship than someone takes it upon themselves to 'breed' unusual-coloured, different-shaped, other-sized, longer-haired forms. (Incidentally, 'breeders' is an odd term for the humans involved, as it is the animals that do the breeding - the humans actually exert their effect by selectively preventing breeding). The resulting diversity of morphological and behavioural modifications in vertebrates ranging from fish to mammals is extraordinary, but there seems to have been very little concern historically about the welfare impacts of these changes. As CAWC puts it: *'Within the boundaries of modern human ecology there are niches, which do not exist otherwise, for all manner of animal types from achondroplastic dogs to red canaries, bubble-eyed goldfish and albino corn snakes. In one sense, what we see is that the process of evolution, being constantly 'on the look out' to fill all possible niches, has begun to 'explore' these new ones; and with its inherent disregard of whether or not they are pleasant 'places' to be.'*

CAWC points out that welfare problems associated with genetic changes to the phenotypes of animals can be particularly serious in that they: (i) can affect large numbers of animals, (ii) have the potential to continue to do so generation after generation into the future, (iii) can have a severe adverse impact on animals' feelings (eg through pain or increased fearfulness), and because (iv) these effects can be of long duration – potentially affecting the animal for a large part of, or throughout, its life.

The Report includes chapters on the history of selective breeding in companion animals, past and present methods used, impact on welfare (and methods of welfare assessment), the scale of the problem, methods available for making improvements, and what needs to be done. CAWC proposes a code on breeding companion animals which all breeders should respect:

'The selection and breeding of companion animals can result in, or perpetuate, characteristics or inherited conditions that seriously affect the quality of animals' lives. No one should breed companion animals without careful regard to characteristics (anatomical, physiological and behavioural) that may put at risk the health and welfare of the offspring or the female parent.'

The report includes sixteen other recommendations that address, among other things, the need (generally) to avoid inbreeding; the need for research into welfare impacts and into diagnostic tests and strategies for elimination or control of current problems.

In a world which increasingly expects strict welfare regulation regarding the use of animals for farming and scientific procedures, the apparently whimsical nature of some

companion animal 'breeding' seems, in the light of this CAWC report, to be a very strange anachronism.

Breeding and Welfare in Companion Animals. (May 2006). The Companion Animal Welfare Council's Report on Welfare Aspects of Modifications, through Selective Breeding or Biotechnological Methods, to the Form, Function, or Behaviour of Companion Animals. 84 pp Published by, and available from, the Companion Animal Welfare Council, c/o The Donkey Sanctuary, Sidmouth, Devon EX10 0NU. cawc.org.uk

J Kirkwood

UFAW

Dog Breed Standards and Breed-related Illness

You wait ages for a bus and then along come two at once. A recent report published by Advocates for Animals (see details below), like the Companion Animal Welfare Council (CAWC) report mentioned above, draws attention to the welfare problems that have arisen in association with the selection of pedigree dogs. Whereas the CAWC Report covers all companion animals, this report focuses specifically and exclusively on dogs. It outlines, with colour illustrations, quite a wide range of examples of common welfare problems that have arisen through selective breeding and states: *'...current pedigree dog breeding policies and practices cannot be seen as ethical or acceptable in their present form.'* And: *'Members of the public who buy pedigree dogs or attend pedigree dog shows are, unintentionally, supporting an inappropriate breeding system that cannot be justified on animal welfare grounds.'*

The Report includes sections on the following:

- welfare implications of pedigree dog breed standards
- prevalence of breed-related disease and abnormality
- breeds affected by various specific conditions (joint dysplasias, eye diseases, heart and respiratory diseases, skeletal problems, bone tumours, and deafness)
- Council of Europe and companion animal organisations' (RSPCA, Kennel Club, Dogs Trust) views
- conclusions and recommendations.

Among other conclusions and recommendations, the authors (Advocates for Animals) believe that: *'Breeders should make the primary goal of their breeding policies the functional health of the dogs in their breed, and this aim should be reflected in the criteria for selection of dogs for breeding'*.

Is the more or less simultaneous publication of two reports on companion animal welfare problems associated with breeding, indicative of a significant awakening to this issue?

The Price of a Pedigree: Dog Breed Standards and Breed-Related Illness (April 2006). A Report by Advocates for Animals. 25 pp Published by, and copies available from, Advocates for Animals, 10 Queensferry Street, Edinburgh EH2 4PG. Available also at: www.advocatesforanimals.org/pdf/Thepriceofapedigree.pdf

J Kirkwood

UFAW