



Paw-some! Association Between Pet-Ownership and Nature Connectedness

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INTRODUCTION

As the human population increases and becomes concentrated in urban areas, we separate ourselves from nature. By 2050, it is estimated that 66% of the world's populations will live in urban areas.[1] Urbanization, the process of an increasing population in a metropolitan area, replaces the natural ecosystem and creates barriers between individuals and the natural environments in which they live. An ongoing discussion is whether or not we still have a connection to nature.

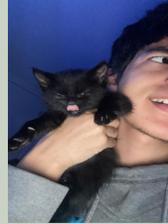


Figure 1. Researcher Cortes with his cute cat Corona

Some argue that we haven't distanced ourselves from nature because we have created spaces, such as zoos, parks, and wildlife sanctuaries, that imitate the natural environment. On the other hand, others argue that the connection we have created isn't authentic because these areas aren't easily accessible to some populations and are man-made. Nevertheless, we still attempt to find ways to connect ourselves to nature, even if it's considered inorganic.

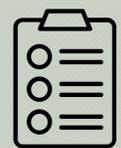
One of the ways we try to connect ourselves to nature is through animals. Over time, humans have formed an unbreakable bond between themselves and animals. Before being considered pets, the purpose of animals was to assist us in our daily lives with tasks, like hunting and keeping us safe. As our technology advanced, we no longer found a need for animals to perform these tasks, causing their purpose to shift.



Figure 2. Researcher Silverthorne and their cute cat Mochi

Currently, animals take the role of emotional helpers and often are being considered members of a family. Research has shown that pet owners favor better animal treatment, are more concerned about animal welfare issues, and showed higher conservation habits compared to non-pet owners.[2] On the contrary, others argue that pets are an accessory for humans and the human lifestyle[3]; thus, not necessarily playing a role in their connection to nature. The distinction between animals' role today led us to ask whether pet owners truly believe they are more connected to the environment because of their pets, and how their pets influenced their interactions with the natural world.

METHODS



Creating the survey

We generated a survey to decipher whether or not pet owners are more connected to the environment because of their pets, and if their pets influenced their interactions with the natural world. To guide our survey questions, we asked four secondary questions that related to our main research question. These secondary questions allowed us to have a different perspective. We have added our secondary questions in the 'Research Questions' portion of the poster under the name Nested Questions. The survey questions brought up things like recycling habits, energy conservation, and opinions on various environmental topics, as well as things pertaining more directly to pets, such as the role they play in families and if they've interacted with nature more because of their pet.

Administering the survey

The survey was administered to Project TRUE Alumni, the WCS Youth Network, Fordham University Alumni, the Fordham University Commuter Student Association, Bronx community groups like The Point, and other New York City residents. We ensured the participants would be safe by making sure their information would only be viewed by the research conductors and refraining from asking identifying questions that could potentially reveal their identity

Analyzing the Questions

After collecting our surveys (n=38), we analyzed our data by first using inductive reasoning to find themes within each set of written responses, coding the themes, and then comparing the two for potential discrepancies. Additionally, we noted the amount of times certain words or themes were discussed in the open-ended questions and created figures, an example is figure 8. By bringing up topics like environmental conservation and treatment of environment, we were able to reveal the participants' behavior and concern for the environment and how pets influenced that. Additionally, it exposes if pet-owners and non-pet owners have observably different views of nature.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What is the impact of pet ownership on the perception of nature in cities?

NESTED QUESTIONS

2. Does having a pet encourage owners to visit green spaces more frequently?
 - a. Hypothesis: Having pet will encourage owners to visit green spaces more frequently because some pets require their owner go outside.
3. How does an urban environment influence pet owners' interaction and perception of nature?
 - a. Hypothesis: Urban environments will limit pet owners' interaction and perception of nature because of the lack of exposure to green spaces.
4. Do pet owners and non-pet owners have different treatment of the environment?
 - a. Hypothesis: Pet owners will treat the environment better than non-pet owners because their pets come from the "natural world" and that connection will make them want to protect it more.
5. Do pet owners and non-pet owners have different views on the conservation/preservation of nature?
 - a. Hypothesis: Pet owners will be more knowledgeable about nature conservation/preservation compared to non-pet owners because they see their pets interacting with nature and see how valuable the environment is.

RESULTS

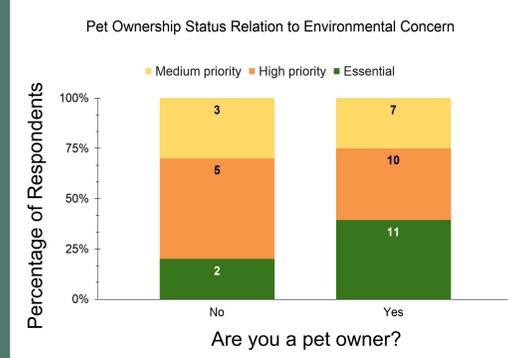


Figure 3. Comparison of how much pet owners and non-pet owners prioritize environmental issues

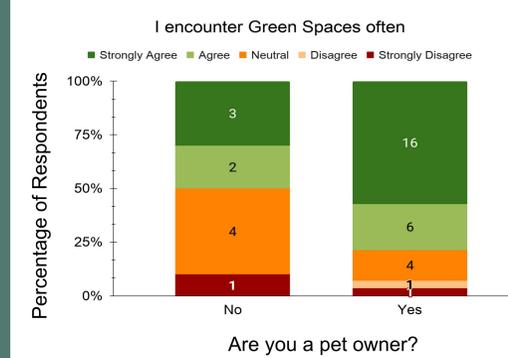


Figure 4. Comparison of how often pet owners and non-pet owners say they encounter green spaces

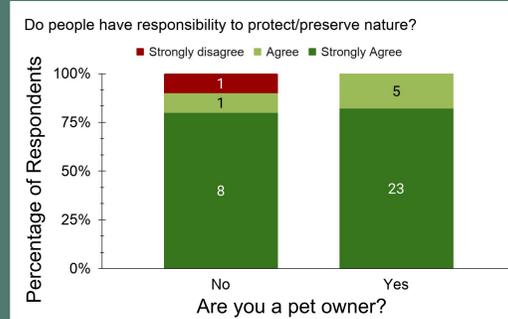


Figure 5. Compares the pet owners and non-pet owners views on human involvement in preserving/protecting nature

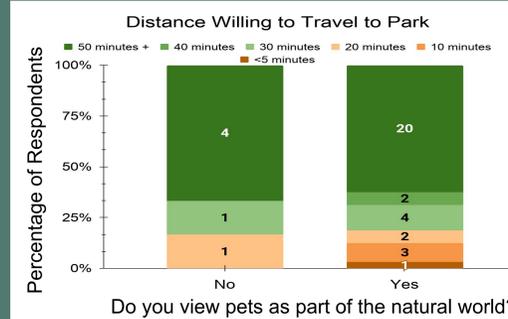


Figure 6. Comparison of how far survey respondents are willing to travel based on whether or not they view pets as part of the natural world.

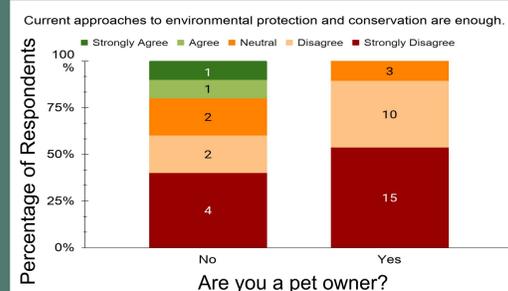


Figure 7. Graph shows pet owners and non-pet owners views on whether current environmental approaches are enough

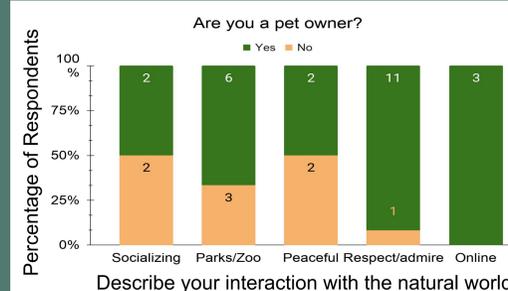


Figure 8. Frequency of certain topics/words when survey respondents were asked to describe their interactions with the natural world.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Visiting Green Spaces

In support of hypothesis (Q2), our data indicated that pet owners are more likely to be exposed to green spaces than non-pet owners. When asked if they encounter green spaces often, more than 70% of the pet owners agreed or strongly agreed that they encounter green spaces; whereas, only little over 50% of non-pet owners agreed (figure 4). Based on other research, exposure to nature can have positive effects on a person's mood and mental health [4]; hence, this exposure to nature can indirectly leave a positive impact on the pet owners compared to the non-pet owners that don't visit green spaces as much.

Urban Impact on Perception of Nature

Despite the lack of green space and access to green space in urban environments, the data collected shows that living in an urban environment causes people to develop strong attachments to nature; thus, **not supporting our hypothesis (Q3)**. Our data shows that all participants prioritized the environment at medium priority or higher (figure 3). While respondents live in urban areas, their concern for the environment shows that despite a lack of green space there is an inherent human connection to nature. In another question, many of the respondents stated that nature made them more happy, peaceful and improved their mental wellbeing.[4] This is further supported by the respondents' willingness to travel more than 50 minutes to green spaces (figure 6). Their positive experiences with nature may overshadow the long trip.

Treatments of Environment

The data showed a correlation between pet ownership status and how the respondent treated the environment; thus, **supporting our hypothesis (Q4)**. Though our data shows that most respondents think the environment should be protected (figure 5), their interactions show something else. In the open-ended questions, many non-pet owners described their interactions with nature as being for social purposes like zoos, parks, picnics, etc. On the other hand, many pet owners described their interaction with the environment as being for admiration/respect (figure 8). A possible reason may be that pet owners admire nature is due to their emotional connection to their pets. [5]

Views on Conservation/Preservation

We expected pet owners to have more knowledge about the conservation and preservation of nature because we thought owning a pet would cause them to care more for the environment [5]. However, though many pet owners did state they learned new things about the environment, data also showed that pet ownership does not influence all the respondents' knowledge and views on conservation; thus, **not supporting our hypothesis (Q5)**. The data shows that both pet owners and non-pet owners think that the environment should be preserved (figure 5) and that current preservation approaches aren't enough (figure 7). Though most respondents had similar responses, the data shows that pet owners feel more strongly about current conservation efforts with about 90% of them saying current conservation efforts are not enough.

Conclusion

As humans continue to urbanize, their connection to nature continues to fade. Further research with more participants can reveal that pets can help replace that lost connection to nature. However, as of now, we can conclude that pet owners admire nature more and believe environmental conservation efforts should be improved.

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