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Eco-friendly pets

Lucy Treloar
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Minimise your pet's carbon pawprint with some know-how, writes Lucy Treloar.

Four-month-old Hebe is lying on a cushion in the sun. Her paw flies up to catch a twist of paper dangling on a length of string above her. This homemade kitten toy is one way that owner Sarah Teasdale's family minimises the environmental impact of its new member. "I don't want to use up valuable resources," says Teasdale.

Caring for the environment is important to this family, but making Hebe eco-friendly has been more of a challenge than expected, admits Teasdale. "There are so many conflicting concerns. You have to make difficult decisions sometimes, and think in terms of a scale of priorities."

Teasdale's family is not on its own: 63% of Australian households, one of the highest rates in the world, own a pet. This includes 2.75 million dogs, 2.3 million cats, 9 million birds, 20 million fish and, increasingly, reptiles. Earlier this year, carbon-trading company Easy Being Green estimated that an average cat causes almost half a tonne of greenhouse gas emissions per year, and a dog produces 1.75 tonnes. So how do you keep your pet green?

Food There's no denying that processed pet foods are convenient, provide adequate nutrition and generally cost little. They also turn waste into food, reducing "demands on the human food larder", says Britain's Pet Food Manufacturers' Association (PFMA).

The bad news is that the world of pet food is a minefield of ethical dilemmas. But the SOLE food principal - which calls for food to be sustainable, organic, local and ethical - is a handy touchstone (ethicurean.com).

Turning waste products into pet food uses a lot of energy and some products, especially imported ones, cover considerable "food miles" (the distance between production and consumption). For example, New Zealand lamb travels to Australia via the US in some products. And then there is packaging, protein source and animal welfare to consider.

Pet-food labels list food values and "ingredients", rather than sources (pfiaa.com.au). The reality is a little different from the images conjured up. The word "meat", for instance, generally means, "very processed animal offal and carcass". A product can be called "beef and vegetable" and yet contain more salt (1.7%) than vegetables.

Beef and poultry are the main sources of pet-food protein, and both present problems. Cattle are major emitters of greenhouse gases (23kg of carbon dioxide per kg). Battery hens rate better (1.8kg per kg), but are an animal-welfare issue. Cereals used in pet foods are treated with pesticides when growing and artificial additives are the norm.

Packaging rates poorly, too. With the exception of tins, it is rarely recyclable. Unlike PFMA, the Pet Food Industry

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Association of Australia offers no guidelines to encourage manufacturers to consider the environment in their packaging.

There are major disagreements about how beneficial processed food is for your pet. Dr Ann Nevill, trained in traditional and complementary veterinary care, prefers unprocessed food. Dr Matthew Miles, executive officer of the Australian Small Animal Veterinary Association (ASAVA), believes, as do many vets, that manufactured food is complete, balanced and healthy. A Choice overview of pet food notes that manufacturers do most pet-food research (choice.com.au).

BARF (biologically appropriate raw food) and similar local products have low food miles and are made with natural ingredients and raw meat. Some contain rabbit, which is a good use of an environmental pest, or kangaroo (www.barfvictoria.com.au; South Road Animal Hospital, tel: 9555 1899). Recipes are available online (choice.com.au).

Some manufactured foods contain natural ingredients (Natural Balance Organic and Eagle Pack Holistic Select) but are energy-intensive to produce, and expensive. Vegan pet food takes animal protein out of the equation (www.veganpet.com.au). It contains natural ingredients but is a processed product.

Australian-made supermarket products (Pedigree, Whiskas, etc) have lower food miles than some "premium" brands (Iams, Eukanuba etc) sold through vets and pet shops, but they are highly processed and contain many additives. Nature's Gift doesn't use additives. Whiskas uses fish from sustainable sources, but some is imported, making food miles a factor.

Waste management Victorian dogs produce 90 tonnes of waste a day. Dog poo doesn't just ruin a good walk: it can make people sick. It is estimated that 10% of the e.coli in the bay comes from poo that's been washed there after rain (www.litter.vic.gov.au).

Biodegradable plastic bags are available from pet shops, through councils or online (including ebay.com.au). Cleaning up costs councils money. The City of Melbourne, for example, gives away an average of 480,000 biodegradable bags per year. Cat owners should avoid using clay-based kitty litters. They don't break down in landfill and contain silica, a known carcinogen. There are several alternatives in Australia. They are processed, but a better environmental choice because of their biodegradability. Max's Pet Litter uses a by-product of the Australian rice industry. Oz Pet Animal Litter uses plantation timber off-cuts. (oz-pet.net.au, coprice.com.au). Biodegradable bags use energy, water and materials in production so, at home, dispose of the waste in in-ground pet toilets and worm farms. (itsadogshop.com, sustainability.vic.gov.au)

Grooming Flea treatments, shampoos and conditioners based on concentrated essential lavender and tea tree oils are effective, "but only for the dedicated" says Nevill. Although natural and biodegradable, these are still toxic, so follow instructions carefully (upmarketpets.com/contact.htm). Creating a clean environment for your pet is an eco-friendly way of making a difference. Nevill has major concerns about insecticidal flea treatments because of their toxicity and poor biodegradability. Capstar is the safest of these to use around children, she says. Miles recommends dab-on treatments (Frontline, Advantage) because they are simple and effective. "There is no cause for concern if used properly and wisely. In 15 years, I have never seen a child harmed."

Accessories Australians spend more than \$160 million each year on dog and cat accessories. Most items are made of imported plastic (toys) or nylon (collars and leads). Where possible, buy products made of natural materials. Hemp products are strong, durable and biodegradable (www.hemptydoo.com). Mats and coats made from recycled polyester or organic cotton are also available. But you don't have to spend a fortune on more products. Cats and dogs are just as happy with homemade toys. Be creative: tug toys for dogs can be made from old clothes, and cats love anything made from wool, paper and string.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/11/22/1195321951996.html>