

Keeping Our Cages Empty:

One Sanctuary's Guidelines on the Private Ownership of Small Furry Animals

By: Becca Walton, Jane Park, Ann Goody, PhD, from Three Ring Ranch, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) issues minimal standards for the husbandry and care of animals in institutions such as zoos, laboratories, and sanctuaries. Although all organizations permitted by the USDA and most private pet owners follow these minimal guidelines for space and housing, some are inadequate for the optimal well being of these small animals. Private pet owners are not under the same regulatory constraints and with a few inexpensive and creative ideas, are easily able to provide a higher standard of living than USDA regulations mandate.

There is a wealth of information available for the potential pet owner to read prior to purchase, but the majority of people continue to buy animals on impulse. Without realizing the long-term commitment of time and financial resources many of these new pet owners become overwhelmed with their new responsibilities. Often these animals end up returned to pet stores, resold, dropped off or abandoned at shelters or sanctuaries, like Three Ring Ranch Exotic Animal Sanctuary, when the novelty wears off. Some small furries arrive when new owners purchased a pair from a pet store only to find they reproduce quickly. Neutering was never explained as an option for rats, rabbits, chinchillas, and guinea pigs. In addition to these, there are other preventable reasons why these small animals arrive at sanctuaries and shelters. Such preventable examples can be seen in Table A.



Table A

Reasons Animals are Surrendered	
Reasons	Prevention
Excessive litters	Neutering/housing in same sex pairs
Odors	Proper ventilation/sanitation
Costs	Practicing low cost enrichment/knowledge of yearly costs
Inadequate facilities/lack of space	Maximize space by building upwards/housing some species outdoors (no chinchillas)
Biting/unsocial animals	Regular human interaction and enrichment

Furthermore, when these pet owners decide to surrender their pets, many arrive in very poor condition. Almost all of these problems were avoidable with a little awareness. For example, Piggy G, a male guinea pig, was surrendered malnourished with overgrown teeth, abdominal sores, and claws so overgrown that the bones of its feet became deformed. The pain was so severe that it cried when handled. These conditions resulted from a lack of regular grooming, improper diet, and improper and unclean housing. Such incorrect care of these animals lead to the problems seen in Table B.

Table B

Condition Upon Arrival	
Conditions	Prevention
Overgrown teeth	Wood/stone blocks in cages/dental treatment
Overgrown toe nails	Regular trimmings
Abdominal sores	Not housing on newspaper/proper sanitation
Malnourishment	Proper nutrition
Eye problems	Proper ventilation and light
Constipation	Proper nutrition/feeding grass
Poor coat	Proper nutrition

Once surrendered At Three Ring Ranch all animals are allowed to live out the remainder of their lives with optimal daily care. All animals live in social groupings whenever possible and male animals are neutered. If neutering is not an option for the animals we suggest same sex pair groupings. However, some animals arrive with serious emotional baggage and never accept other creatures of their own kind. Daily protocol includes: cage cleaning, handling, behavioral enrichment and feeding. All animals are kept in an area, which provides excellent ventilation, light and stimulation. Along with this regular maintenance, animals receive behavioral enrichment specific to the species, without overindulgence. Some of the enrichment protocols that we use that can be utilized by all pet owners are included in Table C.



Table C

Low Cost Enrichment		
Small Furry	Type of Enrichment	Comments
Mouse	Social groups	Introduce carefully
	Exercise wheel	
	Bedding	
	House	Provides shelter from sun
	Human interaction	Begin at a young age
Rat	Social groups	Introduce carefully
	Paper towels	Used as nesting material
	Toilet paper rolls	
	Food rolled in paper towel	Encourages foraging
	Hide food in bedding	Encourages foraging
	Vegetable trimmings (everything you eat, they eat)	Small portions
	House with holes	Allows scent stimulation
	Exercise wheel	
Guinea Pig	Social groups	Introduce carefully
	Non-treated wood/stone blocks	For tooth health
	Grass trimmings	Non-poison treated lawns and large bladed
	PVC pipe with holes	
	Vegetable trimmings/fruits	Caution for overweight
	House	
	Human interaction	Begin at a young age
Chinchillas	Social groups	Females are dominant and some are housed alone
	Non-treated wood/stone blocks	For tooth health
	Cage with multi levels	Can be home made
	House	
	Toilet with shavings	
	Grass trimmings	Non-poison treated lawns and large bladed
	Vegetable trimmings	Small portions and no fresh corn
	Dust baths	Daily
Human interaction	Not good for small children	
Rabbits	Social groups	
	Vegetable trimmings	
	Alfalfa cubes	From horse feed store and small portions
	Grass hay	
	House	
	Wooden platform	
	Human interaction	

Aside from the time it takes to provide the daily care and enrichment, a perspective pet owner might want to consider comparing different typical species commonly kept as pets. Table D would help to decipher what pet might best fit the individual's family and lifestyle.

Table D

Considerations for purchasing a pet				
Small Furry	Longevity (years)	Neuter	Initial Cost of Animal	Estimated yearly cost (including one vet check-up)
Mouse	2-3	No	\$1-2	\$120
Rat	3-4	Yes	\$2-10	\$198
Guinea Pig	3-4	Difficult	\$5-30	\$370
Chinchilla	16-22	Yes	\$100-500	\$370
Rabbit	5-10	Yes	\$5-30	\$395



No one buys a pet with the intent of injuring it or mistreating it, as in the story of Piggy G. In order to avoid such a grim outcome, owners could follow the guidelines outlined above. We feel prospective pet owners should use the tools above to evaluate different species and take the time to find the best fit for their unique lifestyle. By understanding why animals get surrendered and in what condition they arrive, future pet owners can provide the animal with a safe, enriching, long and healthy life. When selected carefully, a small furry can fit harmoniously in a home and provide years of companionship to you and your entire family.

Some of our very favorite animal reference books include:

- 1) Chinchillas (A Complete Pet Owner's Manual). Roder-Thiede, Maike. Barron's Educational Series Inc. 1993
- 2) Guinea Pigs. Behrend, Katrin. Barron's Educational Series Inc. 1996
- 3) Rabbits (A Complete Pet Owner's Manual). Wegler, Monika. Barron's Educational Series Inc. 1999
- 4) Mice (A Complete Pet Owner's Manual). Vanderlip, Sharon. Barron's Educational Series Inc. 2001
- 5) Rats (A Complete Pet Owner's Manual). Daly, Carol Himsel, D.V.M. Barron's Educational Series Inc. 2002

In addition to these, some other websites to get you started:

- 1) Chinchilla care: <http://chincare.com>
- 2) Rabbit care: http://www.hsus.org/pets/pet_care/rabbit_horse_and_other_pet_care/how_to_care_for_rabbits.html
- 3) Guinea Pig Care: <http://www.ahc.umn.edu/RAR/MNAALAS/Gpig.html>
- 4) Rat Care: <http://www.petratscanada.com/ratcare.htm>

Resources:

- 1) Animal Welfare Acts and Animal Welfare Regulations as of May 2002. USDA.
- 2) "What's Having a Pet Going to Cost?" 2004. BCSPCA Speaking for Animals. July 2006 <http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/animalcare/petcost.asp>
- 3) "Small Pets." 2006. Animal Hospitals-USA. July 2006 http://www.animalhospitals-usa.com/small_pets/index.html