

STUDY OF ANIMAL WELFARE ASPECTS AMONG PET RABBIT OWNERS

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Abstract: The European legal regulation of rabbit keeping is concentrating on rabbit husbandry in farm environment, but more and more urban people have pet rabbit. A study was done with questioners (n=150). The query was focused on the following: how can become somebody an owner, what kind of breeds are the most popular, what kind of housing and feeding methods are used, what kind of animal health problems are occurred, how much is known of the biology of the rabbit, what is the fate of the rabbit. All in all, we were looking for the question of whether pet rabbit keeping is appropriate for the domestic rabbit needs and welfare requirements. Most of the rabbits were kept incages and were fed with pellet, but they are not as conscious in the prevention of diseases as in the gift of a living animal.

Key words: pet, rabbit, animal care, animal welfare, survey

INTRODUCTION

Millions of rabbits are kept as pet animals all around in Europe. People are moving to urban areas from the countryside and would like to preserve their contact with the nature and earlier life. Rabbit is one of the most popular pet [5]. The recent legal regulations of animal welfare are focus on the rabbit producers, and the regulation of protection of animals deal with rabbits in general. Nevertheless the conscious rabbit owners pay attention and money on their pets, e.g. to insuring and microchipping their rabbits [11]. Nowadays, the objective relationship between humans and animals has ceased, and humans see animals as companions rather than objects [8]. Jámbor

Rabbits are prey animals, so they are more sensitive on their environment, sheds and disturbance. In other words, consideration should be given to environmental management to minimise disturbance as much as possible, but rabbits could be easily trained and conditioned to perform a series of behaviours [3]. So rabbits could be good companions if they are healthy and when stress-free, enriched living areas are provided them and welfare issues are daily applied [12]. At the same time several rabbits are kept in inappropriate conditions. A result of a survey in UK shows how many ways of housing are used among pet owners (Figure 1.).

The wire mesh cages are more durable and easier to clean them than the wooden ones and they can be made more comfortable with many accessories such as resting shelf and chewing wooden block, feeders for pellet and hay [15]. The rabbit needs a lot of water, so be sure to always have fresh water in front of it. It is best to fill the washable drink bottles daily or even several times a day [16]. The Animal Welfare Act states that outdoor animals should be given shelter when the weather is unfavorable and against predators. It even eliminates the idea of animal torture [1].

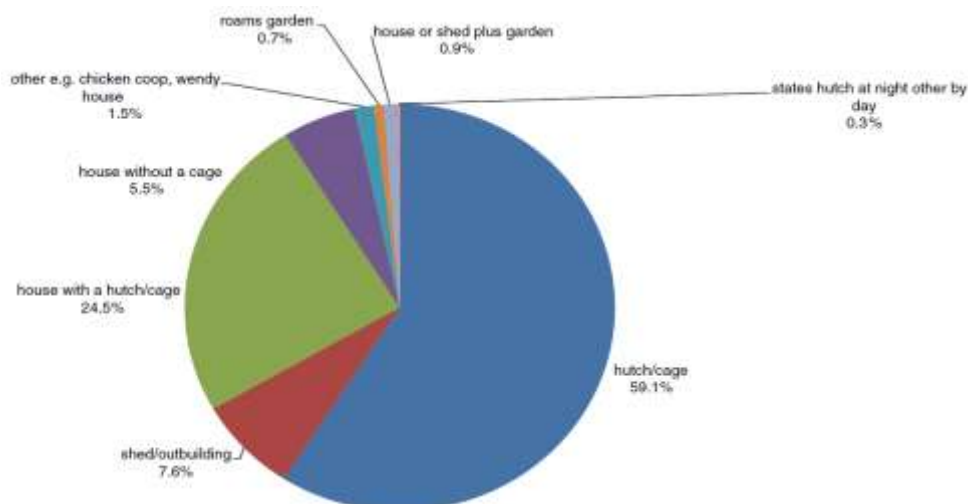


Figure 1: Ways of housing of pet rabbits

Source: [12]

Experience shows that solitary and in small places housed animals make more contacts with their owner than group-housed ones in a large system [14]. There are many cases when rabbits are raised together, but if we want to place two individually raised animals with one another, we need to use a step-by-step approach[2].

The rabbit can suffer from many diseases (myxomatosis, RHD, Pasteurellosis, coccidiosis, ear mite, etc.). Try to prevent these and cure immediately in case of trouble (vaccination, hygiene, call a vet) [13, 17].

The animal owners should take into consideration the right of 5 freedoms of animals [4]:

1. „Freedom from hunger or thirst.
2. Freedom from discomfort.
3. Freedom from pain, injury or disease.
4. Freedom to express (most) normal behaviour.
5. Freedom from fear and distress.”

The aim of our study was to obtain information on the situation of pet rabbit keeping and respect of animal welfare recommendations in Hungary.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data were collected by paper and on-line questionnaires at the university and with the help of Facebook groups. The first group of questions were about the respondents' gender, age, location and type of living. The questions about their pet rabbit keeping were about: the way of get it, their opinion on gifting living animal, the number of animals, the way of housing of the rabbit, the feeding, the animal health problems, endurance, and sense of responsibility. Beside the closed and open questions a 5-point Likert-scale was used to collect data on the students' attitudes.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were evaluated by correlation and cross-table analysis using IBM SPSS 25 statistical software package.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Responses (n=192) were received from almost all parts of Hungary, but mainly from Békés, Bács-Kiskun, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok counties. Due to the small sample the results are not representative. 79% of the total number of respondents has or had pet rabbit and 52% of them were female. The average age of them was 29.73±13.96 years. The youngest was 10 and the eldest was 70 years old among the

rabbit holders. 47-47% of the rabbit owners are living in villages and cities, only 6% of the questioners came back from Budapest. There was no difference between the rabbit holders whether they live in a family house or in an apartment. The respondents had primary (17.2%), secondary (60.3%) and higher education (22.5%).

The livestock holders kept one (28.48%), two (29.14%) or more (42.38%) rabbits at the same time. The rabbits were reproduced at 48% of those who had 2 or more rabbits ($r=0.651$, $p<0.01$).

The pet rabbits are kept in different type of cages in different places (flat 80% or shed 13%). Only 7% of them are kept in free range system.

Significantly more rabbits were fed with pellet (96.6%, $p<0.01$) than other feed types. The pelleted concentrate was usually supplemented with some grass or alfalfa hay. Where the rabbits were fed with other fodder cereals, hay, vegetables and apples were used. The most popular rabbit breeds are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

The rabbit breeds kept by the respondents

Breeds	Proportion (%)
Mixed breed	40.40
Dwarf rabbit breeds (not specified)	13.91
Lionhead rabbit	8.61
German giant	7.95
Hungarian giant	7.95
Castor rex	3.97
New Zealand White	3.31
Californian rabbit	3.31
Pannon white	2.65
Giant papillon rabbit	2.65
Flemish giant	1.99
Dutch rabbit	1.99
Hycole	1.32
Total	100.00

Source: Own data

The responsible animal keepers also took care of the animal's health. Rabbits have some dangerous infectious diseases for which a vaccine is available to prevent them. 55.22% of the owners asked for a vaccine against myxomatosis and some of them also against RHD (Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease). The most frequent diseases with which they went to the vet are in Table 2.

The perseverance and loyalty of keepers to the animal is strongly illustrated by the length of time they have been kept. Most of the respondents have been for years, but some have kept the animal for a few months or a few days only. On average, keepers keep rabbits for seven and a half years. The longest rabbit among the respondents has been a pet keeper for 41 years. The shortest time was 4 days for a pet rabbit.

Table 2.

The most frequent health problems

Breeds	Proportion (%)
Pasteurellosis	11.94
Enteritis	5.97
Ear mites	5.97
Coccidiosis	4.48
Diarrhea	2.99
Conjunctivitis	2.99
Others (not identified)	4.48

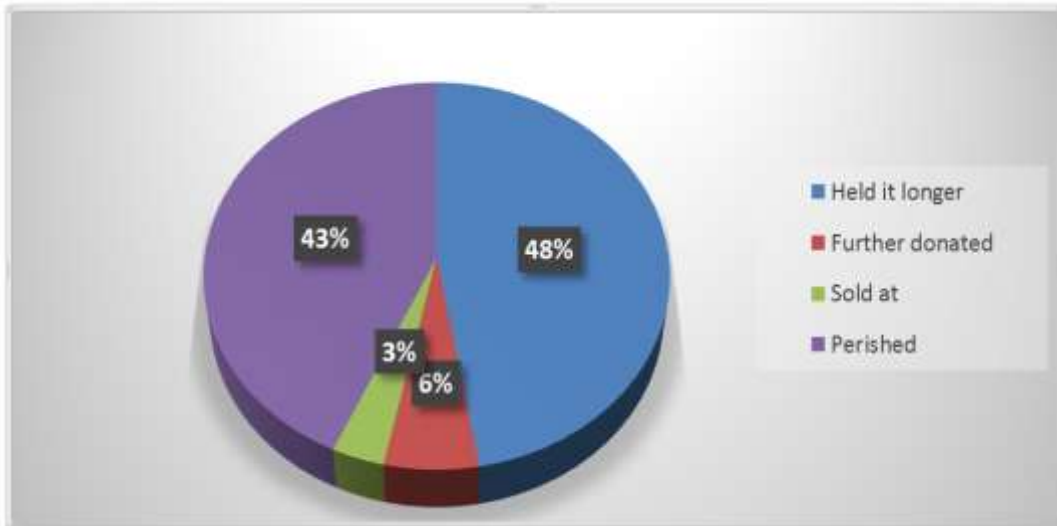
Source: Own data

We have come to the conclusion that men breed more frequent rabbits than women. (The correlation coefficient showed a weak relationship ($r = 0.220$).) Greater numbers of animals were donated by the people who not only kept but also bred them.

There is a weak relationship between the age at which people started to hold pet rabbit and their place of residence. In other words, those living in villages started to keep the animal sooner than those living in cities or in the capital ($r = 0.261$) and there is a weak relationship between where they live and the number of animals kept ($r = 0.220$).

Amongo ther things, it was asked how pet keepers are, or are willing to give rabbit as a present, and how aware they are of the responsibility of an animal. Surprisingly, only 29.8% of respondents would give or donate a pet to others, while the vast majority, 70.2%, would not want to. Here they had the opportunity to write an answer, which many have used. People who do not want to give a pet almost always gave the answer that an animal is a responsibility. Keepers think about the responsibility of giving a pet as a present to each other.

The fate of the rabbit change din many ways (Figure 2). There were livestock keepers who kept it longer, donated, sold or even the animal was dead after a while. Most respondents kept it longer. A small number is where the rabbits were give nas gifts or sold.



Figur 2: The fate of pet rabbits

Source: own data

CONCLUSIONS

Due to the low number of the sample the result of the survey is not representative, but it is a good preliminary result for planning further investigations.

Most of the people have the knowledge of the social behaviour and needs of the rabbits [9]. Only 28.48% of the respondents keep their animals on its own which result is better than Edgar and Mullan (2011) had.

The owners contact veterinary surgeon usually in case of symptoms of diseases (similarly to other sources [7, 10], but slightly more than half of them care on prevention.

The general use of pellet is comfortable for the owner and fit to the nutritional requirements of the species.

There is a big debate on the use of cages in commercial rabbit production (SzendrőFsher), but pet rabbits are usually kept in different type cages.

People typically receive animals as gifts for their birthday and Easter, but most of the respondents are thinking on a responsible way and would not like to donate living animals to those who are not ready for it.

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