

Pet? Companion animal? Ethicists say term matters

May 4 2011, By KATHY MATHESON , Associated Press

(AP) -- Are you the "owner" of a dog or cat? Maybe you should consider yourself a "human caregiver" instead. And Fido and Fluffy? Perhaps they should be "companion animals," not just "pets."

Such vocabulary shifts will help elevate the discourse about other species and, in turn, improve our treatment of them, according to the new *Journal on Animal Ethics*.

The foreword in the peer-reviewed academic publication, which was first published last month, even suggests getting rid of terms like "critters," "beasts" and "[wild animals](#)," along with phrases such as "drunk as a skunk" and "eat like a pig."

"We do need to examine our language about [animals](#) because a lot of it is derogatory in the sense that it belittles them and our relations with them," journal co-editor Andrew Linzey said.

Linzey, a theologian, heads the Centre for Animal Ethics at the University of Oxford in England. The journal, to be published twice yearly, is the first scholarly periodical to have the words "animal ethics" in the title, according to its publisher, the University of Illinois Press.

It's not surprising that researchers are re-examining their language as animal treatment becomes more of a social issue, said James Serpell, a professor of [animal welfare](#) at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine.

But Serpell doesn't necessarily agree with the recommended terminology, which he said could be taken to "absurd" extremes.

"Relabeling pets 'companion animals' could be misleading as well," Serpell said. "The fish in the ornamental fish tank aren't really anyone's companion."

More important for respecting animals is how they are perceived and treated in the legal system, said Susan Cosby, CEO of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

"Currently animals are considered property regardless of what term we use to describe them," Cosby said in a statement Wednesday.

Linzey declined further comment because of previous media coverage that he said inaccurately caricatured the issue as political correctness run amok. He stressed the preferred language does not stem from a desire to avoid "insulting" pets.

"Obviously, animals cannot be insulted in the way in which people can be," he wrote in an email to The Associated Press.

Journal co-editor Priscilla Cohn, a philosophy professor emerita at Penn State-Abington near Philadelphia, noted in an email that the discussion has implications for humans as well.

Cruelty to animals has been linked with anti-social and abusive behavior in people, she wrote, while overcrowding animals on factory farms has repercussions for both human health and the environment.

Cohn also said researchers continue to uncover fascinating insights into the animal kingdom, including communication among elephants and the social structure of wolves, which "are not the blood-thirsty wild beasts

that many people imagine."

"In other words, there has been an explosion of knowledge about animals that should make us consider them in a new light and perhaps change the manner in which we treat them," wrote Cohn, who has six cats and a dog.

In California, The Humane Society of the United States is backing legislation to update language in old state animal-control laws. The bill would replace "pound" with "shelter" and "destroy" with "euthanize," changes that better reflect current views on animal welfare.

"Those words matter," said Jennifer Fearing, the society's senior state director.

The linguistic debate, which Serpell said has been covered previously in various academic journals, stems from animals being in a gray area: they are sentient creatures - more than objects or property - but less than fully human.

Yet he acknowledged that inherently derogatory or disparaging language "perhaps makes it easier for us to justify exploiting them."

Still, Serpell sees nothing wrong with the word "pet," which the fourth edition of Webster's New World College Dictionary defines as "an animal that is tamed or domesticated and kept as a companion or treated with fondness."

Serpell's family has a veritable menagerie at home: a dog, a cat, three aquaria of fish, a pair of degus - like small chinchillas - and a bearded dragon.

"We call them all 'pets' and don't consider the term denigrating," he said.

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