

ANIMALS BEHAVING BADLY



A one-day symposium devoted to 'Animals behaving badly', held in London earlier this summer, explored veterinary and welfare perspectives of a range of behavioural problems seen in companion animals – cats included.



Organised by the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) Animal Welfare Science and Ethics group at RVC in conjunction with CABI, a not-for-profit scientific information and development organisation, the symposium brought in experts from around the UK. Chaired by Martin Whiting, the event focused on the problem behaviour of pets and leisure horses, and the science that helps understand the causes and helps to prevent or remedy them. Ever keen to keep abreast of the latest research in health and welfare, International Cat Care attended the day.



The symposium lectures were followed by a panel discussion. From left, Dr Charlotte Burn, Dr Lisa Collins, Dr Tammie King, Professor Don Broom and Roly Owers. Courtesy of CABI

The programme

- ◆ When the devil makes work for idle paws: how captive environments can lead to abnormal behaviour in animals [Dr Charlotte Burn, RVC](#)
- ◆ Canine behaviour and welfare: an epidemiological approach [Dr Lisa Collins, University of Lincoln](#)
- ◆ 'I'm telling you something's wrong' – how equine behaviour relates to welfare [Roly Owers, World Horse Welfare](#)
- ◆ How many is too many? Common behaviour problems in multi-cat households and welfare impact [Dr Tammie King, WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition](#)
- ◆ Overview of domestic animal welfare and behaviour [Professor Don Broom, University of Cambridge](#)
- ◆ Panel discussion

'Bad' behaviours

Behavioural problems that are often considered 'bad' behaviours, include:

- ◆ Stereotypies
- ◆ Self-mutilation
- ◆ Eating inappropriate substrates, such as litter
- ◆ Overeating
- ◆ Treating other animals, objects or people as sexual partners
- ◆ Aggression towards other individuals
- ◆ Hyperactivity or inactivity
- ◆ Fear
- ◆ Nervousness

Below is a summary of three of the topics with relevance to cats that were presented during the day.

How captive environments can lead to abnormal behaviour in animals (Dr Charlotte Burn)

Many companion animals display behaviours that are considered undesirable to us as humans. These undesirable, or 'bad', behaviours can take two forms – some may be natural, such as scent marking by spraying, and others may be abnormal, which means they would not be performed in the wild. Abnormal behaviours may be normal behaviours performed to an abnormal degree, either excessively or occurring when they normally would not. There is also a separate class of abnormal behaviour – highly repetitive 'stereotypic' behaviour.

Why do animals behave badly?

- ◆ Environmental triggers (eg, stressful events)
- ◆ Internal factors (eg, hormones)
- ◆ Motivation, which can be triggered internally or externally (eg, odours)
- ◆ Genetic predisposition
- ◆ Learnt behaviours

So why may captive environments lead to abnormal behaviour in animals? Wild animals must hunt/forage, seek or build shelter, avoid

predators and find mates. Captive animals, by contrast, are taken care of and confined, so they are often idle. Their instincts to perform these behaviours, however, often remain intact; and trying to perform behaviours that in their environment are unnecessary leads to frustration when they are unable to achieve the end goal. For example, an animal might become frustrated when it needs or wants a particular resource or to perform a particular behaviour, such as to hunt, but this is not possible.

Animals also need to do something with their time. Not having anything to do can lead to boredom; this can be defined as the motivation to experience 'something else' other than what is available to do at the moment. It occurs when a monotonous situation (eg, a barren environment) does not provide enough stimulation. A bored animal will behave with alternating drowsiness and restlessness.

Frustration and boredom are likely to be prevalent and chronic welfare issues for many captive animals and bad behaviours can arise from the mismatch between an animal's instincts or perceptions and its captive environment. The causes of bad behaviour are diverse, but many of them reflect welfare issues.

Common behaviour problems in multi-cat households and welfare impact (Dr Tammie King)

The social organisation of cats is variable and flexible and depends on their environment. Cats are solitary hunters but feral cats will often live in a matrilineal group, a group structured around a queen and her kittens. Males may or may not be integrated into this group. Other cats may be introduced into the group; they will at first live on the periphery and over time they will integrate into the group. There may be communal raising of kittens.

Although cats can be social, aggression between cohabiting cats is a common undesired behaviour in multi-cat households. Aggression is a form of communication and has a distinct purpose – to increase the distance to a threat (in this case the other cat). It is important, however, for owners to distinguish between play behaviours and aggression.

Choosing the right cats

Choosing the 'right' cats is important for a successful multi-cat household.

- ◆ **Personality types** Friendly, sociable cats are more likely to get along in a multi-cat household. These personality traits have been found to be influenced by the sire, so a friendly and sociable sire is more likely to have friendly and sociable kittens.
- ◆ **Well socialised** Insufficient/inappropriate socialisation can lead to fear-related aggression; the cat may not be able to recognise and react to species-specific cues; and play may not be sufficiently inhibited and so can escalate.
- ◆ **Related cats** Kittens from the same litter or a queen and her kittens are more likely to get along.

Another common behavioural issue is inappropriate toileting. Cats may toilet outside of the litter tray due to health reasons such as lower urinary tract disease; for example, feline idiopathic cystitis (FIC). There are a number of risk factors for FIC and these include living in a multi-cat household. Inappropriate toileting can also occur due to behavioural reasons. The cat may have an aversion to a litter tray due to associating it with pain from a previous illness or the cat may have a preference for a different substrate, or there may not be enough litter trays available. Urine spraying may also be considered an undesired behaviour. This is a normal behaviour but may be performed more frequently in multi-cat households or if there are environmental stressors.

Providing the right environment is important in multi-cat households. The cats should have a safe place where they can avoid conflict and there should be enough resources, such as food, water and litter trays, for all of the cats, which should be distributed throughout the household.

When introducing cats to each other, this should be done gradually, potentially over a few weeks (the 'reintroduction protocol' on page 77 describes the process).

And, for that thorny question, how many is too many cats for a household? There is actually no set answer and it depends on the individuals' social competence, the composition of the group and the environment they are in. Some cats are able to live side-by-side quite happily; for others there may be changes based on the above discussion that can be made relatively easily to promote a more harmonious situation.

Overview of domestic animal welfare and behaviour (Professor Don Broom)

Mostly, 'bad' behaviour is a consequence of people failing to provide for the animal's needs and may indicate poor welfare.

'Bad' behaviours are those that owners often do not like to see their pet carry out. The behaviours may cause damage or may be embarrassing for the person who is meant to be in control of the animal. Examples of behavioural problems that often are considered as 'bad' behaviour include stereotypies, self-mutilation, eating inappropriate substrates (eg, litter), overeating, treating other animals, objects or people as sexual partners, aggression towards other individuals, hyperactivity or inactivity, fear and nervousness.

For more information about the consumption of non-edible materials, pica, visit our website www.icatcare.org



Some behaviours may be performed due to fear. Fear has a significant impact on behaviour and, in turn, on welfare, as the welfare of an animal that experiences extreme fear is very poor. Fear towards humans may be a consequence of a negative previous experience with them. Fearful behaviour may also be displayed in response to something in the animal's environment, such as fireworks or thunderstorms.

A sometimes overlooked area in terms of animal welfare is feeding. Overfeeding can result in obesity, which can increase the risk of various diseases. Feeding too little can lead to starvation. Both are welfare issues. Being fed inappropriate foods, such as sugary human food, can also result in poor welfare.

Providing an environment that meets animals' needs is clearly important for their welfare. This may also help to prevent 'bad' behaviours; for example, if a scratching post is provided for cats, they may not scratch other items in the household.

Finally, do animals have any awareness of 'doing wrong'? Possibly so, it seems. Many owners have suggested that if their pet has done something wrong, it knows so and looks guilty. Studies looking at dogs performing behaviours that they were told not to do have shown physiological and behavioural changes that, in humans, would be interpreted as indicating the feeling of guilt.

For information about feline lower urinary tract diseases and feline idiopathic cystitis visit our website www.icatcare.org



Dr Tammie King and Professor Don Broom. Courtesy of CABI