

Litoria caerulea “Benson” 2012
Christian Hofmann’s pet Green Tree Frog



FATS POSITION ON ANIMALS IN CAPTIVITY

Summary

The Frog and Tadpole Study Group of New South Wales Inc (FATS) has a particular interest in the welfare of frogs. Ideally, all native animals should be maintained in the wild, however humans interact with animals for a wide range of reasons. Some of these interactions are critical for our survival and well-being: animals may provide food and valuable products and they also provide companionship. This association with people should not be a justification for cruelty or the demeaning of animals.

FATS is not a society for animal collectors. We promote animal experiences in the wild. However, frogs are regularly brought into captivity as accidental stowaways in fruit and produce consignments and we do our best to treat and cater for these frogs’ needs. A captive frog can be a wonderful pet, a great teaching aid as well as an ambassador for environmental awareness. Captive or domestic animals may be the only experience that many people have with non-human creatures; we see this association as mutually beneficial to both the animal and the owner. Awareness of environmental matters such as habitat loss are more likely to be appreciated by a person who has had first-hand contact with animals than someone who has not. The interaction between humans and animals can be vital for the welfare of both groups.

Rationale

As a group interested in native animals and their welfare, the Frog and Tadpole Study Group of New South Wales Inc (FATS) has a considered opinion about the interaction between animals and people and

how this should be best achieved so that both groups benefit from the association.

Animals for People

People have interacted with animals throughout recorded history. Some animals have had a long association with people: dogs have been living with people for at least 13,000 years. The initial association may have been one of mutual benefit (the dog acts as a lookout for danger while the people feed the dog and encourage it to stay around). Somewhere in history, people have accepted animals such as dogs into their homes as pets. The great joy that people get from pet animals, be they dogs, cats, mice or frogs, is enormous and is recognised in Australia in the Companion Animal Act. Medical studies have repeatedly shown that many people fare much better when they have a companion animal, they suffer fewer mental problems, recover from disease or injury quicker and are generally more content in their lives. So animals provide a great service to humanity.

In addition, many animals provide more than companionship, they provide food and produce for our consumption. As frogs are generally not eaten in Australia this discussion will be confined to the use of frogs as companion animals and as educative tools.



EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY, FAGAN PARK GALSTON

**FATS frogs on display. Kathy and Harriet Potter
Hornsby Council, plant give away event.**

The above points highlight the services that animals provide for people but what do people do for animals? Or are we simply users of animals? Many of you will be aware that people have interfered with the breeding of many agricultural and domestic species of animals, sometimes resulting in animals that can no longer survive in the wild. Some people are cruel to animals, some people neglect their animals (by not keeping them healthy, by not restricting breeding events, by not controlling their animal so that it does not harm other species).

Keeping animals in a highly urban environment poses special problems, especially for animals that need to range.

What do animals get out of this relationship?

Humans clearly benefit from the interaction with animals but do animals also benefit? Animals may benefit through regular feeding, the provision of a safe living space and care when sick or injured. Animals in the wild typically live a shorter life span, are usually infested with parasites and contagion, are always on the alert for danger. The stresses of life in the wild are great and it is hard to know how often wild animals get the chance to relax and enjoy life. It would appear that pet animals are safer, better fed and live longer because of their easier life.

Frogs as Captive Animals

Frogs are typically solitary animals in the wild. They do not associate with other frogs except at breeding events. They normally remain solitary because food resources are limited and food is quickly depleted if an area is overcrowded with rivals. Frogs do move around, usually at night after rain, when they search for food or a mate or a new shelter site. For most of the year frogs are reasonably immobile, remaining hidden during dry or cold weather or at times when food is not available.

It is only in the last 200 years that frogs have been kept routinely as pets. They have been kept in medieval times for medical and witchcraft purposes, but these frogs were rarely fed or treated well.

A captive animal requires many things; the main requirements being:

1. A diet that provides all of the essential requirements for a healthy life.
2. Living conditions that allow the animal to be healthy.

The second condition is the one that often causes the greatest amount of discussion amongst animal fanciers. One extreme view states that no animals should be captive because they can never act or behave normally when confined. The opposite view states that animals are adaptive and as long as they are well fed and kept healthy the living conditions do not need to resemble life in the wild at all.

Animals and People Share the Same Planet.

The Earth has finite resources, especially living space. Human populations are already unsustainable and forecast predicts that much greater populations increases are still to come. For animals in the wild, this means greater and greater losses of habitats and ecosystems. Some biologists have gone so far as to predict the day will come when most species on Earth will be extinct because humans will have modified so much of the planet that it is uninhabitable for many other species. The current rates of extinction are the highest ever recorded in our planet's history; they exceed the rates of extinction in the Cretaceous and

Permian when massive numbers of species were exterminated.

If human populations continue to expand as they are, the future for many animal species is dire. Perhaps their only real future will be as captive species- the choice of which species will be kept will probably depend on the "cuteness" of the animal, the ease of feeding and looking after it, how much space it requires and its monetary or other value to us.

Some species have already disappeared in the wild and are only known from captive sources.

FATS and Frogs

FATS is a specialist interest group with a fascination for frogs (and other living creatures). We are not frog keepers or frog traders. This does not mean that we oppose the keeping of frogs in captivity.

Most FATS members would far prefer to see frogs in the wild rather than in a cage. However, many members also do not have the opportunity to go into the wild to see frogs and so for them captive frogs are the next best solution. Our members who have captive frogs often go to extraordinary lengths to create cage environments that provide all of the essential requirements for the frogs:

1. Enough space to move around (when the frog wants to)
2. Shelter sites so that the frog can remain hidden when it feels the need to do so.
3. Reliable clean water and food.
4. Regular cage cleaning.
5. Regular checks on the animal to ensure that it is not sick or injured.
6. Vet or pathology checks when required.

These measures require a high financial cost- most of our members think that the frogs are worth it.

We discourage members from breeding frogs without a purpose. Some of our newer members think that frogs will get lonely if they are by themselves and need a mate. This is generally untrue-especially in captivity. Too many frogs in one cage will result in some aggression between frogs, causing some frogs to lose weight, become reclusive or to become restricted to some back corner of the cage. Stress behaviour becomes apparent and fights become common if captive conditions are not correct. In addition, many Australian frogs are cannibalistic so placing a small male in a cage with a larger female may be a sure way of feeding the female but will not result in spawning.

Breeding frogs is a major undertaking, mainly because of the large number of offspring that could result. We do not advocate breeding frogs unless there is a plan prepared in advance dealing with the ultimate fate of the offspring. Killing off surplus offspring is not an acceptable option.



***Litoria aurea* Green and Golden Bell Frog**
Photo Josie Styles

How do FATS use Frogs?

FATS interacts with frogs in three main ways:

1. We use frogs as educational tools - FATS does a lot of community, school and teaching engagements where we promote frogs as special animals worthy of conservation. In an increasingly urban world, we see this as the most important role that we have. Fewer and fewer people have any familiarity with frogs (or other native animals) and therefore have no commitments to their conservation. By providing the contact with frogs we are trying to stir up the necessary conservation will to protect these delicate animals.
2. We study frogs in the wild. FATS does regular field trips whereby members can experience frogs in the wild and get a chance to appreciate them better. In addition to helping our own appreciation of these animals, we are also collecting data that can be used to assist the frogs. FATS prepared the first comprehensive list of threatened frogs in New South Wales and was foremost with the early trials on treating chytrid-infected frogs. Today we have several regular study sites where we record frog abundances and diversity so that any long-term changes (such as due to climate change) can be better assessed.
3. FATS runs a Frog Rescue Service. This service was created when we discovered (in the early 1990s) that many frogs were being accidentally imported into Sydney as stowaways in produce or other merchandise. In the major receiving centres, these stowaway animals were routinely killed (which was the legal requirement). In

consultation with government agencies and market owners we set up the Rescue Service so that we could retrieve some of these frogs, rehabilitate them and make them available as captive pets. The frogs were of unknown provenance and could not be released for fear of spreading undetected diseases.

This service also required FATS to develop a quarantining procedure and to develop treatments for various frog diseases (which we did in collaboration with Taronga Zoo). FATS set the standard for treating and limiting infection in frogs.

As we realised that a large number of frogs were coming from one source (namely in bananas from Queensland) FATS undertook meetings with the Queensland government and the Banana Growers Association in 2002. From this an agreed procedure was established whereby bananas are checked at the plantations and frogs released from the collected bananas before being loaded onto the trucks or trains for transport to other places. This action alone reduced the number of frogs coming into Sydney by 60%.

Does FATS sell frogs?

No. The frogs that come through quarantine and treatment in the Frog Rescue Service are made available to licensed keepers. We ask for a donation to cover the costs of maintaining the frogs in quarantine.

FATS Philosophy

FATS does not believe that animals are inferior to humans, nor that they lack the basic rights to life. We similarly do not believe that animals were created for the sole use of people as this belief can be used to justify cruelty and animal abuse. In a world that is overrun with people, many who have no familiarity or concern for frogs, the best that FATS can do is to try to instil a sense of worth of frogs in people. Without someone to care and fight for frogs, frogs will never be conserved and will be one of the first vertebrate groups to disappear during the Anthropocene.



Northern Banjo Frog, Tyagarah Swamp Photo Lothar Voigt