

## Companion or Stray? Conflicting Beliefs of Veterinary Professionals and Animal Help Volunteers in Latvia

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### Abstract

In Latvia veterinarians, veterinary inspectors, and homeless animal help volunteers are the main social groups involved in animal rights protection. They frequently engage with companion or stray animals, and their beliefs regarding the moral value of animals and comprehension of animal rights may affect their perspectives on the topic of pets and strays. Prior research has revealed the existing contradictions between veterinary professionals and homeless animal help volunteers in Latvia. This study investigates the possible causes of these contradictions by analysing informants' beliefs regarding the moral status, value, and legal rights of companion animals and stray animals. The animal is used as an explanatory instrument in this study, conducted from 2022 to 2024 and utilizing a qualitative methodology. 30 semi-structured interviews offer a refined comprehension of the distinctions between veterinary professionals and volunteers. The beliefs of volunteers are frequently shaped by emotional ties to animals, resulting in a moral advocacy for their rights. In contrast, veterinary professionals ground their beliefs in the Five Freedoms framework and practical considerations of animal welfare, which may conflict with the emotional motivations of volunteers. Conflicting perspectives on legal rights result in varied interpretations of ethical treatment and care for animals. Also, diversities in beliefs significantly influence the management of stray animal populations, potentially resulting in conflict or ineffective policy outcomes if not properly handled, as well as affecting the legislative reforms aimed at improving the welfare of domestic and stray animals.

Keywords: companion animal, stray animal, veterinary, volunteer, animal rights.

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## 1. Introduction

Stray animals, also known as homeless, free-roaming, or feral, form a significant element of urban social dynamics (Shingne & Reese, 2022), have a vital influence on urban health (Morters et al., 2014a, 2014b; Otranto & Dantas-Torres, 2010), exemplify the socio-economic difficulties (Reese, 2015) and reveal concerns regarding human-animal interactions (Brasch, 2016; Shingne & Reese, 2022). Animals previously owned and now homeless due to their owners' financial strain (Krcatovich & Reese, 2018) generate multiple problems with urban welfare, alongside the welfare of the animals themselves (Shingne & Reese, 2022), falling within the scope of social studies. Beck (1973) argues that examining urban animals from the perspective of their status helps clarify human behaviour and enhance comprehension of the human urban experience.

In 2024, the Latvian Veterinary Association explicitly asked local governments to promptly address the issue of stray animal overpopulation, since attacks on people and other animals by abandoned dogs represent a considerable risk (LETA, 2024). Previously Latvian veterinarians mentioned diseases transmitted by cats in Latvia (Reinholce, 2011). The nuisance caused by cats to inhabitants, such as damage to car paintwork from warming on hoods (NRA, 2016) or urinating to mark territory (Gunther et al., 2015) should be noted. Prior research also indicates that stray dogs present safety risks to human life and health (Costa et al., 2015; Hampson et al., 2015), but domestic cats on native wildlife (López-Jara et al., 2021).

The unregulated breeding and lack of microchipping of dogs and cats have been identified as factors contributing to the rise in stray animals in Latvia by animal welfare NGOs (Dzīvnieku policija, 2014; Krieviņš, 2018) and the Latvian Veterinarians' Association (LETA, 2020; LETA, 2024). To face this stray animal problem, resulted from careless ownership, abandonment, and the refuse to neuter (Smith et al., 2022; Ho et al., 2024) amendments to the Latvian Animal Protection Act enter into force on 1 January 2025. The primary alteration mandates that the owner or caretaker of a domestic animal (specifically a dog, cat, or ferret) who breeds an animal, must document this event in the domestic animal registry of Agricultural Data Centre. The legislation mandates that a female dog, cat, or ferret may produce only one litter annually (LVPortals, 2024a). To enhance animal traceability, reduce the population of stray cats, and facilitate the recovery of lost pets, it is mandated that cats and ferrets be microchipped and recorded in the Agricultural Data Centre database (LVPortals, 2024b). The obligation to microchip the dogs is in force from 2019 (Veterinārmedicīnas likums, 2001).

The management strategies for feral animals include lethal method Trap-Euthanize (TE) (Thompson et al., 2022), sheltering, adoption and Trap-Neuter-

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Return (TNR) programs (Dalla Villa et al., 2010). The correlation between human perceptions of animals' moral value and their associated rights is frequently contested, especially in urban environments where stray animals provide a significant concern, and dilemma between TE and TNR programs exists (Barrows 2004; Van Patter & Hovorka 2018; Lohr & Lepczyk 2013; Lohr et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2022; Qi et al., 2022).

TNR are proposed to effectively manage the population of stray cats and dogs by sterilizing them, providing basic vaccinations, and returning them to their original habitats, all without coming to euthanasia (Shingne & Reese, 2022). The TNR program has been operated in Riga, the capital city of Latvia, since 2005 (Tehnoloģiju klīnika, 2019); yet the population of stray cats remains significant. In 2023, 810 stray cats were TNRed in Riga, along with 423 feral dogs and 353 cats transferred to shelters (Apollo, 2024). According to Shingne & Reese (2022), the beneficial outcomes of such initiatives can be undermined by notable inflow of new cats, typically due to the abandonment of pet cats (Natoli et al., 2006; Ho et al., 2024). To mitigate hazards of slow and unsuccessful TNR actions (Ho et al., 2024), Animal Birth Control Rules (Hiby et al., 2011) or responsible ownership (Kennedy et al., 2020) appear to be a suitable approach, while it also possesses limitations when implemented in standalone (Wolf & Hamilton, 2020). TNR programs integrate roaming animals into the urban ecosystem, reflecting the social dynamics of human relationships, as humans choose to euthanize animal or allow him to continue existing (Dean et al., 2017; Shingne & Reese, 2022). This is the venue where municipal officials and professionals, such as veterinarians and veterinary inspectors, clash with proponents of harmonious urban lifestyles (Brasch, 2016). Prior research has revealed the existing contradictions between veterinary professionals and homeless animal help volunteers in Latvia. Volunteers view veterinary inspectors as unempathetic and indolent bureaucrats, but veterinarians are generally regarded positively, however criticized for neglecting to treat stray animals. In return vets view volunteers' motivation to save animals as favourable, although they express scepticism regarding the transparency of the financial flows of donations (Šeiko et al., 2024; Šeiko & Nikišins, TBP).

Veterinarians, inspectors, and animal welfare volunteers frequently engage with animals, and their beliefs regarding the moral value of animals and comprehension of animal rights may affect their perspectives on the topic of stray animals. Research on their perceptions and responses regarding issues related to stray animals in Latvia is notably insufficient. Current literature reveals contradictions in the perceptions of veterinary professionals and animal assistance volunteers regarding each other's roles; however, there is a lack of comprehensive studies examining these dynamics within the local context. Understanding the moral and legal viewpoints of these stakeholders may clarify

the root causes of these contradictions and guide more unified policy decisions. This study investigates the possible causes of the aforementioned contradictions by analyzing informants' beliefs regarding the moral status, value, and legal rights of synanthropes – animals cohabiting with humans (O'Connor, 2013). The use of animals as an explanatory instrument offers a refined comprehension of the distinctions between veterinary professionals and volunteers.

The research questions are:

1. What are the homeless animal help volunteers' and veterinary professionals' beliefs about the moral status and legal rights of companion animal and roaming animal?
2. How do their beliefs regarding moral and legal status influence perception of companion or roaming animals?

## **2. The moral value**

The dichotomy between humans and non-humans sustains diverse types of oppression and the moral status of the being. This statement posits that the cultural endorsement of violence against beings that are not human contributes to a larger pattern of violence and dehumanization, which in turn affects how we morally evaluate both human and nonhuman life (Plumwood, 2002; Seshadri, 2012; Torrez, 2013). The dichotomy remains regarding the moral value of companion animals and their free-roaming equivalents. Bioethics posits that both beings warrant a similar approach due to their capacity to feel pain, their sentience and intrinsic moral value (De Vries, 2008; Wallach et al., 2015; Natoli, 2024). However, the scenario in which humans determine which interests should prevail in abovementioned case presents a contradiction to existing bioethical principles (Verhoog, 1992; Musschenga, 2002; Natoli, 2024).

Studies indicate that individuals often perceive human life as more valuable than animal life (Amiot & Bastian, 2015; Awad et al., 2018; Caviola et al., 2019; Caviola et al., 2021; Caviola et al., 2022). The moral value of animals is closely related to the development of social construction of animals. According to DeMello (2021), the way animals are utilized in contemporary culture plays a role in determining their categorization, such as whether they are considered pets, food, sources of fur, or laboratory subjects. It can be argued that stray animals are often marginalized within these classifications, as they do not offer direct benefits or fulfill specific roles that society values. Conversely, the way humans categorize animals also has an impact on how they are handled. In addition to the biological, cultural, and theological classifications, the value categorization is determined by the various ways in which people exploit

animals. This exploitation frequently results in the exclusion of stray animals from access to care and protection, as they are not acknowledged within valuable categories. The process of integrating an animal into the social sphere commences by bestowing upon it a name that facilitates further interactions and fosters emotional connection. Unlike companion animals, stray, laboratory or meat animals lack names, homes, intents, and are viewed more as objects than subjects. Social construction refers to the collective process of defining, establishing, and modifying meaning through interaction and interpretation. Since this process includes not just meaning but also societal, cultural, and moral value, our perception of other species also categorizes them as either “positive” or “negative” (Irvine, 2021). Arluke & Sanders (1996) classify animals into different levels on a socio-zoological scale based on the advantages they provide to humans. Pets and tools are associated with good animals, while vermin and pests are bad. It is also feasible to cross boundaries, thereby transforming pests into laboratory rats (Shapiro, 1995). Stray animals typically occupy these lower categories unless they are rehomed as companion animals. Animals such as koalas, dolphins, and tigers, which are considered charismatic megafauna, are also highly regarded due to their adorable appearance. The socio-zoological scale outlines how people intend to utilize these animals (DeMello, 2021). Abbate (2023) argues that the adoption of companion animals, especially carnivorous species such as cats and dogs, illustrates a hybrid moral perspective that attributes intrinsic value to these animals. This viewpoint implies a hierarchy among animals, indicating that certain species require distinct moral considerations. The socio-zoological scale elucidates the distinction between the perception of domesticated pets and feral animals. This also may be understood as “speciesism” – the unfair treatment of non-species members (Horta, 2010). People often assign moral priority to humans over animals, largely influenced by a speciesist worldview, as evidenced by multiple studies (Caviola et al., 2019; Dhont et al., 2016; Dhont et al., 2019a; Dhont et al., 2019b). Conversely, animals may be viewed as dependent parties (Janssens, 2022) or as “defenseless Others” (Hatami & Firoozi, 2019), possessing legitimate claims to life. This perspective shifts the discussion from moral value to the realm of legal rights.

### **3. The moral value**

The modern intellectual discourse between leading thinkers of animal rights advocating movements often revolves around the topic of animal rights. According to Wacks (2024), animal rights are incompatible with human rights, as animals are incapable of having rights against other animals. It is also the

responsibility of people to fulfill their obligations towards animals. Wacks argues that the scope of animal rights is ambiguous due to uncertainty regarding whether these rights are universal or applicable only to specific individuals. This uncertainty is especially pertinent with stray animals, whose status frequently exists between the absence of established ownership and the protection afforded by normal legal frameworks.

The contrast between moral rights derived from philosophy and legal rights derived from religious, customary, or conventional origins. According to Stucki & Kurki (2020), animal rights encompass moral and/or legal rights that safeguard many aspects of an animal's life, well-being, inherent value, integrity, and other interests. In the case of stray animals, these aspects are often undermined due to the lack of formalized legal rights.

Stucki (2023) exemplifies the idea of introducing new human rights, which extends the existing list of rights to meet a present lack of protection or a new need for protection (Von der Decken & Koch, 2020) and cites women and children's rights as previous examples of new human rights. The most recent addition to this list according to Boyd (2012) is the right to live in a healthy environment. From this standpoint, animal rights can be considered as a form of new human rights, positioned between the step of conceptualization of the idea and the step of its subsequent acceptance in legal and political spheres. The third step in the development of animal rights would be the eventual acknowledgment and formalization of these rights through legal means (Hannum, 2016; Von der Decken & Koch, 2020; Stucki, 2023). The Choice theory of rights posits that individuals possess certain rights protected due to their freedom and pursuit of personal fulfillment. These rights are considered fundamental principles that the government should ensure (Hart, 1982; Kramer, 2010). The Interest theory of rights posits that the primary function of rights is to safeguard specific interests of the individual holding the right, rather than merely protecting individual choice (MacCormick, 1982; Kramer, 2001; Kurki, 2018). There is a correlation between duties and rights (Wacks, 2024). The rights-based theory asserts that rights take priority above concerns for general well-being, rejecting the legal positivist notion that law and morals are separate entities. It also differs between "personal" and "external" preferences (Dworkin, 1978, 1986; Wacks, 2024), highlighting the necessity for a unified framework that integrates the welfare of strays into the wider legal and ethical discussion. This integration would signify a transition towards recognizing the intrinsic value of all sentient beings, irrespective of their classification as owned or stray, therefore enhancing their legal protection.

The discourse surrounding animal law is characterized by intricacies that go beyond a simple focus on legal protection for animals. This is because the realm of non-human beings is continuously categorized into increasingly

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specific subgroups. When discussing animal law in general, it is important to distinguish between laws that apply to domesticated animals and laws that apply to wild animals (Muller, 2020). Animal rights depend on two key conditions: firstly, there is no inherent obstacle that would exclude animals from being granted rights. Furthermore, certain rights can be obtained by legislation that protects the well-being of animals. Legislation that prohibits acts of cruelty towards animals may be seen as granting animals the right to receive compassionate care (Wacks, 2024). Animal protection laws provide explicit obligations towards animals, indicating that animals may be recipients of these obligations. For example, granting animals protection from being regarded as property might reduce owners' power over them (Stucki, 2023). However, welfare rights do not effectively protect against conflicting human interests (Wacks, 2024).

In the veterinary practice animal rights are related to the concept of Five Freedoms, which constitute a framework aimed at safeguarding animal welfare. The Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (FAWAC) first articulated these principles in England in 1979 (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2009). They have subsequently been adopted as the basis for animal welfare law in other nations, including Latvia (Eiropas Parlaments, 2020). The WOAHP then established its own program specifying that animals must be free from hunger and thirst, free from discomfort, pain, and disease, free to exhibit their normal behaviors, free from fear and stress, and free from harm (Manteca et al., 2012; Terrestrial Animal Health Code, 2016).

Certain scholars argue that the concept of animal rights is a natural progression of human rights theory and practice (Wise, 1996; Epstein, 2005; Francione, 2007; Derrida, 2008; Wacks, 2024). For example, ecofeminist cultural theorists (Hasian, 1993; Hasian, Condit, & Lucaites, 1996; Deckha, 2011; Muller, 2020) propose a departure from the perspectives of Singer and Regan. They contend that Singer's act-utilitarianism and Regan's rights orientation are linked to one other and to usual legal theories due to their adherence to liberal humanist principles. However, since the liberal understanding of law focuses on human beings (Burdon, 2010; Deckha, 2011), it is necessary to apply the ecofeminist legal theory to thoroughly examine the potential benefits and risks of animal rights law. Ecofeminists argue that the hyper-rational approach to animal rights within liberalist thinking has significant drawbacks. This approach places animals within the scope of moral consideration, but it also reinforces patriarchal hierarchies that prioritize humans over nature. Consequently, it suggests that achieving justice for animals requires paternalistic and colonial methods of human intervention (Muller, 2020). To foresee significant social change, it is crucial to conduct research on the law while avoiding excessive demonization or inadequate questioning of the

concepts of legal rights and de jure personhood (Muller, 2020). Ecofeminism encompasses different categories. The primary guiding principle is the recognition of a clear link between environmental degradation and the oppression of women. This connection is attributed to longstanding masculinist ideologies that prioritize binary concepts such as man/woman, nature/culture, and human/animal. This viewpoint is supported by various scholars, including Shiva (1988), Rogers (2008), Torrez (2013), and Muller (2020). Vegan ecofeminism opposes the belief in inherent characteristics and emphasizes the importance of animals as a central subject for feminist analysis. This perspective considers itself to be a rational continuation of feminism and ecofeminism, constituting a “third generation” of feminist ideology (Gaard, 2002). Vegan ecofeminists seek to adapt the concept of “The personal is political” to daily activities, advocating for a change in how humans see and engage with animals (Plumwood, 2002; Torrez, 2013; Muller, 2020). Vegan ecofeminism focuses on “ethic of caring-for approach” and extends moral consideration to include non-human entities, including factors such as race, class, sexuality, ability, and species (Donovan & Adams, 2007). The homelessness of animals may also be considered a contributing factor. This inclusive approach confronts the systemic neglect experienced by stray animals and underscores their right to be part of ethical considerations. Vegan ecofeminism opposes an excessive focus on humans and the belief in a universal moral code. This necessitates a reevaluation of both personal and societal involvement in the mistreatment of animals and incorporates the non-human world into ethical and legal systems that prioritize empathy, compassion, and togetherness (Twine, 2010; Muller, 2020). This reevaluation is essential to develop methods that address specific challenges and rights of homeless animals within the larger contexts of social justice.

#### **4. Research method and participants**

The research was conducted from 2022 to 2024, utilizing a qualitative methodology. Based on a literature analysis and the recommendations of Fontana & Frey (2008), King & Horrocks (2010), Gubrium et al., (2012) and Morris (2015), 25 questions for a semi-structured interview were formulated. The initial questions focused on the motivations for volunteering and the selection of the veterinary profession, as well as early experiences related to pet ownership, with the objective of mitigating emotional distress during the interview. The potentially controversial questions about moral status, legal rights, and perceived value of companion animals in comparison to stray animals were allocated to the intermediate phase.



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The first informant for the interviews with volunteers (10 in total) was an acquaintance of the corresponding author. Snowball sampling was employed to acquire additional informants. All study participants engaged in voluntary activities across many cities in Latvia for a minimum of two years. The primary informants for the veterinary doctors' interviews (15 in total) were three veterinarians from Riga who participated in veterinary groups on Facebook. The fourth participant acted as a gatekeeper and disseminated the recruitment information to the Latvian Veterinary Association, therefore prompting other doctors to apply. The informants have different level of experience: 5 with up to 5 years of experience, 8 with 5 to 10 years, and 2 with more than 20 years, and work in different clinics in various cities of Latvia. In the interviews (5 in total) with the veterinary inspector, the acquaintance of the corresponding author, a food inspector in the Food and Veterinary Service, acted as a gatekeeper and enlisted his colleagues to engage in the study. The informants working experience in veterinary field (previously as veterinary doctor and now as inspector) was: 1 less than 5 years, 1 with 5 to 10 years, 1 with 15 to 20 years, 2 more than 20 years, both methods – snowball sampling and the use of a gatekeeper – facilitated the establishment of confidence between interviewers and informants, which was essential for addressing topics of concern.

The coding was structured into three cycles using NVivo 14 software, as per the guidelines of Miles & Huberman (1994), Miles et al. (2014), and Gibbs (2018). The codebook for Cycle 1 was created and comprised 100 descriptive codes, with 4 codes assigned to each interview question. Descriptive codes were employed to summarize the primary information, emphasizing key themes and facilitating the organization of results by topic. The second cycle consisted of Value-Belief codes. The respondents' perceptions of moral status and legal rights were classified as Beliefs, while their perceptions of companion or homeless animals were grouped as Values. Cycle 3 aimed to clarify the connections between beliefs and values while investigating the origins of inconsistencies or similarities in respondents' perspectives.

Cycle 3 comprised 4 theoretical construct codes: beliefs-based perception of moral status; beliefs-based perception of companion animal's legal rights; beliefs-based perception of stray animal's legal rights and value-based perception of animal's moral value.

The study's objective and research questions were explained to the participants (Sarantakos, 2005; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018a), ensuring them that participation was voluntary, and a consent form was provided to the informants. The interviews were performed exclusively over Zoom, and participant consent was obtained verbally. All transcripts were anonymized to ensure confidentiality (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018b). The ethical considerations

for this study were established in accordance with the standards provided by Kimmel (1988) and Creswell & Creswell (2018).

The transcripts were coded and analysed promptly following the interviews, allowing for their conclusion upon reaching saturation (Hennink et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2018). The multilingual authors of the study coded the semi-structured interviews in Latvian or Russian, the languages in which they were conducted.

## 5. Data analysis

### 5.1 *The moral status*

In Latvia, veterinary inspectors require the same veterinary education as veterinary doctors (Pārtikas un veterinārais dienests, 2024). As indicated by the semi-structured interviews, all veterinary inspectors had prior experience as veterinarians before moving to the Food and Veterinary Service for diverse reasons. They may also return to work in clinics if they can demonstrate that their expertise and skills are current with contemporary medical practices. Due to these similarities, we analysed the responses of veterinarians and inspectors collectively.

Initially, we examined the perception of the companion animal – specifically, for whom the companion animal is intended according to the informants. Seven volunteers indicated that a companion animal is a family member, two respondents described it as a friend, and one characterized it as akin to their own child.

*Volunteer 5: “He belongs to the family; he is not only a cat. You see, hardly many individuals consider it to be a family member. That he is to be cared for, that he is your friend for life, for twenty years”.*

Although these definitions are closely related, we opted to maintain their separation for the purpose of comparing them with the responses of veterinary practitioners. Seven informants perceive companion animals as friends, three view them as children, six consider them family members, and six regard them simply as animals – the initial contradiction between volunteers and professionals regarding the perception of companion animals solely as pets.

*Veterinary doctor 11: “Any pet belongs to a human.”*

These findings indicate a discrepancy between the beliefs of volunteers and veterinary practitioners regarding the role and moral importance of companion animals, consistent with the themes discussed in the literature review. Volunteers primarily perceive companion animals as family members, friends, or like children, indicating a moral viewpoint that assigns intrinsic value

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and a higher social status to these animals. This viewpoint corresponds with Abbate's (2023) concept of a hybrid moral perspective, which emphasizes the intrinsic value of companion animals relative to other classifications within the socio-zoological scale (DeMello, 2021).

The responses of six veterinary practitioners highlight a utilitarian perspective, emphasizing the distinctions between humans and non-humans, thereby reinforcing speciesist attitudes (Horta, 2010).

*Veterinary inspector 3: "An animal is an animal. He may be the family pet that everyone loves, but he is still an animal. He'll never be a person. As a child, a daughter, or a son, he will never be a part of the family."*

The belief that a pet is an animal rather than a person reflects a cultural dichotomy between humans and non-humans, as examined by Plumwood (2002), Seshadri (2012), and Torrez (2013) contributing to systemic patterns of dehumanization. This fundamental difference in perception illustrates the hierarchy of the socio-zoological scale and the wider cultural and moral discussions regarding the legal rights of companion animal in relation to human being.

## **5.2 Legal rights**

When looking into the informants' beliefs about the legal rights of companion animals, the analysis showed that only one volunteer believes animals have rights, but they are still subordinate to humans. Two volunteers believe that companion animal have legal rights, and seven believe that unfortunately legal rights of companion animal are limited. We decided not to merge these two types of answers to determine how many respondents are concerned about rights' limitations.

*Volunteer 5: "But right now, I believe the animal to be somewhat vulnerable; hence, the animal lacks this legal right."*

The responses on animals' legal rights of veterinary professionals vary. Three informants concur that the legal rights of companion animals are insufficiently safeguarded, whereas four firmly assert that companion animals possess legal rights. Five informants assert that companion animals have rights; nonetheless, human rights are prioritized. Nine informants clarify that companion animals do not possess legal rights but are entitled to the so-called five freedoms.

*Veterinary doctor 6: "I wouldn't call it rights – it is freedoms"*

Or *Veterinary inspector 5: "They have the right to be fed, to be cared for."*

The supplementary interview questions revealed that all veterinary practitioners studied the Five Freedoms approach to animal rights at university

as a framework to ensure that the animals in their care have conditions that satisfy their fundamental needs.

The discrepancies among informants may be attributed to the veterinary education of veterinarians and inspectors, as opposed to the absence of such education among volunteers. As the *Veterinary doctor 5* mentioned: “*Volunteers frequently lack medical training and are unable to understand when a treatment is no longer morally acceptable.*”

Prior research by Qi et al. (2022) found that, in contrast to cat owners who are aware of the negative effects of cats, enthusiastic animal lovers did not seem to know much about the risks cats pose to the public’s health. That gave us an idea that volunteers’ notion of love, positive affection to animals or personal emotion deeply rooted in motivation to help can be a factor of contradiction with veterinary professionals. Informants’ responses confirmed our assumptions.

*Veterinary inspector 3*: “*Volunteers are emotion-driven, but the vet evaluates animal’s health*”.

Or *Veterinary doctor 11*: “*I frequently observe that they lack rationality. And when we speak to them about it, they regard us as being evil.*”

To assess these viewpoints, we inquired of volunteers whether they concur that their decisions are frequently influenced by emotion. The informants agreed with the vets’ statements.

*Volunteer 8*: “*A lot of us are led by emotions that don’t make sense. What matters most is the outcome. Vets can say that what we’re doing goes against Darwin’s ideas and that we don’t need to save all. People, on the other hand, put these animals in these situations!*”

This perspective can serve as a conduit to the informants’ beliefs regarding the legal rights of homeless animals. All 10 volunteers assert that stray animals, such as cats and dogs, possess the same legal rights as companion animals. Two of the aforementioned informants also indicated that these legal rights are not properly protected.

*Volunteer 9*: “*Whether it is stray animal or domestic cat, a breed or a non-breed, young or old, for me and my companions the legal rights are same. Rights have no age, color, coat, disease, or health definition.*”

Ten veterinary professionals say that the rights of stray animals are far more limited than those of domestic animals. Their beliefs stem from regular engagements with both categories of animals, pet owners, and volunteers who bring stray animals to their clinics or in cases of welfare violations.

*Veterinary doctor 10*: “*Yes, they ought to be the same in theory. However, homeless animals frequently are treated badly, and I believe they have less rights to the same medical treatment. I confess – I also don’t like strays as patients. The volunteer brings me feral cat who is not eating for few days. I can’t check him like domestic cat, because he is wild, and I understand that can’t help him.*”

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Or *Veterinary inspector 1*: “Yes, they have rights too. They have the right to have an owner, to be fed, to have a home, to be healthy and to have someone to look after them. But there are too many of them, overpopulation of stray cats, so these rights are limited.”

Six veterinary professionals agreed with the volunteers that both types of animals have equal rights. Interestingly, two vets expressed the belief that roaming animals have more rights than pets, as they can express natural behaviours like hunting or walking long distances, unlike pets living in small apartments. One informant was unsure how to answer, while another believed that strays have no rights at all.

*Veterinary inspector 4*: “What rights do both a stray cat and a homeless person have? Harsh, but nothing. You just pass them and go further”.

There is present a distinct difference in beliefs between volunteers and veterinary professionals regarding the legal rights of companion and stray animals. Individuals who engage in volunteer work typically tend to hold the belief that both companion and stray animals share comparable legal rights, while those in the veterinary field frequently perceive these rights as restricted. This corresponds with Wacks’ (2024) observation that animal rights frequently appear to be secondary to human rights, underscoring the persistent discussion regarding the extent and relevance of animal rights. The variations in perceptions can be partially linked to the educational and professional experiences of the informants. Volunteers acknowledge that their perspectives are frequently influenced by emotions, a conclusion that aligns with the ecofeminist critique of the overly rational methodology regarding animal rights explored in the literature review. The comprehension of the Five Freedoms by veterinary professionals, shaped by their formal education, often results in a focus on fulfilling animals’ fundamental needs rather than adopting a broader perspective on legal rights. This focus on practical welfare stands in contrast to the more emotionally driven viewpoints of volunteers. The research findings reveal a conceptual tension between moral and legal rights. The belief among volunteers that stray animals deserve rights akin to those of companion animals likely arises from a moral rights viewpoint, advocating the idea of universally applying certain rights. Conversely, it appears that veterinary professionals function under a more limited legal rights framework, indicating a necessity for enhanced recognition and formalization of animal rights within legal settings. The study results do not explicitly frame the discussion in terms of “new human rights,” yet the evolving discourse and advocacy for more comprehensive animal rights align with the historical processes involved in the recognition of new human rights. The reference to the Five Freedoms guidelines by veterinary professionals highlights the present condition of animal welfare rights. While these freedoms may be viewed as foundational welfare principles rather than legal rights, the advocacy and discourse surrounding them can be interpreted as

a component of the broader movement aimed at formalizing new rights, similar to the gradual process described for the development of new human rights.

### ***5.3 Perceptions of animals***

The beliefs-based perspective of companion or stray animals, such as dogs or cats, varies amongst volunteers and veterinary professionals. Seven volunteers consider an animal (no matter companion or stray) as a full entity with its own individuality, while three perceive it as an equal partner to humans.

*Volunteer 10: “An animal is a sentient, unique being. It has its own feelings.”*

Nine veterinary professionals also conveyed the concept of the animal’s individuality, while three expressed the notion of its value as an equal partner. We noticed by the perspective of eight veterinary professionals, who asserted that while animals had intrinsic value, they remain subordinate to humans. That means, these informants separate the value of companion animal and stray animal on the basis of ownership. An animal is regarded in a moderate manner, as articulated by Veterinary Doctor 12:

*“The value of animal stems from the fact that it is an owned pet who resides with us, whether in a garden, a barn, or an apartment. And we need to take responsibility for it”.*

Or regarded in a radical sense of ownership, as exemplified by the statements of Veterinary Inspector 4:

*“What is the moral value? It’s hard to talk about morality if people assume animals can be eaten or killed. The value of a pet is that it’s my own. Then it has incalculable value to me. No for you.”*

The responses regarding the perception of animal value reveal a complex understanding influenced by beliefs about moral status and legal rights. Volunteers typically ascribe individuality and sentience to animals, perceiving them as equals or partners, which demonstrates a sympathetic and intrinsic valuation rooted in a moral framework that emphasizes the distinct emotional capabilities of animals. This corresponds with overarching ecofeminist theories that underscore an ethic of care and moral consideration for non-human beings (Donovan & Adams, 2007). The volunteers’ perspective is significantly shaped by emotions, as they frequently hold animals in profound emotional affection and empathy. Veterinary professionals recognize the inherent value of animals, yet often prioritize these principles under human ownership and obligations. Their beliefs are shaped by their education in veterinary science, especially the principle of the Five Freedoms – framework, which prioritizes responsibilities in a manner consistent with conventional utilitarian viewpoints. The diverse perceptions underscore the interplay of moral beliefs, legal frameworks, and emotional factors – altogether they determine the perceived value of

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companion and homeless animals. Informants' responses also reveal a wider discourse in the literature regarding the socio-zoological scale and speciesism notions.

## 6. Conclusion

The first research question of our study was what are the homeless animal help volunteers' and veterinary professionals' beliefs about the moral status and legal rights of companion animals and roaming animals? The responses from informants indicate that volunteers primarily view companion animals as family members, friends, or children, underscoring a belief that attributes considerable intrinsic value and moral status to these animals. Veterinary professionals frequently adopt a utilitarian perspective that highlights the differences between humans and animals, viewing companion animals primarily as entities with designated roles rather than as family members. Volunteers advocate for equal legal rights for both companion and roaming animals, motivated by a shared belief in the moral obligation to protect all animals, irrespective of ownership status. Veterinary professionals demonstrate a dual perspective; while some recognize specific legal rights for both categories of animals, the majority believe that strays possess limited rights in practice, due to systemic obstacles encountered in veterinary care. The beliefs of volunteers are frequently shaped by emotional ties to animals, resulting in a moral advocacy for their rights. In contrast, veterinary professionals ground their beliefs in the Five Freedoms framework and practical considerations of animal welfare, which may conflict with the emotional motivations of volunteers.

The second research question examined whether the beliefs of veterinary practitioners and volunteers concerning the moral and legal status of animals influence their perceptions of companion and roaming animals. The volunteers' belief in the intrinsic value of companion animals leads them to regard these animals as deserving of respect and rights akin to human rights. This emotional bond fosters a protective attitude towards both companion and homeless animals. In contrast, the utilitarian perspective of veterinary professionals shapes their understanding of animals predominantly through the lens of roles and responsibilities. Due to it they frequently prioritize practical welfare needs above emotional factors. Conflicting perspectives on legal rights result in varied interpretations of ethical treatment and care for animals. Volunteers promote enhanced legal protections from a moral perspective, whereas veterinary professionals underscore the significance of the Five Freedoms framework. Due to this believe veterinary professionals mostly focuses on fulfilling animals' fundamental needs rather than their rights. These contradictions sometimes

lead to tension between volunteers and veterinary professionals regarding animal welfare. Volunteers may see veterinary decisions as excessively pragmatic or emotionally uninvolved. In return veterinarians consider volunteer viewpoints as insufficiently informed about the practicalities of animal care.

A study into stakeholder beliefs uncovers notable distinctions between volunteers and veterinary professionals, which carry substantial ramifications for the implementation of animal management and welfare policies. Diversities in beliefs significantly influence the management of stray animal populations, potentially resulting in conflict or ineffective policy outcomes if not properly handled, as well as affecting the legislative reforms aimed at improving the welfare of domestic and stray animals. This disparity presents obstacles in developing cohesive and successful policies that fulfil both ethical and practical objectives.

Consequently, future study may explore the socio-political dimensions of animal welfare policy development, analysing how the varied opinions and biases of distinct stakeholders affect law and its execution. Research can shed light how the socio-cultural, educational, and experiential elements influence the beliefs and attitudes of volunteers and veterinary professionals regarding animal status and value. Longitudinal studies can be applied to examine these influences from education through professional practice to get insights into the evolution of beliefs over time and identify potential interventions to align differing perspectives. The next study might focus on how everyday interactions with companion or stray animals, their owners, the urban environment, and the surrounding society affect the beliefs of volunteers and veterinary professionals regarding the moral status of animals and their legal status.

The snowball sampling method employed in this study presents a potential bias, as the sample may be more homogenous than the broader population it seeks to represent. This is due to the risk of self-selection bias, where individuals with deep emotions about the topic are more inclined to participate. Such bias may arise among the volunteer participants, who might inherently possess a more emotional and passionate viewpoints on animal welfare issues because of their engagement in the field. The saturation of certain beliefs, such as viewing companion animals as family members or the notion that stray animals possess the same rights as companions, albeit with limitations, indicates that bias remains relatively weak in our perspective. Future investigations could integrate strategies to ensure a more diverse and representative sample, such as merging snowball sampling with additional techniques like stratified sampling, which would aid in capturing a wider array of perspectives.



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