

Susana Suarez was always a dog lover. She can remember no time in her life when she didn't have a pet of some sort – in addition to the dogs, she's owned cats, birds, horses, rabbits, gerbils and guinea pigs. She even tried out a mink, but that only lasted a weekend; the mink being a very territorial animal was not inclined to share its home with others.

After embracing Islam, Susana realized that life with pets was not going to be the same. After getting married and moving out of her parents' home she had to leave behind her beloved Chihuahuas. "I've lost three of my little members into the family is how I feel. There were times when I would just go out in the backyard and cuddle with them," she muses. But now, Susana and her husband have

decided to follow Islamic tradition and keep their home dog-free.

Kindness to Pets and Animals

Pets are important in many people's lives. In fact, the Pew Research Center recently conducted a survey of American pet owners showing that 85 percent of dog owners and 78 percent of cat owners surveyed consider their pets to be family members.

Muslims are among the most avid pet owners. However, there are guidelines Muslims should follow regarding owning and caring for animals. According to Imam Yasir Qadhi of New Haven, Connecticut, there are three conditions for Muslim pet ownership – that the pet be a permissible animal (for instance, a pig clearly would not be appropriate); that the pet not be an animal that would be

dangerous to humans (such as a venomous snake); and that the pet be well taken care of.

Kindness in care-taking is a fundamental part of the Islamic guidelines for pet treatment. There are many *ahadith* instructing kindness to animals. One of the most demonstrably compassionate is narrated by Abu Huraira and states, "Allah's Apostle said, 'While a man was walking he felt thirsty and went down a well and drank water from it. On coming out of it, he saw a dog panting and eating mud because of excessive thirst. The man said, 'This (dog) is suffering from the same problem as that of mine. So he (went down the well), filled his shoe with water, caught hold of it with his teeth and climbed up and watered the dog. Allah thanked him for his (good) deed and forgave him.' The people



pets & Muslims

by Ruth Nasrullah

asked, ‘O Allah’s Apostle! Is there a reward for us in serving (the) animals?’ He replied, ‘Yes, there is a reward for serving any animate.’”

Clearly, in Islam animals are deemed worthy of mercy and care as creations of Allah just as people are. The Qur’an teaches respect for animals as created beings and the *sunnah* explains how to handle and treat animals. How Muslims apply that mercy and care defines us as pet owners, trainers and caretakers.

The Big Issue: Dogs

Invariably, the first question that comes up in a discussion of animals and Islam is the status of dogs. Muslim veterinarian, Dr. Ayoub Banderker, says that when he decided on his career, the idea of a Muslim vet was unheard of. Many community members were shocked that he would want to work with pigs and dogs, the two animals seen as most prohibited in Islam – and reviled by many Muslims. So reviled in fact, he reports, that some Muslims in his hometown of Cape Town, South Africa, go so far as to have dogs euthanized during Ramadan, with the thought that doing so will purify their home.

Of course this idea is baseless and contrary to the Islamic principles of kindness to animals. It is likely a distortion of the prohibition on keeping a dog in your home. Restriction of dogs in the home is based on the *hadith* which says: “Angels do not enter a house which has a dog or picture in it.” This is accepted by the majority of Muslims to bar owning a dog as an indoor pet, but it does not rule out owning dogs for protection or hunting.

Sheikh M.S. Al-Munajjid gives the

opinion on IslamOnline.net that animals such as dogs may still be kept as pets or workers, even if they do not stay in the home. “There are reports in the *sunnah* which indicate that some of the *Sababab* kept permissible animals for farming purposes or for fun and

pleasure,” states the Sheikh. As stated earlier, they must be well-kept.

The other primary concern with dogs is the impurity of their saliva. A *hadith* in Sahih Bukhari records that the Prophet, peace be on him, instructed that if a dog drinks from a bowl or cup, it should be washed seven times before being used by a person. This is widely interpreted to indicate the saliva of a dog is impure, and that getting it on you invalidates *wudhu* and necessitates cleaning of the clothing the saliva may have touched. Sheikh Yasir emphasizes that it’s only the saliva that’s impure, and that if, for example, a dog accidentally brushes against you, you don’t need to renew your *wudhu*.

In the last few years there have been incidents of controversial refusal of some Muslim cab drivers – perhaps concerned with avoiding impurities from the dog – to allow passengers with seeing-eye dogs in their taxis. Although it continues to be an issue of concern in the US, in Great Britain it is now illegal to refuse service to someone with a guide dog. In addition to the civil legislation, the Islamic Sharia Council of the United Kingdom also issued a *fatwah* allowing it. The Council additionally ruled that Muslims can use guide dogs because they are essential to enabling independence for people with disabilities.

Meet the Family – I Mean the Cat

There is a Muslim tradition of keeping cats as beloved pets. The Prophet’s esteemed companion Abu Huraira, whose nickname meant “father of the kitten,” was so called

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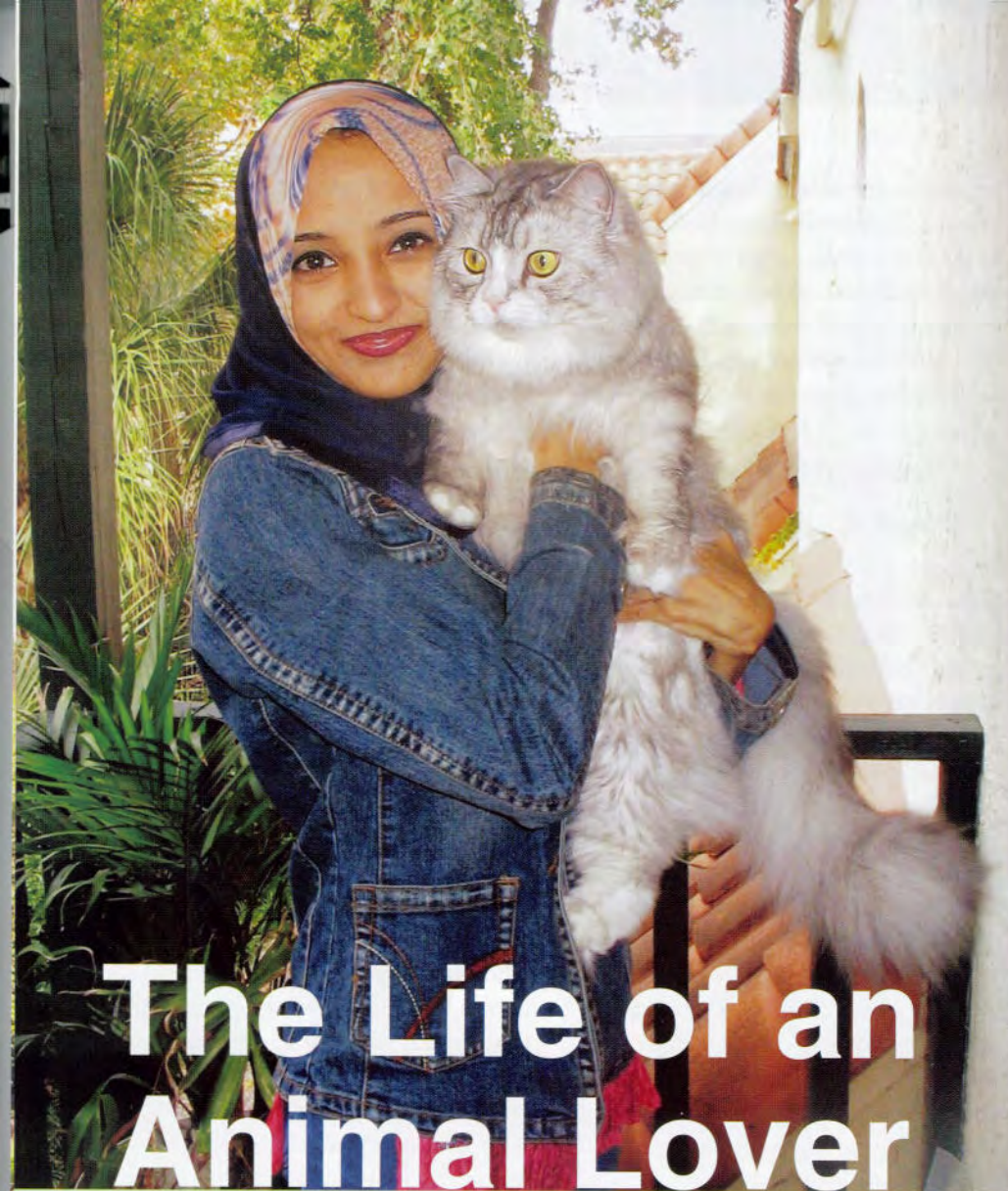
because he always carried a kitten with him.

A cat figured prominently in one of the most famous *ahadith* regarding animals: Narrated ‘Abdullah bin ‘Umar: Allah’s Apostle said, ‘A woman was tortured and was put in Hell because of a cat which she had kept locked till it died of hunger.’ Allah’s Apostle further said, Allah said to the woman, ‘You neither fed it nor watered when you locked it up, nor did you set it free to eat the insects of the earth [i.e., to find food for itself].’

Raza and Masooma Rizvi of Houston are cat owners (see sidebar) who truly see their cat, Armaan, as a friend and family member; this is most likely to their benefit, according to a 1999 study published in the *Journal of the American Geriatric Society*. The study examined nearly 1,000 older men and women and found that owning a cat or dog helped them to maintain or even slightly enhance their functional independence.

Noor and Ahmed Abdullah [names changed at their request] are Muslim cat owners who lovingly refer to their cats, Kootenai and Fuzzy, as the “fuzz dawgs.” They are both indoor cats and the couple is careful about dealing with the litter box and the contents thereof

LEFT: Aisha with Onyx the bunny. Onyx is a rescued rabbit, abandoned at birth and left on Aisha’s doorstep.



The Life of an Animal Lover

by Masooma Rizv

As nature and animal lovers, my husband and I rescued an abandoned cat from the animal shelter. We named him Armaan Murghfidai. Armaan's favorite pastime includes lying lazily on his back with all fours up in the air or watching the bird feeder as a myriad of birds flock the balcony. However, when a determined squirrel shows up for a snack, all hell breaks loose. Like most pet owners, I regularly converse with him, scolding or

complimenting, as if he understands.

Armaan also wakes us up for Fajr prayers every morning – first with a gentle lick on the hand and then, if his patience is tested, he uses his razor sharp molars to give a mild but effective bite on any accessible appendage. That is enough to get us on our feet for salat and also serve him breakfast.

When outdoors, we've noticed that Armaan actually helps us better integrate with the larger American society. On my

daily walks with Armaan, neighbors often come up to me to ask about him. Visitors at the vet's clinic strike up friendly conversations and treat me as a regular person rather than a reclusive hijab-wearing Muslim woman. For us and many Muslim immigrants, pets have unwittingly become a cultural bridge.

However, many Muslims come from parts of the world where even the most basic human necessities are scarce. So it is understandable that some Muslims do not take kindly to what they consider as excessive indulgence of pets. Some try to use religious rulings to justify their revulsion of cats and dogs while others liken the keeping of pets to a Western and un-Islamic lifestyle. As my husband sometimes complains, "The only animals some Muslims like are the ones that are served to them on their dinner plates."

In addition to their loving companionship, pets provide other benefits too. Studies have found that children growing up with cats have a reduced risk of allergies when they grow up. A New York University medical school patient education article stated that studies indicate keeping pets reduces high blood pressure, lessens the likelihood of depression, helps people with Alzheimer's disease and significantly increases the survival rate of heart attack patients. A Web MD article states that pet owners pay 18% fewer visits to a doctor than people without pets and says the "pet prescription" may be helpful for many people. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), pets help children boost their self-esteem and self-confidence, provide lessons about life (birth, illnesses, accidents, death), help develop responsible and caring behavior and teach respect for living things.

As pet owners and animal lovers, my husband and I benefit from the company of our cat and he benefits from ours. As a Muslim, I am proud to follow a religion that has a strong tradition of treating animals with kindness.

in order to maintain cleanliness, both spiritual and otherwise. They also don't allow the cats in food preparation areas; the cats have their own areas of their large house which are separate from their prayer area.

"We also are careful about honoring the placement of the Qur'an, and never allow it to be laid or rested somewhere the cats have access," Noor explains. "The separation in the house works well for us, and has never been a

problem to humans or cats."

Pets in the Saudi Arabian cities of Jeddah and Makkah don't fare as well as their brethren in the West. The religious police in those cities recently started enforcing a ban on the sale of

cats and dogs as pets. Despite Islam's high regard for animals, the Saudi authorities are concerned with the trend of keeping pets as a status symbol, and are seeking to deter this trend, which they see as an unwelcome sign of Western culture threatening to erode strict Islamic customs.

Unusual and Exotic

Stephenie Bourtal Zarat of Chicago is also a Muslim pet owner – proud owner of three ferrets, a less common pet in most American households. “They’re quiet, they don’t make any noise, but they get into things,” elaborates Stephenie. “I guess they’re kind of like kittens.”

Stephenie ought to know about the nature of both ferrets and kittens – she’s an animal trainer for a private zoo in Chicago. She works with a range of animals comprising over 30 species, mostly cats, raccoons, ferrets, foxes, gerbils and some reptiles. Like the other Muslim animal owners in this article, Stephenie also deals with dogs; she takes great care to minimize contact with the dog and maintain her ritual purity as much as possible.

She enjoys working with all animals, though – which in her case includes exotic species such as the Coatimundi (an omnivore related to the raccoon) as well as snakes, pythons, boa constrictors and monitor lizards. “I



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have a very deep respect for the animals that God creates,” notes Stephenie thoughtfully.

All Creations of God

There are numerous *abadith* regarding treatment of animals, including regulations and prohibitions on branding, mutilating or whipping – and even the most humane way to slaughter animals. One tradition states, “God has prescribed the doing of good toward every thing: so when you kill, kill with goodness, and when you slaughter, slaughter with goodness. Let each one of you sharpen his blade and let him give ease to the animal he is slaughtering.”

Sheikh Yasir expands on this by saying the etiquette of slaughter includes minimizing pain, feeding and

ABOVE: Sarah Rahmani with her pet goats, Sarah Star, Layla and Shadow. Sarah has always wanted to work with animals and this was one way for her to learn about them. The animals are Sarah’s hands-on science project. She has learned about nutrition, disease, injuries, wound care, reproduction, birth and death. The veterinarian is helpful and works to make each visit an educational experience.

watering the animal before sacrifice and not sacrificing an animal in front of other animals.

The Qur’an and sunnah both tell us that animals are cherished companions, workers and helpers of humans. Animals are our responsibility, and as Muslims we cannot forego the compassion our religion requires. God tells us in the Qur’an in Surah Hajj, ayah 18: “Don’t you see that to God bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and on earth – the sun, the moon, the stars, the hills, the trees, the animals and a great number among humankind?” 🌿