Rehoming of pet rabbits (Oryctolagus cuniculus) in Sweden: an investigation of national advertisement

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Abstract

Rabbits (Oryctolagus cuniculus) are popular companion animals, yet there has been little research into rabbits kept as pets in Sweden. Many rabbits that are rehomed are done so via personal contacts rather than through animal shelters. The purpose of this study was to provide a picture as to why rabbit owners rehome their pets and to what extent this is done in Sweden. There were 505 rabbits put up for rehoming through a large Swedish advertisement site during the winter of 2012/2013. The most commonly stated reasons for trying to rehome rabbits were ‘Lack of time’ (35.8%), ‘Owners are moving’ (16.6%) and ‘Allergies’ (13.2%). The mean age of the rabbits was 17.6 months and most rabbits were put up for sale for a price of between €11.1 and €55. Requests about the new home were mentioned in 46.8% of the adverts and the majority of the comments described the type of home needed for the rabbit. Reasons for relinquishing rabbits were similar to those found in other studies and the number of rabbits with behavioural problems was very low (0.9%). We conclude that a number of rabbits in Sweden are experiencing rehoming and the effect of this on their welfare should be further investigated.

Keywords: animal owner, animal welfare, behaviour, pet, rabbit, rehoming

Introduction

Rabbits (Oryctolagus cuniculus) are the third most popular companion animal in Sweden, after cats and dogs, according to Statistics Sweden (SCB 2012). There are 76,611 (± 28,741) households keeping rabbits and the number of rabbits kept as companion animals in Sweden amounts to 124,611 (± 45,081) (SCB 2012). The reason given for acquiring a rabbit can differ depending on which age group the owner belongs to (Edbom 2011). In the report by Edbom (2011), child respondents most commonly stated that they had acquired the rabbit in order to participate in show or jumping competitions, whilst amongst adults the most commonly stated answer was that the rabbit was acquired for their children.

The incidences of unwanted pet rabbits in Sweden is poorly studied and as rabbits are easily available in pet stores and through other channels, such as advertisement sites on the internet, there is a risk of people purchasing rabbits on impulse rather than after careful consideration. A survey in the UK showed that 18% of people purchasing a rabbit in a pet store did so after deciding on that same day (Edgar & Mullan 2011), which leaves little time for new owners to prepare themselves for the long-term commitment of caring for the rabbit even if valuable advice is provided by the seller. According to the same survey, new rabbit owners had a limited knowledge of the needs of rabbits, especially regarding dietary and social needs.

Reasons for relinquishment to animal shelters were studied in four animal shelters in the US and it was shown that 27.2% of the rabbits were handed into the shelters as a result of the owners’ lack of interest in their pet (Cook & McCobb 2012). Other common reasons for relinquishment were human housing issues, for example, that the owners were moving (22.1%), that the owners had too many rabbits (21.6%) or owner-related problems, such as allergies, pregnancy or illness (18.1%) (Cook & McCobb 2012). Only 3.4% of the rabbits were handed in as a result of rabbit-related problems, such as destructive behaviour (Cook & McCobb 2012). A survey of 30 animal shelters in Canada showed that 47.8% of the rabbits were handed into the shelters by their owners (Ledger 2010). Out of these, 94.7% were handed in due to owner-related circumstances, while only 5.3% were handed in as the result of behavioural problems (Ledger 2010).

Many animal shelters in Sweden concentrate their efforts on either cats or dogs whereas rabbits are taken in less frequently (Ulfsdotter & Andersson 2016, in prep). According to a UK survey, 22% of the rabbits in question were taken in by their owners as ‘rescues’, over half of these were acquired through friends and the rest through rescue centres (Mullan & Main 2006). This may indicate that the number of unsuccessful outcomes between pet rabbits and their owners is higher than shelter statistics imply (Mullan & Main 2006), especially in Sweden where many shelters do not accept rabbits (Ulfsdotter & Andersson 2016, in prep).