

The Rabbit Overpopulation Myth

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After much research I have discovered that there are no estimates, figures, or data regarding the number of rabbits abandoned or sold in the US, except for a lone shelter survey. The only reliable figure for rabbit abandonment comes from a 1997 shelter survey that estimated 43,519 rabbits abandoned in US shelters in 1996. This estimate does not come from any rescue group or animal rights group, as they all claim they have no information about shelter numbers, but rather from an individual who did it himself. And from Rabbits Annual 1998-99 "Fewer rabbits are being dumped because people know how to care for them." Paige Parsons HRS educator.

In addition "statistics" used, especially by rabbit rightists, are not accurate and often simply made up out of thin air. One such "stat" is the one about 90% of all rabbits sold. Read on to find out why that is totally made up.

Rabbit Abandonment Numbers

For several years I have consistently asked how many rabbits are abandoned, the following are some of the answers I have received:

"We don't have these numbers, because most animal shelters don't keep statistics on rabbits." **House Rabbit Society** 1996

"Because we rescue from shelters we don't have the actual number of abandoned rabbits. You might try the ASPCA or the HSUS, or both. They come the closest to having representative statistics." **HRS** 1997

"I do not have information on rabbit abandonment but would imagine the HRS might be able to help." **HSUS**

"I do not have any statistics about rabbit overpopulation, however I do have a great referral for your project. You should contact the HRS." **ASPCA**

"I was not able to obtain the statistics you are looking for but the HRS may be able to help you." **PETA**

"I would suggest you contact the national HRS they will have the most comprehensive and up to date information for you."

PAWS

"Actually we have no information on rabbit overpopulation." S.F. **SPCA**

"I would hazard that rabbit surrender totals, nationally, are probably in the tens to low hundreds of thousands, rather than millions. Anything that starts arriving in the hundreds of thousands generally does get counted." -Merritt Clifton ed. **Animal People**

"But you're right; it (recording rabbit abandonment numbers) hasn't been done up to now, which is really a shame. I think your need for solid data in your article really serves as a wakeup call to all of us; RECORD YOUR DATA and don't talk out your, well you know." HRS chapter manager/educator via e-mail 1998

Just The Facts:

Pet Products Manufacturing Assoc. in 1996 estimates over 4 million pet rabbits residing within 1.44 million households. In the 1994 issue of Shelter Sense from HSUS the number of pet rabbits in the US was 3.3 million from the American Pet Products Manufacturers Assoc. If one uses the 1996 estimate of 43,519 rabbits abandoned in US shelters that is only 1.09% of the total pet rabbit population.

"In 1996, about 5.1 million animals-1.5 million dogs, 3.5 million cats and some raccoons, skunks, ferrets, gerbils, were euthanized in shelters, says Merritt Clifton, editor of Animal People, a 15,000-circulation newspaper based in C Wash. That's down tremendously from the 17.8 million put down in 1987, the peak of recorded shelter euthanasia, he says." Animal Supporters At Odds by Martha Waggoner 5/11/97. So we do know that there were less than 100,000 "other" animals euthanized at shelters in 1996.

According to the AVMA there are 59 million cats and 52.9 million dogs kept as pets. So according to this information and that of Animal People, 6% of the total pet cat population was euthanized and 3% of the total pet dog population.

UK Rabbit numbers

"17,500 unwanted rabbits in 1996 passed through rescue centres" Linda Dykes **BHRA** 1997

"The resolution of rabbit behaviour problems is still, however, a minority interest-rescue societies are inundated with unwanted pet rabbits. Records of the number of rabbits put to sleep because of behaviour problems are scarce, but a survey conducted in 1995 indicated that 16,000 rabbits were given up to UK rescue centres. In 1997 a survey of 200 UK rescue centres, conducted by Morwen Abbott of one known as 'Cottontails', showed that this number had increased to 24,000." Pg. 21-22 "Why Does My Rabbit? By Anne McBride @1998

According to the same book in 1995 the rabbit was the third most popular mammalian pet in the UK (Cat #1 and Dog #2) with over 1.4 million kept as pets in the UK. What is encouraging is that the number of rabbits abandoned per year (24,000 in 1997) is only 1.7% of the total pet rabbit population.

Rabbits abandoned in the woods or parks

Activists are now trying to convince people that whatever number of rabbits are abandoned at animal shelters the number dumped along roads and in parks is much greater. When I ask how do we know it's much greater I either get no reply or told I have to just believe them. After much research, thought, and input from people I've come to the conclusion that there isn't any way to accurately estimate how many are dumped in the wild. What we do know however is that some portion of this population is being counted. Several shelters who have been sending me information track the number of rabbits that are owner surrendered vs stray. So while we can't guess how many are abandoned, or even know if it is more, less, or equal to the number in shelters, we do know they have some representation in the shelter data.

Plenty of Statements, Lack of Facts aka 90% of all rabbits... make up what you want

In early 1998 a discussion took place between two House Rabbit Society educators and the president of North Texas Rabbit Sanctuary on a rabbit mailing list. The discussion was about the infamous "statistic" that 90% of rabbits bought for Easter end up abandoned or don't live to see their first birthday. The first educator said she had seen this quoted often but has not found anything supporting or verifying it, nor the origins. The second educator stated that "no one seems to be able to track back where it came from". She then cautioned people about using it and added "if we use numbers that we cannot back up, we lose credibility... forgery and lying and all that." The NTRS president said that they should drop the "90%" and say instead "large numbers". She expressed a concern about being harassed by the "numbers police". However the NTRS web site's title page has that very "statistic" and it was picked up and quoted in an article that appeared in the Rabbits Annual magazine (1999-2000 "Fighting the Good Fight" by Diane Calkins). What they say is *"an estimated 90 percent of all rabbits purchased as pets for children die of improper care or are abandoned at animal shelters across the country. Most are euthanized."* In March of 1999 The NTRS president also made this statement on an internet list "If you use them [90% "statistic"] anywhere be prepared to say they are estimates but also know that NOBODY has solid numbers they don't exist." Why use a number that can't be verified?

There are many problems with this "statistic", to begin with no one takes credit for having originally made the statement. Some attribute it to the HSUS however during my own research on rabbit "overpopulation" the HSUS told me they had no information, nor that they said this. Also interesting to note they are credited with the statement that rabbits are the third most commonly abandoned animal, yet they apparently didn't come up with this. I did pick the 90% stat off another web site and the web master said it was from the Chicago HRS site "The House Rabbit Society estimates that up to 90 percent of all bunnies bought as pets for children, die of poor care or are abandoned in shelters where they may be euthanized." Again when I asked HRS where this "statistic" came from they denied knowing or using it, additionally they told me they have no information about the number of rabbits abandoned. The web site I located it on had some of a poster the Chicago HRS chapter acknowledges as theirs but the chapter manager said the 90% part was not from their chapter.

Old "90%" takes on many forms and keeps popping up: "Out of Maybe 10 Easter bunnies purchased for little kids, maybe one makes it though a natural lifespan, and certainly not with the original family." Laura Jodar HRS chapter spokeswoman 3/27/97 newspaper article "Bunnies Could Use a Rabbits Foot at Easter. But when I have contacted the people using it they tell me they don't know where it came from and no they don't have any information or data that can verify its accuracy.

Just recently while I was gathering shelter figures a rescue group told me that according to the ASPCA 8 out of 10 rabbits are abandoned within 6 months. I checked with ASPCA and they have no record of anyone in their organization saying this. Again a mystery statistic.

In a nutshell how can anyone (or group) say 90% of all rabbits anything when no figures, data, or estimates exist for the number sold or number abandoned? Perhaps the answer is simple, **"Humane organizations have had a horrible habit of just making up numbers out of thin air; that's why, when we go to verify them, we often find the commonly**

quoted figures are absurd." - Merritt Clifton editor Animal People (e-mail reply to my question of where the 90% came from).

From Animal People: 10/93 "Apparently, AHA has learned the propagandist's strategy well. It doesn't matter if your data is correct; it only matters if it is fantastic enough for the media to report. By the time their faulty data is exposed, it will be old news and not worth printing. This is either ignorant or dishonest.

More bogus Statements about "overpopulation"

"And if one or two of those rabbits also are allowed to breed, the statistics tell us that within 2 generations, some of your rabbit's descendants are guaranteed to end up dead at a shelter." -"The Hidden Cost of Breeding" by Holly O'Meara . I wrote to her and asked what were these statistics she mentioned? I got back "I didn't write that part of the article; my articles take on a life of their own after I submit them. Amy Espie did the first edit. I will ask her if she wrote it and what statistics she was thinking of." O'Meara forwarded Amy Espie's reply to me: "This info came from some research I did while living in the bay area. I used the libraries at Fund for Animals, S.F. SPCA*(I checked with SFSPCA and got all the info they have on rabbits, nothing there about statistics or estimates on overpopulation), Peninsula Humane Society." "I kept pretty good track of my sources that is they're listed on my notes. If only I could find my notes."

"To purchase from a breeder or pet store is to write a death warrant for a shelter rabbit." 'The Sad Truth About Rabbit Overpopulation' by Amy Shapiro (Espie) Despite repeated requests for evidence that this statement is correct from the author I have received no reply. This is exactly what animal rights groups say regarding why not even responsible breeding should be done. Again they have no figures or data to prove such a statement and there is no logic in such a statement since with animals there isn't a "one size fits all" mentality. As the NAIA said someone wanting a particular breed or size isn't going to settle for a mixed breed or a dog too large or small. The same can be applied to rabbits, someone desiring a small breed will not be happy with a large breed rabbit.

We are expected to accept such statements as fact yet no evidence exists to support them.

Contradictions & Falsehoods Abound

"Another shelter I work with estimates 1500 rabbits a year are given to them" HRS chapter manager on Alt.Pets.rabbits 1998. I checked with the educator to get the name of the shelter, I called the shelter and was told they only take in about 20 rabbits per year and adopt out 10%, the manager said 1500 would be higher than the number of dogs they take in each year. Why did the chapter manager grossly inflate the numbers?

"The North Texas Rabbit Sanctuary estimates about one million rabbits are euthanized each year at shelters." -Thoughtful Suggestions by Janet Livingston Domestic Rabbits Nov/Dec 1996. I checked with the author who said it was Barbara Yule of NTRS that used the 1 million figure in an article in the NTRS newsletter. I then e-mailed Yule for verification. She told me "I have never said a specific number of rabbits being euthanized, simply because I don't know how many there are." She then went on to say that she has checked with animal control agencies and that rabbits are lumped into the "other" category, anything not a dog or cat, and that any numbers would be unreliable. I have been unable to obtain a copy of the NTRS newsletter to see exactly what the article says.

In Aug 1998 a letter from the WIHRS Chapter manager was sent out on-line seeking donations. In it he stated regarding Dane County HS, "That means that NO rabbit has had to be euthanized at the shelter for other than medical reasons in that time [3 years]." On 12/12/97 in a pet newsgroup an educator with WIHRS discussing rabbits dumped at the same shelter stated "No matter how hard we've tried, we cannot keep up with this and have not been able to find homes for them all."

During another attempt to get information from an HRS chapter manager who was trying to convince me that whatever shelter figures are available the number dumped are actually much higher she stated that she knew of a dump site in Long Beach CA. She went on to say she knows new rabbits are dumped there daily because she goes there and sees the rabbits and can tell they are not the same from other days. This is quite a feat since this person lives in FL, **not** CA.

A quick Comparison to Dogs and Cats

I did a test, I surfed the net checking what varying sites and groups listed for dog and cat "overpopulation" numbers. Luvcat web site "HSUS estimates shelters (US) accept 8-20 million each year. 30% purebred, 30%-60% are euthanized, 25%-35% adopted." On the first page the author states that 8-20 million are euthanized. Pawprints & Purrs site "Statistics show 16-17 million dogs and cats euthanized in the US." The American Humane Assoc. estimated 12 million euthanized in 1992, however their figure was disputed by Animal

People. A shelter by shelter, state by state count showed US euthanasia was under 6 million animals per year. When Animal People asked for the data to recalculate and get an accurate number the AHA refused. From Animal People 10/93 'AHA Says 12 Million Wanted to Discredit Pet Breeders'; "a steep decline in animal shelter intakes and euthanasia over the past decade is confirmed by many other compilations of data, including the shelter by shelter, state by state, statistics that are available for multiple years. No other research suggests the recent rise in euthanasia that the AHA claims to have discovered."

In 2008 euthanasia of dogs and cats may only be 2-3 million per year, see separate articles for the data and back up references.

Rabbit Sales Information

If one is to believe the 90% stat one key piece of data required is the number of rabbits sold per year. If you do not have that figure you cannot possibly estimate 90% of all sold are abandoned, killed, or whatever you want to insert. So I looked into how many rabbits are sold per year.

Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (1998) "Sorry we do not have this information".

The information simply does not exist. So if we do not know the number of rabbits sold per year we cannot say "90%" anything. The following is what little exists about rabbit sales from ARBA.

"The average sales trends all over had dropped by 50% during the Easter season of 1997. Sales for 1998 dropped even further and roughly only about one-third of the sales of 1997. Some areas were even lower or even non-existent." ARBA commercial committee. RES breeder survey asked breeders what they thought demand for pet rabbits was in their area, the results are: Low 56%, medium 30%, high 13%. No other information regarding rabbit sales is available.

The Definition of Overpopulation?

"We're so packed right now 14 in the shelter and another 20 or so in foster homes" -rescuer
"I am working with another shelter that has 11 rabbits and is set up to house 6. Those numbers my mind can grasp but a third shelter, Long Beach has 36-more rabbits than I can begin to think about." -rescuer

One of the problems is what is the definition of "overpopulation"? Several rescuers I've talked to say one is too many and more than 1 rabbit abandoned is unforgivable. Fine, but aren't we being a tad unrealistic to say all breeding must stop until there is a zero abandonment rate. Additionally some of these rabbit "advocates" are including rabbits raised for meat, research, and fur as part of "overpopulation". When you start interviewing these people and looking at the facts you realize that for them the ultimate goal is an end to all breeding of rabbits (they will argue some pet owners will have accidental litters so there will be a supply) and any use other than as a companion animal.

From the above mentioned Animal People article: "By publishing euthanasia statistics far in excess of numbers reported by competent researchers using appropriate stratified sampling techniques, American Humane will once again polarize the dog and cat fancy against the humane community. This is unfortunate, as I was beginning to see evidence of a collaborative strategy to address unwanted pets. Many fanciers who were beginning to believe our common interest in animal welfare would allow us to work together will see this retreat to hyperbole as evidence that the agenda of the humane community is indeed to initiate breeding bans to annihilate our purebreds. When will they get the picture? You don't need to jerry-rig the data and get fantastic numbers. Attack the true sources of unwanted pets and the fancier/breeders will be with you all the way."

Conclusions

Those who believe in a rabbit overpopulation crisis are probably saying who cares about the numbers, well we all should care about the truth. Those who weren't informed about the rabbit abandonment problem may equally say who cares about getting the facts, well we all should. The why is simple, as evidenced by my research people tend to quote things and get them a bit confused. These incorrect quotes and inaccuracies are then passed around, quoted in articles, etc and pretty soon the truth is no longer the truth or even based in fact. The heart of the problem is when these mistaken figures and statistics are used to demonstrate a need to regulate and/or restrict responsible rabbit breeders. There is a problem with irresponsible pet owners abandoning rabbits but the problem is no where near the extent that some would like us to believe. All I ask for is the truth and that when you see or hear a "statistic" or number you question its veracity. After all if it is accurate where is the harm in asking for proof that it is?

And The Big Whopper Award Goes To...Or Documenting the Incorrect Information

"Bunny Help" Stantonsburg NC <http://www.angelfire.com/nc/bunnyhelp>

Had the following quote on their website: "More than 7 million rabbits are euthanized every year due to rabbit overpopulation." 1999

I have contacted her requesting where she got this figure from as it is obviously false. According to a shelter by shelter, state by state count, US euthanasia was under 6 million animals (dogs, cats, and other) per year. So her 7 million figure would represent a number higher than the total number of cats and dogs euthanized per year. And note that the cat and dog population in the US numbers over 50 million. The pet rabbit population in the US is only 4 million rabbits. What is so alarming is that at some point someone who does not know the facts about rabbit abandonment, will think this outrageous figure is accurate. It will then be passed along and more people will have been lied to. I did receive a reply from Bunny Help on 8/30/99 that they got that quote from someone else's web site, they didn't give me the address. Bunny Help has since removed the quote from their web site.

Late 2000:

"Friends of Rabbits has boycotted restaurants that serve rabbit on the menu and has worked with groups like PETA to protest animal research. But the group says breeders are rabbits' biggest threat." onwashington.com

"We are trying to put the breeders out of business," says Anand. "Right now, there is an incredible overpopulation of rabbits. Millions of rabbits are put to death every year at shelters. We don't need more animals being bred." Same article Vineeta Anand is the founder of FOR, note the figure of "millions" is incorrect based on RES research

"Come and support our efforts to put breeders and pet stores out of business." FOR newsletter

"Have you ever visited a rabbit breeder? Have you seen the tiny, filthy cages the rabbits live in, stacked one top of another, open to the elements?" same newsletter again note the anti-breeder propaganda

2001 Kris Corson self proclaimed rabbit rescuer has been documented using several false figures, they seem to change with the wind from thousands to millions.