



# Attitudes Toward Pets in Other Cultures

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In our society, pets are usually regarded as part of the family. They're our "pals," and we love them. But not all cultures have the same attitude we do toward the animals we keep and cherish as pets. In fact, there are many cultural differences in the way cats and, especially, dogs are viewed. In some cultures, for example, dogs are regarded as dirty animals, and so they aren't treated as pets in the way that we treat them. People might keep a dog around, but when they do, they don't necessarily take very good care of him. They may let him scavenge for food or else feed him only table scraps, and if he gets sick, they probably won't take him to a veterinarian. If the dog comes too close, they might kick him away, or if he barks too much or too loud or makes a nuisance of himself, they might beat him.

If we try, we can usually figure out why a specific culture views animals the way it does. Perhaps, for instance, people are too poor to buy food for a pet. Perhaps, they can't afford to go to the doctor themselves, let alone spend money on medicine for a dog or cat. Perhaps their religion teaches them that certain animals are unclean—or that certain animals are sacred.

Also, consider that centuries ago in our own culture, so many babies died before they reached the age of three that parents were afraid of attaching too much love to very young children. They held their feelings back as a way of protecting themselves emotionally against a possible loss. In much the same way, people who lack adequate health care often have to live with seeing family members die of diseases that we would be able to cure. Perhaps, then, they are afraid to risk feeling affection for a pet, since they might then have to suffer through the untimely death of that pet as well.

In other words, if people in other cultures sometimes don't treat animals kindly, it's not because they are necessarily "bad" people. We need to recognize that they were raised with different attitudes and customs and that their life circumstances might be very different from our own. We have to imagine what the world looks like to other people. But—and this is a very important "but"—while we can, and should, try to understand why people do what they do, we are not obliged to accept it. Just because there's a reason for an action doesn't automatically make it right. Certain behavior is simply morally wrong. No matter what the situation, it is wrong to be cruel, all the more so when the victim of your cruelty is small or relatively powerless. It is wrong to deprive living creatures of their most basic rights—the right to life, of course, and the right to physical freedom, but also the right to live with dignity and be treated with compassion. For this reason, in our society cruelty toward animals is strictly prohibited by law. When people treat an animal as if that animal were an inanimate object, something with no needs and no feelings, they are behaving wrongly, and they can be punished for their behavior. We might not be able to do much about the behavior of people in other societies, at least not immediately, and it could be that they are honorable people in other respects. But under no circumstances should we condone cruelty. To do so is to be cruel ourselves.