

## 8: Fido as Feed

Pet owners will form strong emotional bonds with their animals similar to if they were human family members. When a pet dies, the grief can be profound; organizations like the RSPCA and services like Paws to Listen exist precisely to support people through pet bereavement. Owners often view pets as much more than property, seeing animals as loved ones.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, this norm of deep attachment to pets fueled conflict between pet owners and Denmark's Aalborg Zoo when they announced an initiative to help keep their animals fed. Through an Instagram post, the zoo invited people to donate unwanted but otherwise healthy animals, such as chickens, rabbits, or guinea pigs to be euthanized and used as whole prey for its carnivorous residents like the zoo's lynxes. The post explains that captive predators thrive when their diet resembles what they would eat in the wild, including bones, fur, skin, and organs. The program aims to reduce waste and support the welfare of the captive animals. In the face of intense backlash, the zoo quickly disabled comments on their post.<sup>2</sup> The zoo emphasized that donated animals are humanely euthanized by trained staff and not released into predator enclosures. Still, many people, particularly pet owners, find the idea disturbing: even if a forfeit animal would be put down either way, offering its body as food for another animal feels unsettling.

Defenders of the policy argue that disposing of a pet via cremation or burial only serves human emotional needs, whereas using the body to nourish another creature generates a positive outcome. After all, in theory the animals donated to the zoo in this program are unwanted and would otherwise be returned to an overtaxed shelter system that may opt to put them down anyway. Isn't it better that they serve a greater purpose? By feeding a pet to a hungry zoo animal, waste is minimized and predator health is supported.

Still, as pet owners, it seems that we may have some responsibility to protect, or at least respect, the animals that belong to us. Turning beloved companions into food might diminish the respect we owe them and reduce pets to simple commodities. Biologist Clifford Warwick, remarked, such a practice "devalues the lives of pets" and raises the question: should something deemed too precious to eat in life become acceptable to eat in death? Respect for the dead is valuable. As family members, shouldn't we afford our pets the same honors in death that we would want for the humans in our lives?

Notably, the zoo clarified that they were *not* asking people to donate certain species, like dogs or cats. By excluding these animals, the zoo drew a moral distinction that reflects an unconscious view that many people hold. Some animals, like rabbits or chickens, are acceptable for use as food while others are special and off-limits. Why do we treat some species of animals as beloved companions while others are seen as food? Does our grief over how a pet's body is used indicate a legitimate ethical concern, or is it an irrational bias that obscures more rational considerations?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do we owe dead pets posthumous respect similar to that owed to humans, and does that respect bar using their bodies as food?
2. Is there a morally relevant difference between dogs and cats, and other pets like rabbits? What about between dogs and cats, and farm animals?
3. What do we owe the animals that are kept in zoos? Do our obligations to these animals change if they are captive for the purpose of rehabilitation?

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<sup>1</sup> Gibson, Richard. 2025. "From Pet to Predator's Plate." *The Prindle Institute for Ethics*, August 13, 2025. <https://www.prindleinstitute.org/2025/08/from-pet-to-predators-plate/>

<sup>2</sup>Pendrill, Sophie. 2025. "Denmark Zoo Invites People to Donate Pets as Predator Meals." *ABC7 Amarillo*, August 5, 2025. <https://abc7amarillo.com/news/offbeat/denmark-zoo-invites-public-to-donate-pets-as-predator-meals-pet-guinea-pig-chicken-rabbit-horse-pet-donation-august-5-2025>