



## Cat and dog ownership and management patterns in central Italy

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### Abstract

Three hundred and ninety-seven randomly selected households were interviewed by telephone to determine the numbers and management of owned cats and dogs in the Teramo Province of Italy. The households were selected using stratified random sampling for each municipality; municipalities were combined into coastal, central hills and mountain regions for analysis. The interviews were completed during May and June of 2004 with a response rate of 74% (397/536). Forty-six percent of households ( $n = 181$ ) owned pets; 15% of all households ( $n = 60$ ) owned cats and 33% ( $n = 130$ ) owned dogs. Twenty-seven of these households (7%) owned both cats and dogs. Data were provided on 91 cats evenly divided between males and females. The median age was 3 years (range 0.2–10 years). Forty-one percent of cats (36/87) entered the household as strays. Nearly half lived entirely outside. Seventy percent (62/88) had visited a veterinarian at least once; 43% (39/91) were sterilized. About 1/3 had had a litter and all litters were considered accidental rather than planned. Age, indoor/outdoor status, veterinarian visit and region were all associated with sterilization. Age, confined to a yard, veterinary visit and region were associated with allowing the cat to roam freely. Data were provided on 182 dogs. Sixty-two percent (113/181) were male, with a median age of 4 years (range newborn to 17 years) and 40% (72/181) were purebred. Almost half were acquired as a gift. Sixty-two percent (112/180) were kept entirely outside despite the fact that 82% (147/180) were considered companions rather than working dogs. Almost all of the dogs had been to a veterinarian at least once; only 20% ( $n = 29$ ) were sterilized. Male dogs were significantly less likely to be sterilized than females. Almost half the dogs had had at least one litter. Seventy-six percent (137/180) of dogs knew some basic commands. Sex, source and training to sit/stay/

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come were significantly associated with whether the dog was sterilized. Dog size, confinement to a yard, trained to leash walk, veterinary visit and region were predictors of roaming freely. Source and trained to leash walk were associated with dog registration. For cats and dogs, education about sterilization seemed to be critically important. For dogs, factors relating to training, which may reflect the strength of the human–animal bond, were also important.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2002, the number of pets owned by Italians was estimated to be 60 million ([International Business Strategies, 2003](#)). About one household in four owned at least one dog or cat. The free-roaming cats and dogs population is a result of owned animals allowed to wander, pets that have been lost or abandoned and feral dogs and cats. In order to gain insight into the problems related to free-roaming pets, an understanding of the owned population is required. Information about reproduction, disposition of offspring, management and sources of pets will provide a baseline for designing and implementing interventions to control the numbers of free-roaming dogs and cats.

In 1991, the Italian Parliament approved National Law n. 281 “Companion Animals and the Prevention of Strays” (Legge 14 Agosto 1991, n.281. Legge quadro in materia di affezione e prevenzione del randagismo. Gazzetta Ufficiale 30 Agosto, 1991, n. 203) which addresses animal shelter regulations, provides for government protection and assistance with free-roaming dogs and cats and a national dog registry (certified translation at [www.comune.firenze.it/servizi\\_pubblici/animali/law281.htm](http://www.comune.firenze.it/servizi_pubblici/animali/law281.htm), accessed 30 September 2003). This law made it illegal to euthanize dogs and cats unless they were seriously or incurably ill, changing the face of animal sheltering in Italy. The law also specifically addressed feral cats, forbidding mistreatment and encouraging the Public Health Service Veterinarians to sterilize and return feral cats.

The Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale dell’Abruzzo e del Molise (IZSA&M) is located in the Province of Teramo within the Abruzzo region of Italy. It is a government public health institution engaged in research. It provides cutting-edge technical and scientific services, documentation and continuing education and training. Its mission is to provide high quality, knowledge-based, innovative services in veterinary public health and environment protection, to national and international markets to protect animal and human health. The IZSA&M manages the municipal shelter (on behalf of the City Council of Teramo). Since 2001, IZSA&M has been actively working on the prevention of dog and cat abandonment and providing care for injured and sick unowned animals. The Institute is also engaged in dog training and animal assisted activities/therapy. This telephone survey was undertaken to better accomplish the mission of the Institute. This study was conducted in the Province of Teramo within the Abruzzo region of Italy.

Two major objectives of the telephone questionnaire were (1) to learn more about the extent, types and potential solutions for problems associated with free-roaming dogs and cats in the Province ([Slater et al., 2008](#)) and (2) to document the owned pet population size and type including reproduction and dog registration. The second objective was the focus of this paper.

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