

Dogs love us more than cats do

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Research shows dogs get a rush of "happy hormone" when interacting with humans.

Most Kiwi pet owners happily admit to loving their companion animals - but do they love us back?

Now research has suggested that the adage "dogs have owners, cats have staff" may be closer to the truth than we might want to admit.

A study conducted for the BBC TV show Dogs Vs Cats last year suggests that, while dogs get a rush of the "happy hormone" oxytocin when interacting with their owners, cats get a much less intense buzz - which might explain why they seem to be ignoring us most of the time.

Researchers on the show tested the oxytocin levels in the saliva of 10 dogs and 10 cats at the start of the experiment, then re-tested it after 10 minutes of playing with their owner.

Levels of the bonding hormone - released in humans when hugging and touching and when mothers breastfeed - rose by 57.2 per cent in the dogs, compared to 12 per cent in the cats.

In one particularly devoted dog, the oxytocin rise peaked at 500 per cent. The percentage rise in the dogs was similar to or higher than the one humans experience when with their partners and children, when levels can rise by 40 to 60 per cent.

American neuroscientist Dr Paul Zak, who appeared on the show to discuss the results, said: "It was a nice surprise to discover that cats produce any [oxytocin] at all."

So, in terms of love for your dollar, Kiwis might like to re-think at least some of the estimated \$747 million on their cats; the \$797 million spent on dogs might be slightly better spent.

A survey by the New Zealand Companion Animal Council found the average New Zealand cat-owning household spends an estimated \$1005 on its cats per year, or about \$670 per animal (when households with multiple cats are taken into account).

Food made up half the total spend, with spending on cat insurance, clipping and grooming, registration and membership and training increased significantly between 2011 and 2015.

The average spend per dog is estimated to be \$1200, up from \$1047 in 2011. Perhaps reflecting their loyalty, dogs are more likely to be insured than cats, with nearly one in five dog owners (19 per cent) paying for pet insurance.

The report also showed expenditure on canine clothing, leads and bowls increased by estimated 154 per cent from 2011 to 2015, "reflecting the importance placed on companion animals and increased discretionary spending on them."

Research by petfood brand Jimbo's indicates a close human-animal bond is the reason for this lavishing of resources on our furry companions.

Their survey showed 61.4 per cent of dog owners and 65 per cent of cat owners wanted their pet to feel like part of the family, 43.4 and 46.5 per cent respectively wanted a settled, companionable relationship, and 31.3 and 35.4 per cent respectively wanted "a special, unique relationship" with their animal.

More dog owners than cat owners wanted to have a "playful" relationship with their pet.

"We have also seen there is more 'treating' and 'spoiling' of dogs, which indicates a more intimate and intense relationship. That might come down to the fact that dogs can appear more 'loving' than cats," says Jimbo's general manager Dave Allan.

"What our research shows us is that owners want their pets to feel like part of the family. These are not just animals living in their houses - they are great companions and often 'fur kids'.

"That bond is really, really important."