

Article

Factors Influencing New Zealanders' Attitudes Towards the Euthanasia of Pets and Feral Animals

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Abstract

Objective: To investigate public attitudes in New Zealand towards the euthanasia of dogs and cats and to explore the factors that influence these views. **Materials and Methods:** Data were collected through a nationwide online survey conducted in 2019 as part of the Furry Whānau Wellbeing research project. The survey included questions about pet euthanasia, and respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with various statements. **Results:** Of 2293 respondents to the 2019 New Zealand Pet Survey, the majority ($n = 1756$) opposed euthanasia for stray, unwanted, or financially burdensome pets (76.7%; 90.2% and 66.3% of these disagreed or strongly disagreed, respectively). In contrast, a slim majority ($n = 1162$) supported it for sick animals. Females were less likely to agree with euthanasia in most scenarios compared to males. Māori and New Zealand European respondents ($n = 1790$) showed higher levels of neutrality than other ethnicities regarding stray animals and lower levels of disagreement regarding financially constrained situations. Older respondents (65+) were more likely to support euthanasia for sick animals, while younger respondents (18–24) were less inclined. Higher education levels are correlated with increased neutrality towards euthanising stray animals and increased support for euthanising feral animals. Respondents with children were more likely to be neutral or to disagree with euthanasia in most scenarios. Those with rural upbringings were more accepting of euthanasia for stray and feral animals. A thematic analysis of 653 respondent comments revealed key themes: euthanasia was seen as complex and context-dependent, a humane last resort for suffering animals, but not for convenience. Respondents emphasised responsible pet ownership and a right to life, even for feral animals, advocating for alternatives such as trap–neuter–release. **Conclusion:** New Zealanders largely view euthanasia as an ethically acceptable option for terminally ill or suffering animals but reject it when driven by convenience or financial hardship. Attitudes vary across demographic groups, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive education and policy. The findings align with Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and support broader discussions on responsible pet ownership, ethical decision making, and animal welfare legislation.



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1. Introduction

Euthanasia in veterinary medicine is used to humanely end an animal's life when its quality of life is severely compromised due to various reasons, such as pain or chronic diseases [1,2]. While the procedure can alleviate suffering, it presents complex ethical, legal, and emotional challenges for both veterinarians and pet owners. Ideally, euthanasia should be considered a last resort [2–4].

The ethical framework guiding companion animal euthanasia is built on principles such as beneficence, non-maleficence, and respect for autonomy [5,6]. These decisions should prioritise the animal's wellbeing while considering the owner's wishes. Veterinarians are tasked with balancing their professional duties with the emotional and practical needs of the owners [7]. They must also assess whether euthanasia requests are ethically justified and can refuse requests deemed inappropriate [4]. Established guidelines help ensure that animals do not suffer unnecessarily or are euthanised prematurely [5].

A variety of personal, cultural, and societal beliefs shape public attitudes toward animal euthanasia. Research suggests that people are generally more accepting of euthanasia for animals suffering from untreatable pain, though opinions can differ depending on the context [8]. Veterinarians often hold more nuanced views, particularly showing discomfort with “convenience euthanasia”, where healthy but aggressive animals are euthanised [9]. Public attitudes also vary between euthanasia for companion animals and population management purposes, such as in zoos and aquariums [10].

Veterinarians play a vital role in advancing animal welfare, sustainability, and ethical practices across various sectors [11]. Despite their role, there remains a gap in research on the environmental impact of euthanasia, such as pharmaceutical waste, disposal methods, and the ecological consequences of euthanising feral animals versus trap–neuter–return (TNR) approaches in veterinary practices, particularly in companion animal care [12]. Additionally, while veterinary students receive training in euthanasia procedures and neutering, there is insufficient focus on emotional resilience and managing compassion fatigue associated with euthanasia [13,14]. Frequent involvement in euthanasia is linked to a lower ethical burden but increases the risk of mental health challenges, including compassion fatigue and suicidal thoughts [9,15]. Ethical burden refers to the emotional and moral strain experienced by veterinarians when making life-ending decisions, particularly in morally ambiguous cases. These concerns highlight the need for better support systems and training for veterinarians facing emotionally challenging situations.

Integrating animal welfare into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is gaining attention. While the SDGs are currently mainly anthropocentric [16], there is growing recognition of the need to incorporate animal welfare [17,18]. Strategies to reduce animal euthanasia in shelters can contribute to SDG 3 on health and wellbeing [19]. Human, animal, and environmental health interconnectedness necessitates a more integrative SDG approach [20]. Some researchers propose an 18th SDG specifically addressing animal health, welfare, and rights [11]. Collaborations between animal welfare organisations and those working on various SDGs could be beneficial [18].

In New Zealand (NZ), public attitudes toward euthanasia—both for humans and animals—are multifaceted. While most New Zealanders support euthanasia for humans with incurable diseases [21,22], opinions on animal euthanasia vary. Therefore, as part of the Furry Whānau Wellbeing research project funded by the NZ Companion Animal Trust (NZCAT), this study explores public attitudes toward the euthanasia of dogs and cats in NZ. By examining the factors shaping these attitudes, the ethical considerations involved, and how veterinarians navigate these decisions, this research aims to provide insights that can inform veterinarians, animal welfare organisations, and policymakers. Ultimately, the

goal is to contribute to a more compassionate and informed approach to euthanasia that balances ethical concerns with practical realities.

2. Materials and Methods

The NZCAT Furry Whānau Wellbeing research was carried out with approval from the Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) Research and Ethics Approval Committee (REAC ref 19/53, approved on 28 July 2017). A key part of this research was a nationwide online survey, the 2019 New Zealand Pet Survey, conducted to explore national attitudes towards companion animal welfare needs. This survey included a specific set of questions (Question 37) focusing on attitudes toward euthanasia for dogs and cats [23]. The questions addressed putting down animals that were strays, unwanted, sick, or feral, as well as situations where an owner could not afford treatment. These specific euthanasia-related questions are the primary focus here.

2.1. Participants and Data Collection

An online survey was created using SurveyMonkey© and made available to the public in NZ. It was developed by the EIT researchers Associate Professor Rachel Forrest and Maria Pearson, in collaboration with Professor Natalie Waran, EIT central veterinary staff, Patu™ staff, Jeal Reiri (Kaitiaki Māori and Lecturer, School of Nursing), and Associate Professor Mark Farnworth. The survey link was shared via email networks and promoted through social media platforms—particularly Facebook—and on Patu™ websites. A snowball sampling method was used to increase participation and recruit respondents [24]. The survey remained open from 8 January 2019 to 31 March 2019.

The survey asked the following specific questions regarding euthanasia.

Question 37. Euthanasia section. Please select the option (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) that most closely describes your feelings about the following statements. Dogs and cats should be put down if: they are strays (they are homeless pets); they are no longer wanted by their owner; they are sick, the owner cannot afford treatment; they are feral (they have become wild). Please provide further explanation if required.

2.2. Statistical Analysis

Respondents were not required to answer all the questions and could skip any part of the survey, including specific statements in Question 37. For the demographic questions, where a respondent chose “Other please specify”, if possible, the information was recoded into the appropriate category—for example, those who did not select European but identified as British were recoded as European. Various categories were collapsed as necessary for statistical analyses to maintain adequate sample sizes.

A forward stepwise binary regression was used to explore whether gender (female, male); ethnicity (Māori, NZ European, other); age (18–24 years, 25–34 years, 35–44 years, 45–54 years, 55–64 years, 65–74 years, 75–84 years); income range (<NZD 14,000, NZD 14,001–48,000, NZD 48,001–70,000, NZD 70,001–100,000, >NZD 100,000, would rather not say); qualification level (1–10; refers to the NZ Qualifications Authority framework, with Level 1 representing foundational certificate-level education and Level 10 indicating advanced, specialised knowledge such as a doctoral degree); being brought up rurally (yes, no); currently living in a town (yes, no); and the number of children and the number of adults present in the household impacted whether or not a dog was transported safely (restrained, crated or in an animal carrier). Respondents were not required to answer all the questions, including those about demographic factors, and they were allowed to skip

questions as desired. All statistical analyses were conducted using the IBM SPSS Statistics (version 25) software.

In response to Question 37’s “Please provide further explanation if required”, some respondents expressed euthanasia concerns. These narrative responses were analysed thematically using an inductive approach.

3. Results

Attitudes Towards Euthanasia

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements regarding the euthanasia of dogs and cats. For each statement, there were between 2274 and 2293 responses. Table 1 shows that most respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the euthanasia of strays, unwanted pets, or pets of owners who could not afford treatment, with a slim majority of older respondents (65+) strongly agreeing with sick animals being put down. The highest percentage of neutral responses were for ‘if they are sick’, ‘if they are feral’, and ‘if the owner cannot afford treatment’.

Table 1. Percentage of 2019 New Zealand Pet Survey respondents selecting each level of agreement for the “Dogs and cats should be put down if . . .” statements regarding euthanasia.

Dogs and Cats Should Be Put Down If:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Total Agreeing	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Disagreeing
they are strays (they are homeless pets)	1.4%	4.9%	6.3%	17.0%	36.3%	40.5%	76.7%
they are no longer wanted by their owner	0.7%	1.6%	2.3%	7.5%	27.9%	62.4%	90.2%
they are sick	13.2%	37.5%	50.7%	32.6%	10.6%	6.1%	16.7%
the owner cannot afford treatment	2.1%	8.3%	10.4%	23.3%	32.2%	34.1%	66.3%
they are feral (they have become wild)	14.3%	21.3%	35.6%	29.0%	20.6%	14.9%	35.5%

For each statement about euthanasia, cross-tabulations along with chi-square and z-tests ($\alpha = 0.05$) were used to explore whether the respondents’ choices were associated with gender, ethnicity, age range, household income, qualification level, whether or not they had a child or children, whether or not they had a rural upbringing, or whether they were currently living in a town/city, as reported in Table 2. The results suggest that gender, ethnicity, age range, qualification level, having a child or children, having a rural upbringing, and currently living in a town or city influenced certain choice selections. No association with household income was observed.

A total of 653 respondents (29% of those who answered Question 37) provided a further explanation in the comments section. A basic thematic analysis of these comments is presented in Table 3. In general, euthanasia was viewed as a complex issue and as a human option that can protect the animals themselves (as well as humans and other wildlife) from distress and low quality of life. It was apparent that the respondents believed the choice to euthanise should be a considered decision made with veterinary or professional input and not just for convenience, and that animals have a right to live. It was highlighted that better regulations and resources would reduce the need for euthanasia.

Table 2. Factors associated with the choice selections made by the 2019 Pet Survey respondents regarding the euthanasia of dogs and cats.

Dogs and Cats Should Be Put Down If:	Gender (Female Versus Male)	Ethnicity (Māori Compared with Other Ethnicities)	Age Range	Qualification Level	Children (with Versus Without)	Rural Upbringing	Town/City Dwelling
they are strays (they are homeless pets)	Lower % strongly agree and agree; higher % strongly disagree	Māori and NZ European: Higher % neutral compared to other; lower % strongly disagree	65–74 y: higher % strongly agree compared to <45 y; 55–65 y: Higher % agree compared to 18–24 y	Level 10: higher % neutral compared to level 3	Higher % neutral and strongly disagree	Higher % agree and neutral; lower % strongly disagree	Lower % agree
they are no longer wanted by their owner	Lower % agree and neutral; higher % strongly disagree	Māori and NZ European: Higher % neutral and disagree compared to other; lower % strongly disagree	65–74 and 75–84 y: Higher % neutral compared to 18–24 y		Higher % disagree and strongly disagree	Higher % disagree; lower % strongly disagree	
they are sick		Māori and NZ European: Higher % agree compared to other	65–74 and 75–84 y: Higher % strongly agree compared to 18–24 y		Higher % agree		Lower % strongly agree; higher % neutral
the owner cannot afford treatment	Lower % strongly agree and agree; higher % strongly disagree	Māori and NZ European: lower % strongly disagree compared to other	65–74 y: Higher % strongly agree compared to 18–24, 45–54, 55–64 y; 75–84 y: higher % agree compared to 45–54 y			Higher % strongly agree; lower % strongly disagree	
they are feral (they have become wild)	Lower % strongly agree; lower % disagree	NZ European: Higher % strongly agree compared to other; Māori: higher % neutral compared to other. Māori and NZ European: lower % strongly disagree compared to other	18–24 y: Lower % strongly agree compared to 35–75 y	Level 10: higher % strongly agree compared to levels 7, 3, and 2	Higher % strongly agree; lower % strongly disagree		Lower % strongly agree

Table 3. Thematic analysis of comments provided about euthanasia by 2019 New Zealand Pet Survey respondents.

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Quotes
Complex/Not black and white	Difficult to answer questions	<p>“As a vet nurse, every case is circumstantial, so it’s hard to give a definitive answer”</p> <p>“Euthanasia isn’t black and white, so many factors come into it—for example, if your pet is sick but can recover there shouldn’t be a need to euthanise, but if it’s sick and not getting better, cancer for example, then having them put to sleep before they lose quality of life I feel is the best thing to do. The above questions are too hard for me to accurately answer”</p>
	Depends on context	<p>“It is extremely situational, depending on the animal and/or the owner”</p> <p>“The 2 neutral responses is because it depends to what extent they are sick or feral”</p> <p>“I don’t think it’s quite as black and white as the above. There are a lot of different circumstances, e.g., with feral cats or how sick they are”</p> <p>“There are so many variables in the answers. Some animals are too wild to be tamed, they can be a problem, yes they can be put down. There are sad cases where people just cannot afford treatment. Who pays? What is the right answer to that I dont know”</p>
Humane last option	If terminally ill	<p>“If they are suffering (e.g., severely injured with little chance of a satisfactory recovery, or terminally ill), euthanasia is often the kindest choice. Sometimes people spend a lot of money in attempts to prolong the life of a terminally ill pet, and sometimes a person chooses euthanasia instead of expensive treatment that they cannot afford, or treatment that causes additional suffering and distress to the animal. I believe people should be guided by a vet to make an informed and humane decision”</p>
	To prevent suffering	<p>“If the animal is suffering with no chance of rehabilitation, then euthanasia is the most humane option. This is the only time I think it is acceptable. If they are sick, but can get better, or can be humanely managed without causing suffering, then they should not be euthanised”</p> <p>“Animals should be put out of their misery”</p>
	If dangerous/harmful	<p>“If they are terminally sick or [have] serious negative behaviour that cannot be undone, yes to euthanasia, but not for other reasons”</p> <p>“Feral/wild cats and dogs can be aggressive and can cause serious harm to surrounding birdlife, children and visitors. I think these animals should be put down as they require a lot of training, etc. to become a ‘loving’ pet”</p>
	If low quality of life	<p>“Only be euthanised if the quality of life has degraded enough that they are in pain and unable to live a happy, healthy life”</p> <p>“Only if they have a low quality of life that cannot be remedied by other means”</p> <p>“No animal should be put to sleep unless they have little to no quality of life from injury/illness or old age. Even feral cats can be, on occasion, tamed or rehomed as barn cats on farms/lifestyle blocks. I personally have tamed numerous previously unsocial cats. Dogs can always be retrained by a professional and do not need to be put down”</p>
	For feral animals	<p>“I only believe in euthanasia if every option has been exhausted for a stray that has turned feral. It’s the absolute last option”</p> <p>“I believe that feral animals can change with intensive care and time, only if this fails should euthanasia be considered”</p> <p>“Feral—it’s all about if they can be domesticated. If they remain feral we can’t let them back into the wild, not fair for them or our wildlife”</p> <p>“If a pet can be retrained and adopted to someone (strays) then they should be given the chance to do so. Unfortunately, this is rarely possible with ferals and putting them down is the best way to ensure New Zealand wildlife remains unaffected”</p>

Table 3. Cont.

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Quotes
Protects welfare	Humane option	<p>“If an animal is ill and in pain with a condition that is untreatable or likely to cause significant loss of quality of life, then I believe the most humane option is to euthanise it. Similarly, some feral cats live in conditions that cause them to be parasite ridden and to carry diseases that are dangerous to other animals. Often, feral cats have a poor quality of life, and for this reason, it may be more humane to euthanise them”</p> <p>“Euthanasia is always a humane option. Not always an ethical option, but it does adequately protect welfare”</p> <p>“In the case of an extremely sick animal, where it would be more humane to euthanise them, then I think that’s the best thing to do”</p>
	Better/kinder option	<p>“Euthanasia should be an option whenever quality of life is reduced, so [it] can be applicable to all above scenarios, but is not always the best option. Suffering, however, is far worse than euthanasia”</p> <p>“Animals better euthanised than having untreated illness or injury”</p> <p>“I am involved with a dog rescue, and feel that euthanasia is the kindest option if a dog is sick and the owner can’t afford treatment, if the owner cannot find a good home for their dog and they no longer want or can have the dog”</p> <p>“Euthanasia in my mind is better than neglect or abuse of the animal if someone is financially strapped. I prefer a no-kill mentality, but it’s not a perfect world, and sometimes euthanasia is best”</p>
	When resources are limited	<p>“Re if they are feral, I believe if they become ill, injured, not spayed/neutered by [the] community, then they should be euthanised” “Also, it’s no kindness to let an animal suffer if the owner has limited financial resources, so again, euthanasia may be a kinder option than allowing the animal to be in pain”</p>
	When alternatives result in a low quality of life	<p>“Wouldn’t be fair to force a feral animal to exist in distressing captivity, unfortunately can’t release them either”</p> <p>“It’s not a simple situation—in my view, morally no animal should be put down if they are lost, unwanted, feral or the owner can’t afford to treat, but if the other options provide poor quality of life, euthanasia must be an option. It’s not an either or situation”</p>
Only on vet recommendation/advice		<p>“Vets should be able to make an informed decision if a dog/cat is suffering and has a sickness, etc. that cannot be cured, or if an animal is beyond taming and is a danger”</p> <p>“Euthanasia should be utilised in accordance to recommendations from a vet”</p> <p>“Unless a dog or cat are too sick to have a good quality of life, or they have a life-ending illness that a vet feels the best option would be to end their suffering, there is no excuse for putting them to sleep”</p>
Should not be for convenience		<p>“I don’t agree with people putting animals down just for convenience”</p> <p>“It is unacceptable to put an ill animal down merely because the illness is an inconvenience for the owner”</p> <p>“Euthanasia, when owners don’t want the animal anymore, should be banned”</p>
Use only as a last resort	After professional input	<p>“Euthanasia is a valid option when other options are exhausted. Ideally, the other options are explored in consultation with the relevant professionals”</p>
	For sick animals	<p>“I think all animals should be given the chance to prove themselves. If their sickness is not treatable or is going to cause them to suffer then, yes, euthanise. Euthanasia is a last resort”</p>

Table 3. Cont.

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Quotes
Use only as a last resort	For healthy, friendly animals	<p>“If an animal can be homed, it should not be euthanised, euthanasia should only be a last resort option for a healthy, friendly animal”</p> <p>“I can reluctantly accept that some stray or unwanted dogs or cats can’t be rehomed, but I’d like to see such euthanasia to be a last resort, and done humanely”</p> <p>“Last resort—having worked at SPCA the last 7 years, I have seen so many success stories, an effort has to be made to save if possible”</p>
	For wild cats: Trap, neuter, vaccinate, return or rehome	<p>“A wild cat can still be tamed given patience and if it still won’t ever be friendly enough for a home, it can be desexed and released to a farm to catch mice and rats. Euthanasia should be the last resort”</p> <p>“Wild cats can be desexed and released. Death should be [a] last option for any creature, not the first”</p> <p>“Feral cat colonies shouldn’t be desexed and released, they should be homed or put down. They devastate our native wildlife”</p>
	Limited resources	<p>“Regarding the euthanasia of strays, I think it’s a terrible thing to happen; however, I do understand the limitations of pounds/SPCA’s and that sometimes there is no other option”</p> <p>“There are organisations, i.e., SPCA or cat protections organisations that will take these cats; however, if the owner can’t get their cats into these, yes they should be put down”</p> <p>“If a pet is sick and owners cannot afford treatment, surrendering to a rescue should be talked about first, but euthanasia may be appropriate if there are no rescue organisations willing to pay for treatment and rehome”</p>
Right to live	Deserved by every animal	<p>“If TNR is available and the community or an individual ensures they are fed, they have every right to live”</p> <p>“Every animal deserves a chance to live, be neutered and if feral, trap, neuter, release”</p> <p>“ALL cats deserve to live and homes CAN be found for them.”</p>
	Owner responsibility	<p>“. . . if an owner doesn’t want them anymore. . . then the owner should at least have the decency to rehome them to a loving home. . . if the animal is sick and its quality of life is greatly compromised then yes the option to put them down should at least be discussed. . . if the owner can’t afford treatment, we have the option of surrendering it to the SPCA. . . my cat (now 10) was a wild cat. . . now she’s the most loving, loyal animal you’ll ever meet. . . there’s always hope of finding a loving cat with a feral one until proven otherwise”</p>
	Euthanasia unfair	<p>“I think to put an animal down because it is feral isn’t fair. We have a cat whom came to us as a wild kitten, she is lovely and friendly”</p>
Feral animals	All should be put down	<p>“Feral cats should definitely be euthanised, feral dogs should too”</p> <p>“Feral cats should absolutely be put down”</p> <p>“I do think there are too many feral cats and strays. I am not one to keep animals alive at all costs”</p> <p>“Feral animals live a horrifying existence of disease and danger. They don’t have the basic sociability to be rehomed without intensive work and death is preferable to them living in miserable conditions at risk of illness and injury while starving”</p>

Table 3. Cont.

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Quotes
Feral animals	For wild cats: Trap, neuter, vaccinate, return or rehomed	<p>“Feral cats? The research I have read on feral cats seems to support an argument for their remaining as rodent control”</p> <p>“Euthanasia is a difficult situation. In terms of stray/feral populations, catch and kill methods simply create another niche for more ferals to move into. It’s much more effective to catch, fix and release so the wild populations can’t breed and create more kittens”</p> <p>“I think feral cats should go through a TNR program, except in some areas where releasing them would be damaging to endangered wildlife. But they should definitely be neutered so the feral population diminishes”</p> <p>“If able to be domesticated, then they should be trapped, socialised, neutered and found a loving home”</p>
	Regional/District responsibility	<p>“There needs to be a system in place for catching and disposing of stray/feral cats! In the past couple of weeks, I have caught and had to pay to have feral cats put down by my vet. No one, not the District Council or Environment Southland, takes responsibility for this, and it is a burden on my finances. It may mean I use a ‘kill’ trap instead and this puts my neighbours’ pets at risk...”</p>
Preventable by better regulations/resourcing	SPCA/Animal welfare organisations	<p>Strays can be managed and, in many cases, can be tamed and homed. If owners no longer want their pets, they should be legally obliged to surrender them to the SPCA or an animal refuge. The SPCA and animal refuges should be supported with central government funding”</p> <p>“There are hundreds of welfare organisations that rehome and rehabilitate homeless/unwanted pets. If the pet is adoptable (in health and temperament) there is no reason to kill them”</p>
	Multifaceted approach needed	<p>“A pet is for life and deserves to be loved and well looked after. Cheap professional desexing, landlords allowing pets in rentals, harsher penalties for cruelty, more education from a young age and help from government to fund those many rescue charities would help a lot of the abandonment that is unfortunately increasing so much”</p>

The key findings for each theme identified through the analysis are as follows:

1. Complex/Not black and white: Many respondents acknowledged the complexity of euthanasia decisions, emphasising that it is not a simple “yes or no” question. They recognised the influence of various factors, such as the animal’s condition, the owner’s circumstances, and the availability of resources, in determining the most appropriate course of action. This highlights the need for careful consideration and individualised decision making when facing euthanasia.
2. Humane last option: Many respondents viewed euthanasia as a humane and compassionate choice in certain circumstances. They supported its use when animals are terminally ill; suffering, with no hope of recovery; or posing a danger to themselves or others. This reflects a concern for animal welfare and a desire to prevent unnecessary suffering. Euthanasia is viewed as a way to provide a peaceful end to an animal’s life when other options are not viable or would result in a poor quality of life.
3. Protects welfare: Respondents also recognised the role of euthanasia in protecting animal welfare. They viewed it as a humane option when resources are limited, preventing animals from enduring neglect, abuse, or a life of suffering due to financial constraints or a lack of suitable alternatives. This emphasises humans’ responsibility to ensure animals’ wellbeing, even when it involves making difficult choices.
4. Should not be for convenience: A clear consensus emerged against using euthanasia for convenience. Respondents expressed strong disapproval of euthanising healthy or treatable animals simply because they are unwanted or inconvenient for the owner.

This highlights the ethical responsibility of pet ownership and the importance of considering alternatives to euthanasia, such as rehoming or seeking assistance from animal welfare organisations.

5. Use only as a last resort: Many respondents advocated for euthanasia to be used only as a last resort, after exploring all other options and seeking professional input. This perspective emphasises the value of exhausting all possibilities for treatment, rehabilitation, or rehoming before resorting to euthanasia. It also shows the importance of involving veterinarians and other experts in the decision-making process to ensure that euthanasia is considered only when it is truly the most humane and appropriate course of action.
6. Right to live: Some respondents strongly believed in the inherent right of animals to live, including feral animals. They advocated alternative approaches, such as trap–neuter–release programs, to manage feral populations and reduce their impact on wildlife. This reflects a deep respect for animal life and a commitment to finding non-lethal solutions whenever possible.

4. Discussion

4.1. Public Attitudes Toward Euthanasia

The 2019 NZCAT Furry Whānau Wellbeing Survey suggests complex attitudes toward the euthanasia of dogs and cats, shaped by concerns for animal welfare, ethical considerations, and societal responsibilities. The survey indicates that NZ pet owners highly value animal welfare, supporting euthanasia as a humane option for animals that are terminally ill, suffering, or part of unmanageable feral populations. However, there is widespread opposition to euthanasia for reasons of convenience or financial burden. Specifically, about half of the responders (50.7%) agreed that euthanasia is acceptable for pets that are terminally ill or suffering, reflecting a broader belief in euthanasia as a compassionate way to alleviate suffering [1]. This aligns with veterinary ethical principles and broader public concern for animal welfare [25].

Conversely, 76.7% of respondents disagreed with euthanising strays, and 90.2% opposed euthanasia for pets simply because their owners no longer wanted them. This strong ethical stance suggests that alternatives such as rehoming or seeking help from animal welfare organisations should be pursued before considering euthanasia [4]. These findings align with international attitudes, where convenience euthanasia is discouraged in favour of humane alternatives like TNR programs for stray animals. For example, Brisbane, Australia, has adopted such programs. At the same time, Victoria still faces challenges with high stray cat euthanasia rates despite successfully reducing euthanasia rates for dogs through increased reclaim and adoption rates [26].

4.2. Complexity of Euthanasia Decisions

A recurring theme in the survey was the recognition that euthanasia decisions are context-dependent. Factors such as the animal's health, the owner's resources, and the availability of non-lethal alternatives shape public attitudes. This nuanced perspective aligns with ethical debates in veterinary medicine, where individualised decision making is emphasised [25].

Mixed opinions emerged regarding feral animal euthanasia. While some respondents supported euthanasia to control populations and mitigate wildlife impact, others preferred non-lethal solutions such as TNR programs. Although TNR is supported by some as humane and effective [27,28], studies suggest it may be less effective than euthanasia in reducing cat populations, particularly when immigration occurs [27,29]. Fur-

thermore, TNR programs may also pose risks to wildlife through predation and disease transmission [30,31].

4.3. Euthanasia as a Humane Last Option

Survey participants largely viewed euthanasia as a last resort, applicable only when other options, such as medical treatment or rehoming, had been exhausted. This sentiment was echoed by respondents who supported euthanasia primarily for cases of terminal illness or unmanageable suffering, favouring the alleviation of pain over prolonging life [32]. Notably, 35.6% of respondents supported euthanasia as a management tool for feral animals, while an almost equal number were neutral (35.5%), indicating uncertainty about how to best balance animal welfare with environmental concerns such as ecosystem disruption, wildlife predation, and disease transmission linked to unmanaged feral populations.

4.4. Perspectives from Veterinarians and Stakeholders

Research on attitudes toward animal euthanasia reveals complex perspectives among veterinarians and the public. Veterinarians generally support passive euthanasia but are less accepting of active and non-voluntary euthanasia [33]. Active euthanasia refers to the deliberate administration of a lethal agent, while non-voluntary euthanasia involves decision making on behalf of an animal unable to express consent. Educational interventions can enhance veterinarians' knowledge and attitudes toward animal welfare and euthanasia [34]. Interestingly, attitudes toward animal euthanasia do not correlate with acceptance of human euthanasia or suicide [35]. This discrepancy may originate from differing moral frameworks—animal euthanasia often centres on welfare and preventing suffering, while human euthanasia is influenced by legal, ethical, and religious considerations. Our findings suggest that respondents' views on animal euthanasia were shaped more by compassion and practicality than by broader beliefs about end-of-life rights. Factors influencing preferences include demographics, wildlife value orientations, and experiences with feral cats [36]. Cat colony caretakers and bird conservation professionals often hold polarised views on management strategies [37]. Public education about the impacts of feral cats and the implications of their management is recommended to address misconceptions [38]. Ethical considerations in wildlife management suggest adopting a knowledge-based approach within an adaptive management framework [39]. The emotional impact of euthanasia on wildlife researchers is also noted, highlighting the need for organisational support and training [40]. Overall, balancing animal welfare with environmental concerns remains a challenge, necessitating further research and education [41].

4.5. Ethical Dilemmas of Convenience Euthanasia

The issue of convenience euthanasia presents an ethical dilemma for veterinarians worldwide. Although studies show that veterinarians generally have a negative attitude toward convenience euthanasia, this may shift over time, with increasing tolerance in later years of practice [35]. Decisions regarding convenience euthanasia are often based on the veterinarian's subjective evaluation of the owner–animal bond, with considerations primarily focused on the interests of the veterinarian and owner rather than the animal [42].

Although NZ is often praised for its animal welfare legislation, systemic issues remain—particularly in production animal systems, where legal but welfare-adverse practices remain [43]. In contrast to euthanasia used as a humane option for suffering companion animals, these farming practices raise questions about the consistency of welfare principles across sectors. While some argue that euthanasia is a valid treatment choice and the right of the owner [44], others emphasise the need for ethical decision-making tools to avoid convenient euthanasia [45].

4.6. *The Right to Live and Alternatives to Euthanasia*

A notable number of respondents expressed strong opinions regarding the inherent right of animals to live, especially among those opposing euthanasia for feral animals. They advocated for alternatives, such as rehoming or TNR programs, which have shown effectiveness in controlling feral animal populations while avoiding the ethical concerns associated with euthanasia [28]. The debate on animal euthanasia and the right to live encompasses ethical, legal, and philosophical dimensions. While some argue that animals have a right to life based on their autonomy and consciousness [46], others contend that painless killing may be morally acceptable [47]. The decision to euthanise companion animals is complex, involving the animal's welfare, the owner's wishes, and the veterinarian's ethical considerations [7].

Legally, perspectives vary, with some countries legalising human euthanasia while opposing animal euthanasia [48]. The historical context reveals humans' enduring claim to a "right of death" over animals [49]. Recent shifts in societal attitudes have led to decreased animal euthanasia rates and increased recognition of animal welfare [50]. The debate extends to human euthanasia, with legal and ethical considerations surrounding the right to die [51]. Overall, the issue remains contentious, balancing animal welfare, human interests, and ethical principles.

In NZ, the debate on animal euthanasia reflects both human and animal perspectives. While human euthanasia is contentious, with arguments based on autonomy and quality of life [52,53], animal euthanasia raises complex ethical questions about the value of animal life [54]. Some advocate for recognising animals as subjects with perspectives on death [55], while others question the existence of an animal's right to life [47]. New Zealand's Animal Welfare Act 1999, which introduced the concept of "duty of care", is internationally recognised for its progress [43,56]. However, systemic welfare issues, particularly in farming, remain [43]. Continued policy reform and increased resources are necessary to further improve animal welfare in NZ [43,57].

4.7. *Demographic and Cultural Influences*

Demographic variables—including gender, age, ethnicity, education, and upbringing—were significantly associated with attitudes toward euthanasia. For instance, older adults were more likely to support euthanasia for sick animals, while younger respondents were more likely to oppose it. Women consistently expressed stronger opposition to euthanasia across all categories.

Respondents with rural backgrounds showed greater acceptance of euthanasia, particularly in the context of feral or stray animals. These findings suggest that lived experiences, cultural norms, and exposure to animal management practices shape ethical perspectives. Differences between Māori and NZ European respondents, particularly in their levels of neutrality or disagreement, may reflect diverse worldviews about human–animal relationships [58].

These patterns underline the importance of culturally responsive public education and veterinary communication. Strategies to promote responsible pet ownership and humane decision making must be adapted to reflect the values and concerns of different communities [59].

4.8. *Broader Contexts: Sustainable Development Goals and the COVID-19 Pandemic*

The intersection of companion animal euthanasia with global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adds further complexity. Although animal welfare is not explicitly included in the SDGs, progress in animal welfare is compatible with several goals, such as health and wellbeing, reduced inequalities, and responsible consumption [55].

Critics argue that the current anthropocentric framing of the SDGs neglects non-human interests, prompting calls to reinterpret them through an animal welfare lens [16].

Euthanasia of companion animals is an issue with emotional, social, and ethical implications [60]. The practice of euthanasia in veterinary medicine differs from human euthanasia and raises questions about interspecies relationships and communication [54]. To address global animal protection, including euthanasia practices, proposals such as the United Nations Convention on Animal Health and Protection (UNCAHP) have been suggested [61]. Research on companion animal population dynamics and control practices, including euthanasia, is extensive and growing [62].

The COVID-19 pandemic further impacted euthanasia decisions. Economic hardship increased pre-surgical euthanasia for treatable conditions like gastric dilatation volvulus [63]. Low- and no-contact euthanasia protocols created ethical challenges for veterinary teams [64]. Despite grief, most owners felt confident in their decisions [65]. Caregiver burden and income were predictors of euthanasia consideration [66]. Community-based sheltering practices gained prominence, aiming to keep pets with their families [67]. Pet owners' concern for their animals even influenced their own health decisions [68], and companion animals helped people cope with stress during lockdowns [69].

4.9. Study Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into public attitudes toward companion animal euthanasia in NZ, several limitations must be acknowledged. The voluntary, online survey design introduces self-selection bias, resulting in a non-representative sample. Females and individuals of NZ European descent were over-represented, limiting generalisability to the broader NZ population, including Māori and other ethnic groups.

Additionally, the survey was conducted in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the findings may not reflect more recent shifts in public opinion or animal management practices. Nonetheless, the data offer a valuable pre-pandemic baseline for future studies examining evolving public attitudes in the face of societal change.

5. Conclusions

This study highlights the complexity and depth of public attitudes toward companion animal euthanasia in Aotearoa, NZ. While euthanasia is broadly accepted as a compassionate and ethical choice for animals suffering from terminal illness or poor quality of life, there is strong public resistance to its use for reasons of convenience, unwantedness, or financial constraint. These findings reflect a widespread commitment to animal welfare and a growing expectation that euthanasia be used only as a last resort.

Demographic factors—such as age, gender, cultural identity, education, and rural upbringing—significantly influence these attitudes. This underscores the importance of culturally sensitive communication and targeted public education to support ethical decision-making, responsible pet ownership, and end-of-life care. The qualitative responses in particular reveal a desire for greater support for alternative solutions, including rehoming, financial assistance, and community-based management strategies such as trap–neuter–release.

The findings also resonate with wider global goals. Companion animal welfare intersects meaningfully with the SDGs, especially Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being). Promoting humane and sustainable euthanasia practices not only benefits animals but also supports human mental health, environmental protection, and social justice.

As public discourse around animal rights, ecological responsibility, and veterinary ethics continues to evolve, it is essential that policymakers, veterinary professionals, and welfare organisations collaborate to address the ethical dilemmas associated with eu-

thanasia. This includes investing in veterinary training, public education, animal shelter resources, and mental health support for practitioners involved in end-of-life care.

Future research should explore how public attitudes shift in response to social and economic changes, such as those seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how policies can evolve to reflect changing societal values. By fostering informed, ethical, and compassionate approaches to euthanasia, we can better safeguard the wellbeing of both animals and the people who care for them.

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