



How Much is that Doggy in the Window?



The Shame of Puppy Mills

When we walk past a pet shop window and see an adorable puppy, we're tempted to go in and take a look. Sometimes, we even decide to buy the puppy. But have you ever wondered what the real cost of that puppy might be?

The majority of pet shop puppies come from places known as puppy mills. There are nearly 12,000 pet shops in the U.S. It's estimated that up to 500,000 puppy mill puppies are sold in the 3,500 or so pet shops that do sell animals.

A puppy mill is a breeding kennel and can house 50, 100, or even 2,000 dogs. Needless to say, the conditions in which these puppies are bred and raised are abominable. Female dogs are usually bred twice a year until they are no longer fertile; then with no breeding value, they are killed or ignored and left to die. Mothers and puppies live in cramped cages with wire flooring, so that waste matter can drop through. But, many times, they live in urine soaked, feces laden cages. Suffering from malnutrition, confinement, exposure to the elements, and lack of proper veterinary care, these puppies often have health problems. Life in a puppy mill is truly wretched for both mothers and litters.

Because this is a business and profit is the bottom line, the well being of the product—puppies—is not a priority. Getting by on minimal care and expense before shipping off the puppies is the norm.

But what about the puppies who do eventually leave the mill? Sold to brokers—usually from \$50 to \$75—they are packed into crates for resale to pet shops—often for \$200 to \$400.



They may travel hundreds of miles—often without adequate food or water, proper shelter or ventilation. Some puppies do not survive the transport. Those that do make it to a pet shop are animals with minimal human contact. Nonetheless, they may sell for \$400 to \$1,000. Because puppy mill puppies are bred for quantity and not quality, genetic defects and personality disorders are easily passed from one generation to the next. Often difficult to socialize, these puppies are destined for both behavior and health problems. Many new owners incur excessive veterinary expense trying to overcome these problems. When it is not an affordable option, these dogs are frequently euthanized.

What About the American Kennel Club (AKC)?

Often we think if a puppy is registered by the AKC it must be fine. What does registered mean, anyway? The AKC is a registration body.

Based on the honor system, it merely provides a certificate which says according to the breeder's paperwork, the puppy is "registered". In fact, any puppy born to registered parents—no matter what their condition—can be registered. The AKC receives a fee for each puppy registered. Therefore, puppy mill litters provide the AKC with a significant percentage of its revenue.

There Ought to be a Law

Well, there is sort of. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is charged with enforcing the Animal Welfare Act (AWA). The USDA requires a license only for breeders and dealers that sell wholesale to dealers/brokers or directly to pet stores. Of course, with fewer than 100 inspectors nationwide who are responsible not only for thousands of puppy mills, but also zoos, circuses, laboratories, and animals transported via commercial airlines, you can imagine how infrequently puppy mills are inspected. Puppy mills and backyard breeders who sell directly to the public, are not required to be licensed and are not regulated. Thousands of puppy mills avoid licensing issues by using the internet to sell directly to the unsuspecting public. If ever the phrase "caveat emptor" (buyer beware) applies, it is in the purchasing of animals over the internet.

Seventeen states, including Minnesota, have enacted "puppy lemon laws" to provide some relief in those instances where sick animals



have been purchased. Unfortunately, these laws are seldom used and are not adequate. In Minnesota, the law stipulates that "a dog or cat can be declared unfit for sale within 10 days, and up to one year for congenital or hereditary defects." The consumer can get a refund, make an

exchange, and be reimbursed for veterinary expenses up to the cost of the animal. As you can imagine, most people choose to keep their puppy and try to save it rather than returning it to the seller who will likely destroy it. Of course, if the puppy dies, people usually decide against getting another puppy from the same seller for fear they may encounter similar problems.



Photo courtesy of Companion Animal Protection Society

Does Minnesota Have Puppy Mills?

Most of us are shocked to learn Minnesota ranks among the top puppy mill states. While there are states with many more puppy mills than Minnesota, we have the dubious distinction of having some of the largest kennels in the nation. Several Minnesota puppy mills house more than 1,000 dogs each. In 2006, another large puppy mill opened in Minnesota. Unfortunately, despite protests from neighbors, animal welfare groups, and people across the nation, a license was granted to a breeder in Belle Prairie Township, Morrison County, MN to house 500 breeding dogs. That doesn't include the unlimited number of puppies that can be housed there. This breeder was previously cited with numerous violations under a different USDA license where he operated another puppy mill. Yet, he was able to open a new facility - in the same county.



What Can I do About This?

First and foremost, never purchase a puppy or kitten from a pet shop. Remember, every puppy purchased from a pet shop provides space for another puppy mill puppy. Why not save a life and get your animal from a shelter, rescue organization or impound facility. It's estimated that 25% of shelter animals are purebreds. Getting your animal from a shelter, rescue organization or impound facility not only saves a life, it also helps reduce the misery of the unfortunate puppy mill dogs. When people stop purchasing from pet shops, the puppy mill industry will no longer be profitable.



Are There Good Breeders?

Yes, good breeders do exist. If you purchase from a breeder, here are a few tips to help you determine a good one.

- Animals live in a clean, well-maintained area in the house.
- Breeds only one or two types of dogs and is knowledgeable about the breed standards.
- Puppy appears happy and healthy and doesn't shy away from visitors.
- Breeder encourages you to spend time with the puppy's mother.
- Provides references from others who have purchased puppies.
- Feeds high quality food.
- Encourages multiple visits from entire family interested in puppy.
- Doesn't always have puppies available so will keep your name on a list.
- Requires you to answer such questions as to why you want a dog, who will care for the dog, how much room the dog will have, etc.
- Requires you to sign a contract agreeing to spay/neuter your dog and return your dog if, for some reason, you can no longer care for it—no matter how old the dog.

In summary, a good breeder will never sell a puppy unless interaction occurs with potential buyers to determine that the puppy and family are a good lifelong match.

A Word About Cats

While not as great in number as puppy mills, unfortunately kitten mills do exist. The cats and kittens live under similar horrible conditions as those described for the dogs and puppies. They are confined to tiny cages stacked one on top of the other, laying in their own feces and urine. Often times the breeding females are kept in small sheds or basements where the public doesn't see them. Upper respiratory, worms, severe matting and disease are commonplace. The kittens are normally purebreds and often suffer from health problems just as the puppy mill puppies. There are many smaller catteries, which usually raise one or two different purebreds. If you choose to go to a breeder, it is critical to identify a good breeder using the tips previously mentioned.



Photo courtesy of Second Chance Animal Rescue



Where Should I go for my Next Animal?

The Minnesota Humane Society—along with area shelters and pounds—encourages you to look for your companion animals in local facilities. Many wonderful dogs, cats, puppies, and kittens can be found in area shelters and pounds. Their lives depend on you. By choosing a shelter animal, you save its life and help reduce the demand for puppy mill animals sold in pet shops. You can truly make a difference.

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