

Viewpoint: ‘All natural’ pet food is no better for Fido, and it’s terrible for the environment

Gone are the days when a proud new pet owner could waltz into the grocery store and pick up a generic-looking bag of Kibble ‘n Bits without asking, “bits of what?” or “hey, what would that all-natural pet food over there have to say about these ‘bits’?” Cautious shopping, spurred by pet food recalls and our furry friends’ rising household statuses, is the new norm. But unbeknownst to well-meaning pet parents, their popular response — buying premium, all-natural, and grain-free pet foods — has serious environmental consequences.

If you think pet food just doesn’t matter much in the grand scheme of environmental problems, think again. In the US, around [163 million](#) cats and dogs consume as much dietary energy as all of Canada’s humans. In the process, these furry Americans account for [20-23%](#) of US livestock production’s environmental impacts, and, if current purchasing trends persist, our pets’ environmental footprint will only grow.

Because cats and dogs can safely and happily consume byproducts — animal parts that we humans either cannot or will not eat — we could theoretically feed our pets without raising more chickens and cows. But premium pet foods tend to contain [higher-quality meat \(by human standards\) and more of it](#), thereby increasing direct competition between the human and pet food systems, driving up demand for livestock, increasing emissions, and so on. And the real kicker? These environmental impacts, though a consequence of consumer vigilance and good intentions, are unlikely to yield health benefits for our four-legged companions.

How could wanting the best for man’s best friends go so wrong? The problem is not our good intentions, but how we go about defining “best.” Consumer vigilance born of well-founded health and safety concerns has been hijacked by the naturalistic fallacy — the conflation of naturalness and goodness.

Unfortunately, what’s natural is not always, or even usually, what’s best, and naturalness is so amorphous a concept that it defies delineation. Do our cats, with their evolutionary desire to hunt, and our dogs, who still howl like wolves, have the same dietary wants and needs as their wild ancestors? Or are pets so domesticated — cats meow to humans but not each other, and dogs have evolved facial muscles to allow them to reflect human-like emotions — that their wants and needs more closely mirror our own?

Recalibrating our conceptions about pets and their food might well require examining how the naturalistic fallacy influences what we feed ourselves.

The answer is both and neither, but with the naturalistic fallacy at the wheel, two divergent premium pet food trends have emerged:

On the one hand, there are owners who fancy their pets as tamed but innately wild animals. This breed of human is drawn to the gray wolf, lynx, or herd of wild bison on food packages featuring catchy slogans like [“feed your pet’s primal hunger”](#) or “nature’s evolutionary diet.”



Credit: 4Health

On the flip side, there are the proud parents of “fur babies” or [“folks with paws.”](#) Pet parents who assume that their furry friends’ wants and needs align with their own are much more likely to adhere to one [pet food company’s](#) credo, “don’t feed them anything you wouldn’t eat.” Cue personalized pet meal delivery services, human-grade and GMO-free ingredients, packages featuring pictures of plated steak or [rotisserie chicken](#), and [pumpkin-spice lattes](#) (and perhaps two pairs of Uggs while we’re at it?).



Pumpkin Spice Latte for your dog? Credit: The Honest Kitchen

Despite reflecting opposing conceptualizations of our pets, these trends have a similar outcome. When feeding your cat or dog's "primal hunger" means buying high-protein and grain-free foods and when pet food manufacturers use ingredients that are more palatable to humans, the level of direct competition with our food system increases. The bottom line? A large and growing environmental footprint.

What's worse, neither fad corresponds with domestic cats or dogs' dietary needs.

Unlike wolves, dogs [are omnivores](#) and have evolved an [increased ability to glean nutrients](#) from grains and plants, and even cats, obligate carnivores that they are, can [digest and utilize grains](#). Already, average crude protein levels in canned and dry foods far exceed cats' and dogs' [recommended allowances](#). So except for the rare cat or dog with grain allergies, "the bottom line is that 'grain-free' is a marketing concept designed to sell pet food," [writes the Cummings Veterinary Medical Center's](#) clinical nutrition team.

Veterinarians also confirm that human-grade meat, organic produce, and superfoods [are unnecessary for pets' health](#) and that, despite being unappetizing and sometimes inedible for humans, animal byproducts like bone meal, organs, tongue, and trachea are perfectly delicious and healthy for our pets. Still, a stigma against animal byproducts prevails, with six of Amazon's ten [best-selling dry dog foods](#) claiming not to contain byproduct meal (and all but one of those six foods are more expensive than the four products that do).

How could wanting the best for man's best friends go so wrong? The problem is not our good intentions, but how we go about defining "best."

Of course, the onus of reversing these environmentally unsustainable trends isn't on America's cats and dogs but on their humans, and without a public perception shift, consumer-driven pet food system change seems unlikely.

all natural large x q crop smart

Image not found or type unknown

Recalibrating our conceptions about pets and their food might well require examining how the naturalistic fallacy influences what we feed ourselves. Consider how proponents of the [paleo diet](#), which seeks to replicate cavemen grub, or the grass-fed and free-range movements, which advocate for farming methods from a simpler time, reveal our tendency to evaluate a dietary trend on the basis of when, in the course of our evolutionary history, it has its roots. And look no further than the fear-inspiring GMO nickname, "Frankenfood," if you wish to understand how tightly intertwined "unnatural" and "monstrous" are in our collective unconscious.

This ingrained assumption jeopardizes the efficacy of consumer action, or "voting with your pocketbook." After all, a store aisle full of people worrying over what a lynx or wolf would eat or whether Fido's dinner is fit for a king is a food democracy with an awful lot of uninformed voters.

Follow the latest news and policy debates on sustainable agriculture, biomedicine, and other 'disruptive' innovations. Subscribe to our newsletter.

[SIGN UP](#)

Real improvement in the pet food industry, therefore, might require help from environmental regulations, voluntary standards, and pressure from advocacy groups to steer the pet food industry back on track.

But there's no denying that producers respond to pet owners' preferences or that consumers have a role to play. Start by reading this list of [pet food considerations that matter](#), like whether a company employs a qualified nutritionist and owns their processing plants. And before you hop on that next bandwagon, try to remember that a food fad's appeal often hinges less on reality and more on how you answer one value-laden and context-dependent question: what is natural?

Caroline Grunewald is a food and agriculture analyst at the Breakthrough Institute. Follow her on Twitter [@caro_grunewald](#)

This article was originally published at the [Breakthrough Institute](#) and has been republished here with permission. Follow Breakthrough on Twitter [@TheBTI](#)