

The importance of animals in the past and present

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Summary

Animals have always been of great importance for people and have been a significant factor in the development of human civilization. During the approximately 200,000 years of human history, the role of animals has changed greatly. Humans originally feared animals, but at the same time admired them, as evidenced by prehistoric cave paintings, constellations named for animals, or portrayals of Egyptian gods with the heads of animals. A new chapter in animal–human relations was ushered in by the domestication and economic use of animals. This gave rise to agriculture and accelerated the development of civilization. Methods of genetic improvement of animals have been developed, leading to the creation of a vast number of breeds and genetic lines of domesticated species – mainly mammals and birds, but also fish and insects. In the last century, due to careless human activity, the rate of extinction of species has accelerated, and more animals have become endangered. Around the world, including in Poland, measures have been taken to protect biodiversity, understood as protection not only of endangered species, but also of genetic resources, including endangered breeds, strains, and genetic lines. The role of animals today has taken on new meaning. They still play a key role in meeting nutritional needs and provide many materials; however, new species and forms of use of animals have appeared. Breeding and rearing of exotic and free-living animals are now common. Animals are used to appeal to tourists and make landscapes more attractive. People who are stressed and overworked increasingly need regular contact with animals, which means that pets are becoming more important. The companionship of animals is especially important to people who are lonely or not accepted by the community, people with complexes, children, and disabled people. Animals are also used as therapeutic tools (in equine-assisted therapy, dog therapy, cat therapy, alpaca therapy, and apitherapy) and for organs for transplant.

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