

mal is a pet, a pest or [an animal farmed for] profit – makes a big difference in how concerned we are about how they are treated. That's part of the reason they have such an ambiguous status in law... It's a very anthropocentric approach, that an animal's value depends on what it gives to us as humans."

As such, she admits to some misgivings about the way the growing body of evidence supporting "the link" between animal cruelty and human violence has finally made authorities take the suffering of animals seriously. Focusing on what a person who harms animals could do to one of us next will certainly make people sit up and take notice, Taylor concedes, but "somewhere there, the animal itself gets lost".

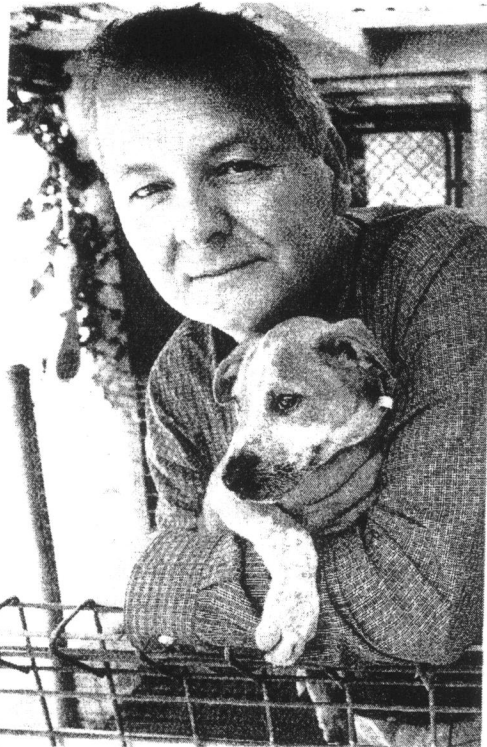
She also urges caution about interpreting "the link" too definitively. "It is often presented as causal, when it's not that simple. If your five-year-old tries to pull the ears off his pet rabbit, you don't necessarily have the next Jeffrey Dahmer on your hands."

That said, Taylor's Australian work is adding to mounting international evidence that childhood animal cruelty in particular is a red flag worth noting, both as evidence that the child might be experiencing or witnessing other forms of abuse in the home, and as an indicator that he or she might be a future perpetrator of violence. Whether the latter is simply a product of the former – that is, a child grows up to abuse animals and people simply because they have seen such behaviour modelled in the home – or whether there is some other inherited or biological tendency in some people towards such behaviour, is one of the most hotly-pursued issues in the field today.

Taylor says one of the keys is an "empathy deficit", or a lack of normal development of the trait that allows us to recognise and feel for the state of other living things. One of the more positive aspects of her research is a growing recognition that, just as animals may fall victim to children who have suffered their own trauma, they may also play a role in healing that trauma and rebuilding empathy, through animal assisted therapy (AAT) programs.

But such programs are palliative, rather than preventative. And violence – whether it targets animals or people – is unlikely to ever be stamped out, according to Taylor, until we recognise that the world as we know it often encourages and even rewards a lack of empathy towards others. As a sociologist, she says she first recognised "the link" not in the rarefied halls of academia, but while volunteering in an animal shelter in her native England.

"One day we had a woman come in, who was fleeing a domestic violence situation. She was trying to find somewhere safe to leave her dog because she was convinced the dog was at risk too. That's where it started, where I began to think about the links and similarities



between domestic violence, child abuse and animal abuse.

"They are all situations where regimes of power and power imbalance are being played out... The minute you get a power difference, whether it's a young boy [being abused by] an older child, or a group of boys with a cat, it's kids picking up on an awful, pernicious message that's out there.

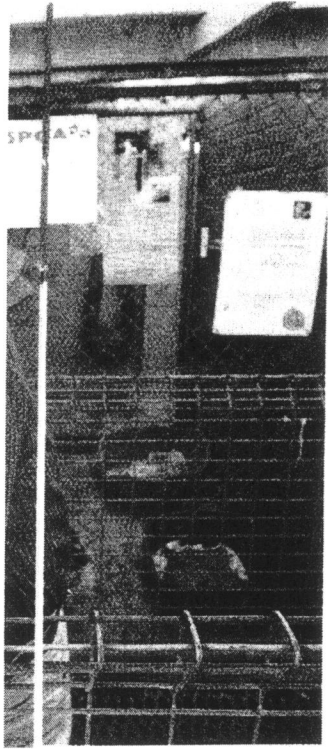
"This is a domination framework, where the perpetrators lack empathy and [their victims] can be interchangeable; animals can be kids can be spouses."

Out on the frontline, knocking on the doors of those suspected of harming their own animals, Tracey Jackson sees that framework in play every day. "There are definitely two mindsets," she says, when asked to describe the typical profile of an animal abuser. "There is neglect, which can end up being cruelty, but is often about a lack of resources or education, or just stupidity. Then there are the

offenders who demonstrate a maliciousness, a violence and basically a complete lack of empathy for another being, that makes you ask, 'What is going on in your head?...' Obviously there's aberrations but the bulk seems to be young males, lower socio-economic, and usually under the influence of drugs or alcohol."

Increasingly, Australian agencies are following the examples of American and English authorities, where police and animal and social welfare groups share information about the people and activities they are called to investigate.

**Just as animals may fall victim to children who have suffered trauma, they may also play a role in healing that trauma and rebuilding empathy, through animal assisted therapy programs**



**Hard line:** RSPCA Queensland chief executive Mark Townend believes offenders deserve punishment, not education. "You've got to hit them hard," he says

But Jackson's boss at RSPCA (Queensland), chief executive Mark Townend, says there is little benefit in those on the front line recognising "the link" if the courts remain reluctant to punish offenders. "In the past 10 years we've really ramped up our education campaigns and you'd like to think the next generation would reflect that," Townend says. "But instead there's been an increase lately in the worst, the really nasty cases. It makes you wonder what the hell is going on out there.

"I don't know whether it's the internet, but people just seem to be more desensitised to it. And there's no doubt some people are just mentally unstable. You've got to hit them hard, make them realise we have no tolerance for it."

Townend says the Queensland parliament "really lifted the bar" in Australia when it passed the Animal Protection Act in 2001, significantly increasing the penalties to a maximum fine of \$30,000 or one year's jail for anyone failing their duty of care to an animal, and \$100,000 or two years' jail for deliberate animal cruelty.

"But we weren't getting sentences anywhere near that," says Townend, listing several cases of frightening and often gory brutality, leading to the painful death of one or more animals, where the offenders were given fines of \$2000 or less. "The magistrates should have realised they were representing the community, they are supposed to take note of the community. These are really horrific crimes and the broad support for the [Animal Protection Act], when it was introduced, indicated people really want something done about them."

Which is where groups such as BLEATS come in. Drawing on a pool of more than 190 solicitors and barristers, including four senior counsel (including honorary patron Graeme Page SC, and two QCs), BLEATS's pro bono legal work is estimated to have saved RSPCA (Queensland) more than \$1.2 million since its inception in 2007.

But their impact is worth much more, says Townend. "We usually have at least eight or nine [cruelty] cases on the go now and we never could have afforded that without their help. And the sentences are getting tougher; they're forcing the magistrates to take the issue seriously."

Geysen says it is just the beginning. While acknowledging that animal law is not a big part of her firm's work now, she points to the US, where the field has exploded to incorporate animal custody cases post-divorce, class actions targeting factory farming and live animal exports, and wildlife protection cases.

"I compare it to environmental law, which nobody had ever heard of 20 years ago," says Geysen. "Or think about domestic violence. It has not been recognised [under law] for much longer than that either."

Which means she's slowly coming to terms with thinking about the unthinkable.

"And if other people love animals but don't want to engage with the details, that's fine," she adds, cheekily. "As long as they support groups like the RSPCA - and like BLEATS".