What You Can Learn From Your Deceased Pet

Animals that die of an undiagnosed disease can provide valuable information that might contribute to the health and well-being of you and your other pets. A necropsy (postmortem examination) of the body by a veterinarian can usually determine the cause of death and let you know if precautions need to be taken. The necropsy should be done as soon as possible after death to be meaningful. While pet owners may not look forward to such an examination, they should remember that the information obtained might prevent the further spread of disease to themselves or their remaining pets.

Summary

Ownership of pets does not end with death. Owners are responsible for seeing that deceased pets are cared for in a safe, sanitary and considerate manner. While no laws presently exist in Alaska that govern the final arrangements for deceased pets, care should be taken to protect the health and welfare of people, other animals and the environment. This can best be done by complete cremation or deep burial.

The death of a pet can be a tragic event in the life of the owners.

Caring for the remains is not only traumatic, but it can be a very real practical problem as well. Bodies of animals that have died as a result of illness can spread diseases, contaminate water resources and create other hazards to the environment. Animals that have been euthanized retain the euthanizing drug in their bodies after death. Scavengers like bald eagles and others can be killed by the drug when they consume blood or fat from the euthanized animal. Therefore, it is important to properly care for the remains of deceased pets, not only as a final act in the death and mourning process but also to help protect the environment.

Frozen ground, lack of an appropriate fuel and the absence of cremation services are realities that complicate the disposition of these animals. Yet, even in the face of these complications, pet owners can make final arrangements for their deceased pets that are environmentally safe and maintain the dignity of the pet and owner relationship.

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Cremation

Cremation is one method of caring for deceased pets. Not only is it a convenient and honorable means, it also destroys any disease organisms or euthanizing drug that may be present. In some cases, owners may request that their pets be individually cremated and the remains returned to them. In larger metropolitan areas, cremation services may be available through private pet undertakers. You can arrange for anything from a simple cremation to an elaborate pet funeral, and prices will vary accordingly. In communities that have animal control facilities or small animal veterinarians, cremation services are often available for individual pet owners for a nominal fee. Those who want cremation for the deceased pet should check with local governmental offices, veterinarians or pet stores to learn if such facilities are available.

Individuals can cremate their own pets provided they have adequate supplies of an appropriate fuel. Petroleum fuels, wood, coal or tires all work well. Straw, hay, grass, leaves and paper do not generate adequate heat to properly cremate animal remains. Owners should check with appropriate local authorities concerning burning regulations.

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Deep Burial

Deep burial is another way to care for deceased pets. At present, there are no laws governing burial of animals in Alaska. However, some common sense rules should be followed. Bodies should be buried to a minimum depth of three feet. The earth should be mounded to fill the void as the ground settles. Shallow graves permit scavengers to dig down to the remains and increase the likelihood of surface water contamination. To avoid ground water contamination, graves should not be closer than 100 feet from wells, streams, ponds, lakes or underground aquifers.

Deceased pets can be difficult to bury in the freezing conditions of winter, but if left unprotected, they are easily accessible to scavengers and can be an unsightly nuisance until a grave can be dug. In this situation, two alternatives are available to pet owners. First, the body can be frozen and protected from scavengers until the ground thaws, or second, the body can be cremated. Pets that die in the winter should be covered with at least one foot of snow for insulation once they have frozen, then wood, sheet metal or similar materials should be placed over the snow to discourage scavengers from digging down to the body. If placed on the north side of a building or other shaded place and covered they will remain frozen until a grave can be dug in the spring.

Things Not To Do

All too often, deceased pets are dumped by the side of a road or into streams or other bodies of water. Not only does this create an unsightly nuisance, it can also present a health hazard for people and other animals. Disease organisms and euthanizing drugs remain viable in the body for considerable periods of time after the animal’s death. Ingestion of the remains can infect scavengers, and diseases can be spread through water or by flies, birds or other organisms that come into contact with the body. Disease can then spread to humans, animals, food, water or even buildings and equipment. Therefore, it is important that deceased pets be disposed of by either cremation or deep burial.