Australia has one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world: 61% of households own pets, primarily dogs (40%) and cats (27%). As a large body of research links these human–animal relationships with mental and physical health, older adults may derive critical benefits from pet ownership. Pets can provide companionship, structure and meaning in daily life, reducing loneliness by filling ‘the emptiness of the house’ with ‘unconditional love’. Dog owners also find dog-walking provides a reason to leave the house, fostering both physical activity and social connections.

However, the expense of pet ownership, combined with age-related illnesses (e.g. arthritis, diabetes), can make owning and caring for pets challenging, with older owners concerned about what may happen if they enter aged care or die. Most human–animal research has focused on interactions with domestic pets, with some recent research showing that access to greenspaces supports well-being and that people watch and interact with the wildlife that visits their suburban gardens and nearby greenspaces. Drawing
on the biophilia hypothesis, the argument is that humans have an innate tendency to connect with nature and living things—and by connecting us to the flows and cycles of nature and animals, these interactions have health benefits. To date, only a handful of studies have investigated the value and experience of companion animals (pets) for older Australians, with little research focused on local wildlife. Australia is an ancient country with unique and diverse wildlife quite different to what is considered ordinary elsewhere—compare, for example, kangaroos, kookaburras and frill-necked lizards with the native fauna of other countries. Thus, this research asks: What is the value of companion animals and wildlife in the lives of community-dwelling older Australians?

2 | METHODS

This study was part of a larger multi-modal qualitative research project on contemporary older adults’ experience of home and community, following best practice (COREQ) qualitative research processes. Three online focus groups (OFG) were conducted, via a private contractor who recruited participants from an existing database (Queensland University of Technology ethical approval no. 160000983). Data collected in OFG have been shown to be similar to in-person focus groups, increasingly used as a cost-effective means to gain input from people from geographically distant locations. Invitation emails were sent via the contractor to 132 people aged 50+, purposively selected from a range of age, sex, region and locality backgrounds, with no additional exclusion criteria. Participants provided informed consent and received a nominal ten-dollar credit per day, up to a maximum of thirty dollars, redeemable for gift cards (funded by the project funding body). Table 1 illustrates how 103 people, aged between 50 and 92, from across Australia participated. To maximise comparability of data, three separate focus groups ran during the same four-day period. Discussions were facilitated across all groups by the same researcher around identical stimuli and prompting questions such as 'How important are pets and animals in your life? What role do they play?' As the groups ran asynchronously, participants could log on and off, read and interact at times and locations that suited themselves over the four-day period. Text from participants’ typed posts was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2013) to develop and construct an understanding of the natural world and animals (both domestic and wildlife) in participants’ lives. The first author used NVivo 12 to identify themes in the large data set (1800+ posts), with all authors using manual approaches to iteratively identify, group and discuss nuances, themes and patterns.

3 | RESULTS

Participating older Australians explained that companion animals, wildlife and nature played a significant positive role in their day-to-day lives. The three themes and indicative quotes are described in detail below, and in Table 2.

3.1 | Theme 1: Pets as family—'someone to care for, who loves me'

Most participants (60%) reported having at least one pet, with 14 per cent having two pets and 23 per cent three or more. Dianne, aged 55, for example, owned '2 dogs, a cat, 5 ducks, 6 chooks (chickens), a rooster'. As 69-year-old Geoffrey explained, having his pet for company is 'just like having another member of the family around'. After having up to 20 show dogs at a time for nearly four decades, 71-year-old Rod felt 'dogs have ... always had my abiding love'; similarly, 72-year-old Valerie described her cat as 'the love of our life. She can “talk” to us and is such a comfort'. Pets were especially valued for filling a void in later life, as children left home or a spouse died, critical during times of loss and grief. After her partner died unexpectedly, 67-year-old Margaret found great comfort from her dog, who gave her a reason to leave the house:

Has been with me 24/7 since I lost my partner...sleeps with me and doesn't let me out of her sight...I often wake up and think 'what on earth am I going to do today all on my own' but once I get out walking with my dog and get among people, I feel much better. I would desperately like some support to help
me through some of my down times. I am slowly making a few more friends … but they are not always available when I really need somebody, so I just shrink into my chair and hope the evening will pass quickly … Thank goodness for my lovely dog.

3.2 Theme 2: The challenges of pet ownership

While pets can facilitate exercise and social connections, they are a significant commitment. Many older people explained that despite loving their pets, as Linda, aged 81, observed ‘losing them meant freedom’ – to travel, to start new adventures and from caring demands. 64-year-old Vicki explained that, when the kids left home, she was:

...the main carer of all pets and had most of the work to do. A cat that aged with us...while I loved him dearly...when he did pass away it was with sadness but also relief... we made a conscious decision that we didn’t want to have any more pets. I still miss them - but not miss them too.

The loss of a much-loved companion animal could be so distressing people chose not to have another pet. Linda, aged 81, explained their last cat was with them for 13 years and they ‘will not get another one; no other cat could give us as much joy as Bubbles did’.

The 40% of participants who did not own pets were not necessarily pet-free by preference, citing cost, challenges of securing pet-friendly rental accommodation and reliable pet-minders as barriers. Ann, aged 59, reflected on the trauma she felt giving up a much-loved companion because she could not find a pet-friendly rental home:

I want pets but I rent and the risk of not being able to get appropriate rental accommodation in the future because I have pets, makes it not worth the emotional attachment... I couldn’t go through that again.

---

**TABLE 1** Participant demographic characteristics

| Variables                        | Possible responses | \( n = 33 \) | \( n = 37 \) | \( n = 33 \) |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Sex                              |                   |             |             |             |
| Female                           | 17                | 18          | 17          |
| Male                             | 16                | 19          | 16          |
| Age                              |                   |             |             |             |
| 50–59                            | 10                | 11          | 9           |
| 60–69                            | 11                | 6           | 9           |
| 70–79                            | 10                | 14          | 10          |
| 80+                              | 2                 | 6           | 5           |
| Education                        |                   |             |             |             |
| Primary/high school              | 8                 | 12          | 8           |
| Trade/postsecondary              | 16                | 14          | 13          |
| University/postgraduate          | 9                 | 11          | 12          |
| Relationship status              |                   |             |             |             |
| Married/partnered                | 22                | 27          | 20          |
| Divorced/single/widowed/never married | 11           | 10          | 13          |
| Household income                 |                   |             |             |             |
| Under $20,000–$39,999            | 14                | 17          | 15          |
| $40,000–$79,999                  | 12                | 10          | 12          |
| $80,000+                         | 7                 | 10          | 6           |
| Primary income source            |                   |             |             |             |
| Government pension               | 18                | 19          | 19          |
| Work full-time/part time/casual  | 9                 | 12          | 8           |
| Savings/investments/independent income/other | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Home tenure type                 |                   |             |             |             |
| Own outright                     | 22                | 27          | 24          |
| Own part                         | 5                 | 6           | 9           |
| Rent or lease/live with others   | 6                 | 4           | 0           |
| Retirement status                |                   |             |             |             |
| Retired now                      | 19                | 24          | 23          |
| Retire in the next 10 years      | 6                 | 8           | 4           |
| Retire in 10+ years/Don’t expect to retire | 8 | 5 | 6 |
| Location                         |                   |             |             |             |
| Capital city inner/suburb        | 18                | 21          | 21          |
| Regional city/Regional town/Rural | 15            | 16          | 12          |
3.3  |  Theme 3: Connection to everyday wildlife and nature

Interactions between wild and native Australian animals gave many older people a way to connect with animals, without the labour and commitment of ownership. As Shirley explained, at 81 she currently does not have any pets, ‘apart from my skink that lives under my air-conditioner on the patio’. Gerry was the same, noting there was ‘no need for pets. I have wild birds that I water and feed sometimes’. These interactions with wildlife provided a connection with the non-human world that was greatly valued:

My dog passed away about 6 months ago. It was sad but it has untied us to be able to travel more. We have geese on our dam and although they are wild, we can hand feed them and they always waddle up to us. At the moment it’s nice to have ‘pets’ without the worry of having to look after them.

(Tracy, aged 57)

Additionally, the natural non-human environments that people could see, hear and interact with provided a sense of belonging, whether vast areas of bushland, small pockets of native plants, a backyard garden or local public greenspace. Sixty-four-year-old Glenn appreciated the ‘birds singing all day’. For others, like Allan (aged 61), the journey was the destination, embarking on a new life post-divorce ‘exploring the Australian bush and desert, looking for flora, fauna and tranquil night skies’.

4  |  DISCUSSION

This qualitative study suggests that older adults’ ongoing relationships with companion animals and wildlife contribute positively to well-being and quality of life: it is among the first to identify that older adults appear to develop a similar emotional bond with native wildlife as they do with domestic companion animals (e.g. cats and dogs). This is an unusual, but promising, finding, given that many older people worry about the costs and commitment associated with pet ownership. While we could speculate that bonds between older adults and wildlife may be qualitatively different to relationships with companion animals because: wildlife (generally) does not live in the domestic home; does not share close intimate space with the human; is not totally dependent on the human for its survival; and that ‘feeding’ wildlife is optional; it is clear that some participants in this study described
their relationship with local wildlife in similar terms. Potentially, instead of owning a pet, older people could be encouraged to engage and connect with the native wildlife surrounding them.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

While further research is needed, especially on the role older citizens play in conservation activities involving wildlife, flora, and fauna, our findings support the growing call to redesign our built environment to be biophilic, and to better connect people with their natural world and native wildlife.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks go to the older adults who participated in the focus group discussions. Open access publishing facilitated by Queensland University of Technology, as part of the Wiley - Queensland University of Technology agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

Council of Australian University Librarians.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Authors elect to not share data.

ORCID

Kelli Dendle https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4188-6402
Evonne Miller https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0577-3438
Laurie Buys https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8917-0863
Desley Vine https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8414-9210

REFERENCES

1. Animal Medicines Australia Pty Ltd. Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people. Animal Medicines Australia Pty Ltd; 2019. https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ANIM001-Pet-Survey-Report19_v1.7_WEB_low-res.pdf
2. Amiot C, Bastian B, Martens P. People and companion animals: it takes two to Tango. Bioscience. 2016;66(7):552-560. doi:10.1093/biosci/biw051
3. Bibbo J, Curl AL, Johnson RA. Pets in the lives of older adults: a life course perspective. Anthrozoös. 2019;32(4):541-554. doi:10.1080/08927936.2019.1621541
4. Gee NR, Mueller MK. A systematic review of research on pet ownership and animal interactions among older adults. Anthrozoös. 2019;32(2):183-207. doi:10.1080/08927936.2019.1569903
5. Enders-Slegers MJ, Hediger K. Pet ownership and human-animal interaction in an aging population: rewards and challenges. Anthrozoös. 2019;32(2):255-265. doi:10.1080/08927936.2019.1569907
6. Thorpe RJ, Simonsick EM, Brach JS, etal. Dogownership, walking behavior, and maintained mobility in later life. J Am Geriatr Soc. 2006;54(9):1419-1424. doi:10.1111/j.1532-5415.2006.00856.x
7. Hui Gan GZ, Hill AM, Yeung P, Keesing S, Netto JA. Pet ownership and its influence on mental health in older adults. Aging Ment Health. 2020;24(10):1605-1612. doi:10.1080/13607863.2019.1633620
8. Mein G, Grant R. A cross-sectional exploratory analysis between pet ownership, sleep, exercise, health and neighbourhood perceptions: the Whitehall II cohort study. BMC Geriatr. 2018;18:176. doi:10.1186/s12877-018-0867-3
9. Wood L, Giles-Corti B, Bulsara M. The pet connection: pets as a conduit for social capital? Soc Sci Med. 2005;61(6):1159-1173. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.01.017
10. Chur-Hansen A, Winefield H, Beckwith M. Reasons given by elderly men and women for not owning a pet, and the implications for clinical practice and research. J Health Psychol. 2008;13(8):988-995. doi:10.1177/1359105308097961
11. Wood L, Hooper P, Foster S, Bull F. Public green spaces and positive mental health – investigating the relationship between access, quantity and types of parks and mental wellbeing. Health Place. 2017;48:63-71. doi:10.1016/j.healthplace.2017.09.002
12. Bell SL, Westley M, Lovell R, Wheeler BW. Everyday green space and experienced well-being: the significance of wildlife encounters. Landsc Res. 2018;43(3):18-29. doi:10.1080/01426397.2016.1267721
13. Folmer A, Haartsen T, Huigen PPP. How ordinary wildlife makes local green places special. Landsc Res. 2019;44(4):393-403. doi:10.1080/01426397.2018.1457142
14. Beatley T. Handbook of Biophilic City Planning and Design, 1st ed. Island Press/Center for Resource Economics; 2016.
15. Reisner SL, Randazzo RK, White Hughto JM, et al. Sensitive elderly men and women for not owning a pet, and the implications for clinical practice and research. Qua 16. Woodyatt CR, Finneran CA, Stephenson R. In-person versus online focus group discussions: a comparative analysis of data quality. Qual Health Res. 2016;26(6):741-749. doi:10.1097/01.QHR.000053
17. Braun V, Clarke V. Successful Qualitative Research. A Practical Guide for Beginners. SAGE; 2013.
18. NVivo (Version 12). QSR International Pty Ltd; 2018. https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home
19. Miller E, Burton L.O. Redesigning aged care with a biophilic lens: a call to action. Cities & Health. 2020;1-13. doi:10.1080/2374834.2020.1772557

How to cite this article: Dendle K, Miller E, Buys L, Vine D. ‘Kookaburras, kangaroos and my frilly-necked lizard’: The value of wildlife, nature and companion animals for older community-dwelling Australians. Australas J Ageing. 2022;41:335–339. doi:10.1111/ajag.13070