

Help Stop Negligence of Pet Store Ferrets:

A SINGLE SHORT PHONE CALL CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

By Ellana Strickbine, AFR Journalist

On a sunny, beautiful weekend in the beginning of July, I went to my local pet store for ferret supplies. I knew the store doesn't treat its ferrets very well, and I'd already had numerous conversations with the management and staff about the quality of care they provide. Those talks taught me, however, that appeals to the sympathy and compassion of neglectful pet store employees generally don't work. The reason is simple: People capable of sympathy and compassion would already be doing their utmost to ensure the wellbeing of the animals in their care.

When speaking to a pet store manager now, I try to approach the topic from a practical angle. Generally, I make the point that neglectful treatment will make ferrets more prone to misbehavior and more difficult to train. My hope is that the people I talk to will see that sales would go up if they improved conditions and offered their customers better-tempered pets. I also hope they'll want to make things better just to avoid complaints from people like me.

Unfortunately, on my July trip to the pet store, I found the ferrets in even worse condition than normal. They had dug all the food out of their bowl, and it was mixed in among the bedding and their waste. Also, they had no fresh food, their hammock was ripped and unusable, and the cage was far too small.

This time, I spoke to an employee about the careless conditions. His reaction, however, was patronizing and indifferent, and I felt like I was being blown off. I became quite angry at being treated so rudely, and

my companion suggested I call Animal Control.

That struck me as a very good idea, and I made the call as soon as I got home. I was connected to a dispatcher who recorded my complaint and information, and about 15 minutes later an Animal Control officer called me back. The officer asked me for some more details and sounded genuinely concerned. During the call, I also mentioned my concern that, if ferrets weren't being treated well at the pet store, it was probable that other animals were also being neglected. The Animal Control officer agreed, and said that she planned to go to the store that day and investigate.

I was gratified by this positive response, and soon learned there are other groups who will also responsibly investigate cases of animal neglect or mistreatment. In the week following my call to Animal Control, my boss at work told me that she had once called the toll-free Petco number when she witnessed neglect at one of their stores. Petco cleaned up the situation and periodically checked in with her after her initial report. She was quite pleased with their response and now feels good about buying her pet supplies from Petco.

A ferret friend recommended calling the Marshall's Ferrets toll-free number to report any mistreatment or neglect of Marshall's-supplied ferrets in pet stores. My friend had in fact done this herself on one occasion, with the result that Marshall's placed the pet store on probation and the store stopped selling ferrets. I'm including my friend's story here,

as she reported it. I think you'll find it of interest:

My boyfriend and I were in his hometown, where there had always been a very nice pet store. The owner was awesome, very caring and concerned, and did a lot for rescues, etc. We decided to go into the store, thinking we would get the dogs a new toy or something. As I walked to the back where the small animals were kept, however, I could see that times must have become very tough for the owner. It was evident he had really let the business slide.

Two ferrets were in a glass aquarium, maybe 10 gallons in size. Feces were piled up in one corner, and the ferrets were on pine shavings, with no food in the bowl and little more than an inch of water left in the water bottle. The smell in the area was disgusting. I immediately said, "I'm taking the ferrets." The store sold me the two of them for \$100 and told me they had both been returned multiple times. They had no paperwork from Marshall's—or rather, they couldn't find the paperwork from Marshall's. They gave me two boxes to carry the ferrets, and we took them home. I named them Fiona and Natasha and, at first, all seemed well. The ferrets were insanely hyper that night, and ate great.

The next day, however, I felt Natasha wasn't right. She was really sleepy, though she still had hyper moments. I immediately took both ferrets to the vet for shots and ADV testing, and mentioned to the vet everything I'd observed about Natasha. Something was just

off about her, though she wasn't showing any definite signs of anything. Both ferrets had raging ear mite infections: their ears were literally clogged with blood and feces from the mites. But we got them cleaned up, put on drops and Revolution, and went home.

At home, Fiona kept improving, but Natasha never did. She got even sleepier and her eyes were very squinty. We immediately went back to the vet, but the vet couldn't really figure out what was going on. We tested Natasha for everything—CBC, ADV, BG, you name it. Even a whole-body X-ray turned up nothing. At that point, my vet called other vets, but no one had a clue as to what was wrong with Natasha.

Natasha went on thiamine injections, prednisone, two different antibiotics, and Carafate, but she remained completely out of it. She would lie on my lap curled up and not move or even really wake up, except when I was giving her meds and duck soup. Finally, on a Monday that I still remember, she seemed to turn a corner for the better. She had some energy, and was more alert.

She lost her squinty-eyed look. She even fought like hell with me for the meds. I was so happy I called my vet and left her a message, thinking we now had a healthy ferret on our hands.

The next morning, however, Natasha crashed. She started to seize in my arms and continued seizing as I ran her to the vet. My vet wasn't there yet, but the other exotic vet was. She looked at Natasha and saw that it was Miss Natasha's time. We put her to sleep and immediately did a necropsy.

What we found was disgusting. Basically, what started out as a simple outer ear infection at the pet store had progressed to an inner ear infection when I had her, and a particularly bad one. The two different antibiotics had done nothing. The infection ended up abscessing into Natasha's brain, which is why she started seizing. There was nothing we could have done for her. The infection never showed up on the X-ray, and my vet wasn't about to ask me to spend \$500-plus on an MRI for her. Even if the MRI had detected the infection and we had tried

surgery, Natasha would have had only about a 10% chance of survival. My vet and I were both horrified and shocked to realize that all the time, money and heartache we'd expended was due to a simple outer ear infection that could have been easily treated but never was. Nevertheless, we were relieved to have finally found out what was wrong with Natasha.

I immediately called Marshall's and reported the pet store. And, honestly, Marshall's couldn't have been nicer about anything. The woman I talked to explained that Marshall's has regional people that check in on the pet stores that purchase their animals. She sent someone over to check on the conditions in the store from which we'd bought our ferrets, and called me back. She told me that the store had been put on "probation," which meant that it had been warned to clean up its act.

About a year ago, I revisited the store on my own and found that they no longer carried ferrets. In going back there, I had no intention to get any money, and I also didn't want another ferret

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NATASHA



FIONA

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from Marshall's. I really didn't want anything at all. I just wanted to make sure that what had happened to me didn't happen to someone else. I found out later that Natasha's condition was fairly bizarre and pretty much unheard of in ferrets. Oddly enough, though, it is seen in rabbits. My vet did a presentation on it at the clinic's rounds, and the last time I spoke with her she was putting together the research for a conference.

I still have Natasha's partner Fiona, but Fiona too seems to be suffering from her early experience in the pet store. Her behavior can only be characterized as "basket case." She's rubbed the hair off her face and front legs and made them red and irritated by trying to get out of a carrier. In fact, she can't be put into any small enclosed area without having a complete meltdown that usually ends in some kind of injury. In trying to understand this behavior, the only thing my vet and I can figure is that Fiona is claustrophobic and panicky from being restricted in a small aquarium from the age of six

to eight weeks until I took her home when she was six months old.

The point I want to make by including my friend's story is this: Good early care in a pet store is essential to the future well-being of ferrets. *If you see neglect or abuse occurring at a pet store, please take a few minutes and contact a group that can help.*

You can call or email your local Animal Control department or Humane Society, the pet store's corporate headquarters, the pet store owner, or Marshall's Ferrets. Please do not be afraid to speak to the employees of the pet store about any instances of animal neglect or mistreatment that come to your attention. If the employees are rude or unresponsive, ask to speak to a manager. Remember, it is their job and responsibility to ensure the welfare of the animals in their care.

Please also remember that pet store neglect can lead to harmful misunderstandings on the part of potential ferret owners. For example, if a pet store keeps ferrets in a cage that is too small, a first-time ferret owner

may mistakenly think that small cages are acceptable. In addition, if animals are mistreated by pet stores, people may "impulse buy" them for no other reason than that they feel sorry for the animals. Such unplanned purchases can contribute to animal hoarding.

Sometimes agencies or pet store owners may be indifferent to your complaint. If they are, and even if you don't wish to pursue the matter beyond a single phone call, that's okay! Keep in mind that if every person called the pet store or an appropriate agency when they see evidence of neglect or abuse, the cumulative flood of complaints would force even reluctant organizations to take action. Every positive action in behalf of ferret welfare, no matter how small, makes a difference. Please take that action. The future wellbeing of our beloved fuzzies depends on it.

Note: The writer of the case history in this article wishes to remain anonymous, but has granted permission for use of her story and photos.

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It's my strong belief, however, that we in the ferret community need to do more than simply talk to one another. To make things better for ferrets, we need to get accurate information about them to the general public, too.

Many people are still in the dark when it comes to ferrets. They know little, if anything, about their personalities, their needs, and how those needs can be met. That can lead to serious problems.

Today, ferret shelters are bursting at the seams. Many ferrets are

being discarded in dumpsters, thrown out of car windows to the side of the road, let loose to "fend for themselves," or simply dropped off at pet stores or with a branch of the SPCA. It's only through *education* that we can hope to replace such ignorance with understanding.

Obviously, such an undertaking is far beyond the capacity of any one person or committee; it must be shared by all of us who care about ferrets.

I therefore challenge all AFA mem-

bers and others who may read this report to join me in an *education crusade*. If you see someone at a pet store looking at ferrets, share with them some basic facts about owning and caring for ferrets. Do the same for someone who may show an interest in your own ferrets. If you see someone at the vet's who has brought in a ferret, tell them what you may know about the ferret's illness or medical needs. Offer the benefit of your own experience with ferrets to anyone who shows an interest. It can make an important difference—even if only in one ferret's life!