

A Response to the article “The Standard of Ferret Breeding: Are We Damaging Ferrets for the Sake of Human Wants?”

A recent article entitled “The Standard of Ferret Breeding: Are We Damaging Ferrets for the Sake of Human Wants?” was published in ferret-world by Tim Marsh. Ferret World touts itself as “the World’s Largest and Oldest Online Community of Ferret Lovers... Over 10 Years Providing Ferret Education.” Mr. Marsh’s article stated, “As a community, we’ve let our ferrets down... Possibly worst of all is the AFA’s Ferret Breed Standard which begins with the honorable intention of ‘promot[ing] the breeding of healthy ferrets who conform to the structure of what the ferret was meant to be’ but then end with tight definitions of various ferret types which require deliberately limiting the gene pool to create.” (<https://www.ferret-world.com/news/the-standard-of-ferret-breeding-are-we-damaging-ferrets-for-the-sake-of-human-wants/>)

ferret-world’s calling out the American Ferret Association for its Breed Standard in this manner shows a lack of research and dearth of understanding of the standard and its development. No information on the author’s education, training or expertise in ferret husbandry or genetics was included in the publication So, perhaps the following clarification of the AFA Breed Standard will deflate the notions put forth by Marsh that ferrets have been let down.

The AFA Breed Standard was developed by a committee of experienced breeders over 20 years ago. It is based on decades of breeding experience prior to publication. Prior to publication of the Breed Standard, the AFA Position Statement on Breeding, first published in 1997, clearly stated that breeder responsibilities include:

“The breeder should have a breeding plan. The plan should be geared toward improving the ferret as a pet species, as follows:

- a) Preservation and enhancement of the species genetic diversity without greatly modifying the original design of the species.
- b) Documenting and maintaining documented lineage of breeding ferrets.
- c) Avoidance of using ferrets that are genetically deficient.
- d) Promotion and enhancement of pet qualities, such as a gentle temperament.”

Sally Heber, one of the founders of the AFA in the early 1990s, a breeder since 1982 and one of the authors of the AFA Breed Standard, recently said, “In my mind, the way we crafted the breed standard, its intent is to steer breeders to make their pairing decisions based on sticking with the traits that nature and natural selection designed, as these traits are the most beneficial for the overall health and welfare of the animal.”

Heber further explained, “For the most part, the AFA’s standards (breeding and judging) appear to be influencing the decisions of private breeders as intended. The judging standard works hand in hand with the breed standard and further

discourages traits outside the norm.” To clarify, the list of color/pattern descriptions at the end of the breed standard are simply a list and description of the color/patterns seen in the current pet ferret population. This is not an endorsement nor encouragement for someone breeding to attempt to produce ferrets with certain color/patterns such as panda, blaze or dark-eyed white (DEWs) that may display genetic traits such as deafness or clefts of the palate or nose. Marsh’s claim that the AFA Breed Standard includes “tight definitions of various ferret types which require deliberately limiting the gene pool to create” is erroneous.

Private breeders are not the ones responsible for producing the panda, blaze, DEW or other fancy colored ferrets currently being sold as pets. Large corporations breed these ferrets. They are bred because despite the possibility of being genetically faulty, retailers profit from their popularity with ill-informed buyers. Heber explained, “One need look no further for a destructive breeding position than the one(s) for dogs creating many ‘breeds’ of dogs with characteristics that are not commonly found in a wild canine population.” Golden Doodles, Doxy-poops, Puggles, Schnoodles, etc. are examples of “designer” dog breeds that have gained in popularity in recent years. Hybridization of this nature is not seen in ferret breeding. In fact, Heber says, “The AFA’s breed standard as well as the judging system’s goal was written to discourage creating ‘breeds’ of ferrets that would promote introducing traits that are not normally found in the ferret.”

Taking a look at the practices of an experienced ferret breeder is one way to illustrate the faulty assertions of the ferret-world article. Ann Barzda of New Jersey, is an AFA Title Class Senior Judge who has owned ferrets since 1992 and has bred ferrets since 2000. In recent discussions unrelated to the criticism of ferret breeding featured in the Marsh article, it came out that Barzda currently has a lot of “oldsters” in her business. She was asked if there is a “key” to having achieved this as far as her breeding program. She was asked about nutrition and other factors she might be able to share. Her lengthy reply is instructive to all ferret owners. She said, “I looked at my babies for this article and was shocked to see so many of them over five years old, a few will be eight in May, some are seven, six. I was thinking I had a house of babies yet and didn’t even realize so much time had passed. They are all still so active with good muscle tone and good teeth. I don’t know if there is a key. When choosing my first ferrets to breed, and afterward, I researched breeders and chose ferrets that were from long-lived (as far as I knew at the time), healthy lines. That’s the only way to start. After that, you make your best guess as to which babies will grow out to be the kind of ferret you want to breed and will have the health and longevity you desire. When adding new genetics to your program, you do the same thing and thoroughly investigate any potential kits (as well as their breeders).”

Barzda continued, “What is difficult with breeding is that you may be three generations down the line before you discover an issue, as some health issues

don't present until the ferret is four or five or six or older. That can be a lot of kits already out in the world. I have had good experiences in my house that all or most of my home-bred ferrets have lived past six, and if not, there was usually a really strange reason why not (I lost a few to an anesthesia issue during a routine surgery, not something that could be predicted and not genetic). I have had some of my babies, in other homes, pass much younger – and those were lines I didn't breed. It's very sad whenever I get that call that one of my babies is gone. I always wonder, "what was different?" Why is the littermate at my house happy and healthy and doing well and why did the other one pass away? I do think nutrition plays a key role. I have done a raw diet since 1998. I also make sure they have dens to sleep in, or at least hidey-holes, and I try to keep them to a natural light cycle as much as possible. I try to let them live as naturally as they can, considering they are in the house and not foraging in the woods. They get regular health care and checkups as needed, more as they get older, and I stay alert for any signs of an impending health issue. The raw diet helps with dental hygiene and I think that makes a huge difference. In humans, bad teeth have been linked to systemic issues, including heart disease, cancer, kidney problems, diabetes, infertility, etc. It is not a huge stretch to think that poor oral health in a ferret could have a similar impact on their health. Proper dental care is very important. I also do my best to make sure they are loved, happy, stress-free, live with friends or alone, however is best for them. I think a positive home environment makes a difference, as much as that sounds like "woo therapy", I do believe it works, for the ferrets and the humans in the household."

So what else, besides Barzda's philosophy on husbandry, is enabling her ferrets to live long lives? Perhaps it is the primary factors she considers when selecting pairs of ferrets to breed. She explained, "I look at whether the cross will produce kits with the qualities I want. Intelligence, athleticism, curiosity, companionship, good overall structure, do they maintain some characteristics of the polecat, that sort of thing for the physical and emotional/mental abilities. I kind of want a Border Collie or Basenji Ferret – you know, so smart they test the boundaries and sturdy and strong enough to break the barriers. Note... this kind of ferret is NOT for everyone. Is health an important component? Of course. But I would not purchase or choose for breeding any ferret that had a health issue in the first place. I always try to start with the best possible health and build on that."

The Ferret World article criticized intentionally breeding for a specific color or pattern. When Barzda was asked if that is something she does, she candidly stated, "Yes. That may sound shocking, but yes. However, I specifically breed for, and have always bred for, standard sables. The basic, standard color of the European polecat. Not for any variations in shade, color, markings, nothing. I have always wanted to continue breeding ferrets that best represent and maintain the most natural coloring and natural state I can possibly obtain in the kits."

In focusing more specifically on the ferret-world article's assertions about the current state of health issues and faulty genetics in ferret breeding, Barzda was asked if she could respond to the premise that some ferret breeders select pairs in hopes of producing specific colors or patterns in spite of our understanding of defects such as white patterns and deafness, with the obvious exclusion of Marshall Farms, since it is known they breed for these traits. Her reply was, "I can't really say what another breeder may or may not know about genetics or any links between color, pattern, deafness and other genetic issues. I do know there are breeders, in the AFA and not in the AFA, who focus on specific colors or patterns or types. I think as a breeder you ought to have a basic understanding of genetics, and you really ought to have done some research on genetically linked defects, but honestly I cannot say whether or not they breed specific pairs "in spite of our understanding of defects." Breeders I know personally are aware of such links and have done testing to make sure their ferrets are healthy and defect -free before breeding."

Barzda was questioned about the extent to which she thinks ferrets have a "faulty gene pool" as referenced in the ferret-world article. Her response was, "Any specifically bred species has a 'faulty gene pool' of some size. It depends on the population of the species and especially the population of the starting group. Ferrets have a smaller gene pool in the US as there were only so many places to get unaltered ferrets back in the 1970's and 1980's and most ferrets today have some common ancestors. This is why you see so many people importing ferrets from other countries for breeding in an effort to diversify the gene pool and bring in genetics that may not have issues. The downside is we may not receive full genealogies, so you don't always know if the ferret you imported has a clean bill of health for generations or not."

Barzda was requested to comment on the ferret-world article's statement beginning with, "Possibly worst of all is the AFA's Ferret Breed Standard..." from the perspective of her role as a breeder and then as an AFA Judge. She replied, "This is a very narrow reading of the AFA Breed Standard and is a pull quote that is not entirely accurately portrayed. The quote above continues: '...Anything outside the 'norm' is discouraged as is the selective breeding of traits that are not normally found in the species *Mustela [putorius] furo*.' The rest of the document does go into some detail to try and describe those traits or what the 'norm' would be. It is not a narrow definition of what is a ferret. It is a guideline for breeders and an explanation for future owners of what should or can be considered when looking at a ferret. It is also more detailed for use in training judges. I'm not sure what the author feels is deliberately limiting the gene pool, unless it is the description of colors at the end. The colors description was written to help people understand, in terms of shows, what color their ferret actually is, and when judging the shows, how to place the classes. It does not encourage anyone to breed a specific variation... and in fact, the AFA discourages breeding of pandas and blazes. The AFA is not the police. They cannot demand that people follow

any specific guidelines. The AFA can only do what it is doing, which is encouraging good husbandry, good breeding and promoting the understanding of genetics and health. The AFA uses the show system as a way to reward those who breed to the standard and to educate the public about ferrets, ferret husbandry, etc. At the same time, mass breeders are churning out ferrets with white patches, pandas, blazes, mitts and all sorts of other genetic variations, with no care as to whether or not the ferret may be deaf or have health issues down the road.”

When asked to remark on the article’s statement, “We need a useful ferret breeding standard that works to reduce the number of genetic illnesses suffered by our ferrets,” she defended the AFA Breed Standard by saying, “Exactly how does the author plan to do that? How will it be enforced? We already have a useful standard for responsible breeders. For large farms that cater to the uneducated public, how do you change their breeding patterns? They don’t care if their ferrets live three years or six. That’s not the focus of their pet store sales. So, how can a rewritten breed standard do anything about that? Small, private breeders already care deeply about the health and longevity of their babies, and work to improve their lines. Good breeders will stop breeding a line if it proves to have issues. I have stopped some lines because I was concerned about the possible health issues, and every breeder I know, that I consider to be an ethical person, has done the same thing. Good breeders work together and share information about their lines. What other ‘genetic illnesses’ does the author mean? Adrenal disease? Insulinoma? Lymphoma? Some of these problems are not genetic, but are related to early neutering, or diet, or husbandry, or some as yet not fully understood cause. So how will a breed standard change that?”

Barzda is not alone in her views. Several other breeders shared similar opinions on their breeding programs and the contentions published by ferret-world. The American Ferret Association may not be the largest ferret community, online or otherwise. But it is the oldest, with over 30 years of providing ferret education. To learn more about the AFA, proper ferret care, ferret shows and social events for ferret-owners, check out the AFA’s web site at <http://www.ferret.org> or the Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/americanferretassociation/>