

How Ferret Care Differs Between Countries

Ferret owners in Australia, Hungary and the Netherlands weigh in on how ferret care in their countries might differ from other countries.

By Jennifer Mons McLaughlin

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While the love owners feel for their ferrets is universal, across-the-board ferret care is not. Even though ferrets are the same in all countries, what is considered optimum ferret care does differ.

For example, while ferret shelters in the United States save the lives of and provide excellent care for ferrets every day, such places do not exist in some other countries because there is not a need for them. Shirley Hewett, a ferret owner and one of the founders of the International Ferret Congress Australia, pointed out that Australia is one of these countries.

With less ferrets to care for, many ferrets in other countries are not kept in cages, spend most of their time outdoors and are fed a more natural diet.

Hewett believes that fur color is the only physical difference between pet ferrets and their wild counterparts, polecats. Because of this, she believes their physical and mental needs are the same. "Our symposium speakers, for the most part, recognize this and recommended no caging, large and stimulating living areas, a natural diet, access to fresh air and sunshine, and access to dark and private sleeping quarters," Hewett said.

The same goes for ferrets living in the Netherlands. "In Holland most ferret owners have inside/outside housing for ferrets," said Stephenie Baas, chairman of the ferret club. "They tend to keep the ferrets indoors when it's very cold, but have a place outside where the ferrets can spend time playing and sleeping."

Hewett said that Australia's Government Health Departments recommend a wide variety of fresh raw food be part of a healthy diet. "It follows that these folks are not afraid to feed fresh raw prey and parts of suitably sized prey to their carnivorous ferrets."

"We also tend to feed the ferrets a more natural diet," Baas said. "A lot of people feed rat, rabbit, and birds, also crickets and worms."

The majority of ferrets in other countries are purchased from private breeders, so spaying or neutering is left up to the owner. "Because Australian kits come from private breeders, they are not already de-sexed at a young age and are only de-scented if there is a medical reason to do so," Hewett said. "Our symposia, therefore, include information on when and why to de-sex ferrets — after [they're] 6 months old."

"We don't have big ferret farms here, so most ferrets are bought at private breeders, and we seldom neuter before 6 to 9 months of age," Baas said.

There is also a difference in opinion on light exposure. "While many U.S. Internet sites and forums recommend limiting the amount of light that ferrets get each day in an attempt to prevent adrenal disease, IFCA [International Ferret Congress Australia] speakers encourage the opposite," Hewett said.

And smaller, yet noticeable, differences have been noted as well. "The only big difference I've noticed when I was judging ferrets in Slovakia is that they had very clean white teeth," said Balázs Gasparin, former leader and current member of the Hungarian Ferret Club Board. "I was told that vet costs are much lower there and they take the ferrets to the vet for teeth cleaning."

Jennifer Mons McLaughlin lives in Minnesota and has been writing about the pet industry for more than 10 years.