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Posted Mon, 29 Mar 2004

US pet owners are being offered a second lease on life for their dying cats by a firm that is offering to clone the animals for about \$50 000 per "copy cat".



Genetic Savings and Clone, based near the freewheeling West Coast city of San Francisco, claims to be the leading US pet cloner and has launched a commercial, albeit expensive, cloning operation.

This year, the company that announced the world's first cat clone in February 2002, plans to clone nine felines, six of which will be sold to the public, with three to be kept to show off at cat shows.

Massive interest

The firm has already received four firm orders for the copy cats and is also working hard to duplicate the genetic make-up of dogs.

It says it has received massive public interest about its unusual services, with some of the requests proving touching and others a little bizarre.

"We've had people say they have a ball that their dog used to play with and it's covered with saliva and can we clone from that," said Ben Carlson, the company's vice president of communications.

"We get a lot of poignant requests like that. Or they have a bit of fur or maybe a tooth or they buried their pet a couple of months ago and just heard about us. But we have to tell them unfortunately, it's too late."

Swab needed for cloning

To create a clone, the company takes a swab sample the size of a small coin from the mouth and from the stomach of the pet. Dead animals can be cloned, but only during a short time after death.

The company was formed in 2000 when founder John Sperling, inspired by the successful 1996 birth of Dolly — the British sheep who became the first cloned animal — began trying to clone his beloved dog, Missy.

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After eventually settling on the simpler area of feline cloning, CC — short for copy cat — was born at Texas A and M university.

When pet owners heard the success, they began calling him asking if they could have their dogs and cats cloned as well. Genetic Savings and Clone was born.

Ethical row

The company now boasts a few hundred clients who are banking their pets' genes in the hope of reviving their beloved furry companions' genes at a later date.

Even amid a lingering row in the scientific, religious and political worlds over the ethics of animal and even human cloning, the firm is focusing on cats but is also trying to move into the dog cloning market.

Californian Connie Gombert banked the genes of her beloved dead German Shepherd, Maggie, with Carlson's company in the hope that the technology will soon be available for her to relive Maggie's glory says.

"She was exceptional in every way," Gombert said. "She was the ideal dog. You know you watch Lassie as a kid and you think 'I wish I had a dog like that'. Well, she was. She was a dream come true."

Barking up the wrong tree?

But scientists say the company is barking up the wrong tree with its canine ambitions.

Experts, including David Magnus, the co-director for the Centre for Biomedical Ethics at California's prestigious Stanford University, are dubious about both the ethical and practical viability of the venture.

"Right now success rates are poor — it took 270 attempts to get one Dolly (Britain's successfully clones sheep)," Magnus said. "For a successful live birth, there are a lot of births of malformed animals.

In addition, says Magnus, himself a bereaved dog owner, the only reason people would want to clone their pet is to get an exact carbon copy, something that is scientifically impossible.

"I would do almost anything to have Rudy back, but even if I had a clone of Rudy, it would not be him."

But Gombert begs to differ.

"The clients of Genetic Savings and Clone are not idiots," she said. "We know we won't be getting the same dog — we'll be getting a biological twin."

Carlson is sanguine about the row over cloning, whether of pets or the more controversial debate over the possibility human cloning.

"Cloning is a very controversial issue," he said. "A lot of people are hostile or negative, and by letting them know our perspective and letting them know the facts, we persuade them to have less negative attitude."

"Cruel and wasteful"

Animal rights lobbyists also slam pet cloning as cruel and wasteful, when 17 million US animals are put down in shelters each year because no homes can be found for them.

"Genetic Savings and Clone: a clever name for a diabolical business," scoffed Mary Beth Sweetland of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. "If people only knew how many animals die before one successful clone is born."

But Carlson says his clients are not irresponsible and do not cause overcrowding in animal shelters.

"They want an animal they can't obtain from the shelters — they want a dog or cat with a specific genetic endowment."

AFP

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