

The eye of the beholder: **Natural beauty vs. the ignorant breeder**

Article by Chloe Long

Humans are constantly striving for perfection. From improving cars to re-designing furniture, we see imperfections in everything, and everyone has their own idea about how it can be improved. But where do we draw the line? For centuries now we have been breeding a wide variety of animals and adapting them to better suit our needs. Dairy cows are selectively bred to give a higher milk yield, thoroughbred horses are bred to improve speed and stamina- these are examples of 'improvements' humans believe they have made to domestic species that make them more valuable to us. But what about the breeding of animals we keep as pets? Since there is no need to improve our pets' physique for our personal gain, we have strived to improve their appearance, making them 'more beautiful' and hence more desirable. But what price do our pets pay for this so-called beauty?

Animals that have been left to their own devices rely on natural selection to give them the 'improvements' they need to survive, that directly benefit *them*. Human interference with this natural process results in selection of features we believe are better *for us*, and often overlook the consequences such selection has on the animal. For example, Persian cats have been selectively bred for features characteristic of the Persian breed- a long coat and a short, flat face. However, such features are actually problematic to the breed. The long coat needs frequent grooming or it becomes tangled and matted, and the loose hair produces it's own problems in the form of large furballs when the cat grooms itself. The cat's squashed face may look visually appealing to some people, but gives the cat acute respiratory complaints and nasal problems. These features are so desired by humans that we constantly strive to produce more and more 'perfect' examples, only enhancing the problems for the cats.

Degus face a similar dilemma. As if they don't have enough genetic complications as a result of chronic inbreeding, breeders in Germany and the Netherlands are currently producing black and grey colour variations. These colourations are produced by further inbreeding degus to such an extent that genetic mutations occur in the form of colour abnormalities. What effect is this having on the health of the degus involved? We just don't know. This is such a new topic that it's hard to say what problems these 'mutant' degus have, but their lifespan will almost certainly be reduced and problematic inherent conditions such as dental malocclusion and diabetes will be exaggerated.

We already know that our pet degus have a greatly decreased life expectancy compared to their wild cousins, and this latest 'endeavour for improvement' could well be the final nail in the coffin. Unless degu breeders take active responsibility to improving the physical fitness of degus *for the sake of the degu* and concentrate less on our human desires, we could be inflicting unspeakable (and preventable) suffering on our pets. What kind of world do we live in if we value the welfare of our fellow animals below our own to such an extent that we inflict torture on those we care for in the name of 'beauty'?

There will always be breeders out there who are ignorant of the damage they inflict on living things, but for me at least, 'beauty' is skin deep and it is what is on the inside- in terms of the health and vigour of an animal- that makes them beautiful.