

The PIAS PetNet Archive

How Mars studied shaped and measured Australian pet ownership

Dr Tom Lonsdale BVetMed MRCVS
The Pet Food Con | September 2026

A recovered portion of the former PIAS and PetNet record changes the character of the Mars investigation. It shows more than promotion. It reveals a sustained programme that researched Australians' emotional vulnerabilities, defined desirable conduct, enlisted trusted institutions, distributed messages at scale and measured whether public behaviour was moving in the preferred direction.

PIAS made pet acquisition a badge of virtue, while the foreseeable costs and harms of ownership were progressively recoded as failures of the individual owner. Mars funded the organisation and stood to benefit from the enlarged and protected market.

Evidentiary status The documents establish the research, funding relationship, messages, institutional channels and measurement programme. They support serious inferences about Mars and PIAS. They do not, without the missing contracts and correspondence, establish the personal intentions of every researcher or intermediary.

What the recovered archive changes

For approximately half a century, the Petcare Information and Advisory Service presented itself as a source of reliable public information about pets. The recovered PetNet About page described PIAS as an autonomous, non-commercial organisation established in 1966 and funded by Mars Petcare as a community service. Its stated purposes included original research, public education, promoting responsible ownership and encouraging pet ownership in balance with society's needs. [1][2]

That description invited governments, journalists, veterinarians, schools and families to treat PIAS as a disinterested civic authority. But PIAS was financed by a corporation whose pet-food business depended upon the existence of a large, durable and culturally protected population of pet-owning households. The conflict was not incidental. It sat at the centre of the programme.

The archive does not yet reveal the complete PIAS budget, its reporting lines to Mars, the commissioning instructions attached to individual studies or Mars's internal valuation of the programme. Nevertheless, the surviving record permits the programme's operating logic to be reconstructed.

Programme stage	Function
-----------------	----------

Programme stage	Function
Research the population	Identify the fears, aspirations, family pressures and emotional rewards associated with acquiring and keeping pets.
Define responsible conduct	Convert selected behaviours into social expectations carrying the authority of research, veterinary expertise and civic responsibility.
Distribute the norm	Use journalists, newspapers, schools, veterinarians, councils and welfare organisations to carry the messages into homes and public policy.
Measure compliance	Repeat national surveys and describe movement towards the selected behaviours as social progress.
Protect the market	Oppose restrictions said to threaten pet ownership while transferring adverse consequences to the category of irresponsible owners.

This was not a collection of unrelated publicity exercises. It had the essential parts of a feedback and control system: observation, intervention, institutional reinforcement, measurement and renewed intervention.

The 1992 Mackay study

Mapping the emotional levers

The most revealing recovered document is What Australians Feel About Their Pets, commissioned by PIAS and published in September 1992. MacCallum Research conducted twenty non-directive group discussions in private homes: ten with men and ten with women, across Sydney, Melbourne, Ballarat, Bendigo, Tamworth and the New South Wales Central Coast. All participants were current owners or had owned a cat or dog during the preceding seven years. [3]

Hugh Mackay did not merely lend his name. The report says he played an active consulting role, participated in the study design and final analysis and wrote the prologue. By then Mackay had substantial training and experience in psychology, audience research, social research and market research. The Mackay Report had operated since 1979. His subsequent national newspaper columns greatly enlarged his public prominence, but in 1992 he was already an authoritative interpreter of Australian attitudes. [4][5]

An emotional map rather than a health assessment

The study was not designed to determine whether keeping a pet was biologically appropriate, whether industrial food promoted health or whether the resulting animal population imposed unacceptable harms. It examined why people wanted pets and which emotional meanings made ownership attractive.

The report's central finding was that pet ownership "transcends the rational". It described emotional benefits and rational objections as "two separate agendas". Costs, feeding, veterinary attention, dumping, biting, restraint and threats to wildlife appeared on the negative side of its own analytical matrix. Companionship, soothing, healing, teaching, control, dominance and power appeared among the rewards. [3]

This separation is critical. The foreseeable harms were not absent from the research. They were recorded. But the study concluded that emotional rewards commonly overrode them. For a commercial sponsor, that was not an inconvenient result. It identified the means by which rational objections could be made less influential.

Normality family completeness and parental duty

The research connected pet ownership to childhood, traditional values, family completeness and social belonging. One participant described animals as a "symbol of normality". Another said, "It's not a family without a dog". The report observed that some parents feared failing in their responsibilities if their children were "deprived" of pets. [3]

This is where persuasion becomes more than product promotion. A family is not simply offered a discretionary purchase. It is presented with a moral identity. The caring parent provides a pet. The complete family includes one. The normal child grows up with one. The responsible adult continues to pay for food, veterinary services and the consequences that follow.

The pressure need not be expressed as a threat. It operates through conditional belonging. Acquire a pet and join the caring, complete and responsible majority. Decline and risk appearing cold, abnormal or neglectful of a child's development. The very softness of the message makes it powerful and difficult to contest.

From vulnerability to market opportunity

Mackay's prologue connected increased pet ownership with anxiety, loneliness, family fragmentation, insecurity, loss of control and the desire for comfort and reassurance. The researchers also recorded that ownership could supply authority, dominance and the freedom to dispose of an unwanted animal.

Read as social research, these are observations about Australians in a period of change. Read within a Mars-funded market-making system, they amount to a map of emotional levers: where people felt vulnerable, which promises they found reassuring and which moral messages could make acquisition seem necessary.

The surviving report names PIAS as the commissioning body but contains no textual disclosure that PIAS was funded by Mars. That omission matters. Readers could assess the work differently if told that the organisation commissioning research into increased pet ownership was financed by a major seller of the products required by the resulting animal population.

The Roy Morgan surveys

Converting responsibility into measurable compliance

The recovered 2006 National People and Pets Survey shows what followed. It compared national surveys conducted in 1994 and 2006. Both were co-sponsored by PIAS and conducted by Roy Morgan Research. Each used a representative sample of approximately one thousand people aged sixteen and over. [6]

The 2006 report says there were "no official guidelines" for socially responsible pet ownership. It nevertheless supplied ten guidelines and stated that they reflected an approach likely to be endorsed by local governments, community groups and veterinarians. Those guidelines became the measuring instrument by which public behaviour was assessed.

- Selecting the right pet for the whole family
- Desexing and vaccination
- Identification
- Training
- Managing and controlling pets

- Being a responsible neighbour
- Minimising nuisance and complaints
- Cleaning up after dogs and cats
- Regular veterinary checks
- Care and exercise

Several behaviours may plainly reduce nuisance or improve welfare. That is not the point at issue. The important fact is that a Mars-funded organisation participated in defining the norm, commissioned the instrument, measured conformity and described increased conformity as progress.

The measured system congratulated itself

The report characterised the overall results as "highly favourable". It credited opinion leaders including local governments, veterinarians, professional associations and the urban animal management movement. It also credited owners applying "peer pressure" to one another. [6]

In other words, the survey did not merely describe private behaviour. It recorded the operation of the institutional network through which the preferred behaviour had been promoted. The researchers then interpreted movement towards the selected behaviours as evidence of social improvement.

The report's closing pages expose the protective commercial logic still more clearly. They said pet ownership was "under threat" from urban consolidation, environmental concerns, changing lifestyles and legislation. Policy makers were urged to minimise pet nuisance without disadvantaging the responsible majority. PIAS thereby occupied both sides of the process: it promoted a larger and more deeply embedded pet culture, then used its definition of responsibility to argue against restrictions upon that culture.

Adverse evidence was absorbed rather than allowed to correct the system

Even within the favourable account, the 2006 survey reported an adverse movement in managing and controlling dogs. The proportion said to display undesirable behaviour rarely or never fell from 84 per cent in 1994 to 77 per cent in 2006. Aggression towards other dogs was among the behaviours reported. The survey also calculated that approximately 4.8 per cent of owners had required a pound or shelter to recover a missing animal. [6]

Those findings did not prompt reconsideration of the programme's commitment to maintaining pet ownership. They were absorbed into the responsibility framework. The system could therefore treat favourable trends as proof that promotion was working while treating adverse consequences as evidence that particular owners required further education or control.

That is the cybernetic defect. Information capable of challenging the expansionary objective was not permitted to operate as effective negative feedback. It was reclassified as a problem of individual compliance and used to justify more of the same institutional intervention.

Who benefited and who carried the costs

The PIAS programme encouraged the community to understand acquisition as normal and responsible while placing the continuing burden of care upon households. Mars could receive repeated commercial benefit from food sales. Owners paid for the food, veterinary care, medicines, equipment, boarding and property arrangements. Animals carried the burden of disease, behavioural frustration, abandonment, surrender and euthanasia. Shelters, councils, health services and taxpayers carried additional consequences.

The Mackay study itself recorded veterinary expense, biting, dumping, restraint and wildlife damage. The point is therefore not that every adverse consequence was unknown. It is that known disadvantages were

psychologically subordinated to emotional rewards and institutionally transferred to the responsibility of the owner.

The formula was exceptionally favourable to the sponsor: encourage acquisition, cultivate lifetime emotional commitment, sell into the resulting market and describe predictable failures as irresponsible ownership. Commercial rewards were concentrated. Many costs were dispersed and socialised.

This archive adds documentary depth to warnings previously set out in *Raw Meaty Bones* and *Multi-Billion-Dollar Pet Food Fraud*. Those books argued that industrial feeding, veterinary endorsement and institutional dependence formed a mutually reinforcing system. The recovered PIAS material now shows how research into family aspiration, childhood, responsibility and social conformity fitted into that larger architecture. [7][8]

The commercial arithmetic

A long term investment rather than a charitable expense

The actual PIAS budgets have not been recovered. Any claim about the total spent by Mars would therefore be speculative. But the economic logic can be illustrated without inventing a figure.

Animal Medicines Australia's 2025 national survey estimated that Australians spent A\$21.3 billion annually on pets, including A\$9.8 billion on pet food. It reported 31.6 million pets across 7.7 million households. [9]

Share of annual pet food expenditure	Gross market value
0.01 per cent	A\$980,000
0.1 per cent	A\$9.8 million
1 per cent	A\$98 million

These figures describe the whole Australian market, not Mars revenue, market share or profit. They nevertheless show why even a very small influence upon acquisition, retention, feeding practice or regulatory permission could justify substantial expenditure. The returns would recur throughout the life of each animal and could be reproduced in the next generation of families.

Mars did not need PIAS to persuade every Australian. It needed only to influence enough households, prevent enough restrictions and make industrial pet keeping sufficiently normal for the investment to repay itself repeatedly.

The scale visible in the surviving record

Measure	What the surviving record indicates
Duration	Established in 1966; described as being in its fifth decade by 2012; its ABN was cancelled in November 2017.

Measure	What the surviving record indicates
Mackay study	Twenty qualitative group discussions across metropolitan and regional locations in 1992.
Roy Morgan	Comparable national surveys of approximately one thousand respondents in 1994 and 2006.
Research portfolio	PIAS historically claimed that it had funded more than thirty studies. This remains a PIAS claim until the complete research register and accounts are recovered.
Media distribution	PIAS historically claimed four Pet Hints each month for more than six hundred newspapers. If distributed to every listed paper, that represents up to 28,800 potential distributions a year, not proof of 28,800 publications.
Digital and advisory reach	PIAS claimed more than 300,000 annual Selectapet enquiries and more than three million monthly website hits. Legacy hits are not equivalent to people or visits.

The last three reach claims are historical PIAS self-descriptions and have not been independently audited. Their importance lies in what PIAS said it had built: research, advice, media syndication and digital selection tools operating as parts of one influence system.

What bad faith means in this context

Bad faith should not be used as a substitute for evidence. Here it describes a serious and testable institutional inference arising from the contradiction between PIAS's public posture and the sponsor's commercial interest.

The documentary facts

- Mars funded PIAS, while PIAS described itself as autonomous and non-commercial.
- PIAS encouraged pet ownership and supplied advice about selection and continuing care.
- PIAS commissioned research into the emotional and social drivers of ownership.
- The 1992 research recorded serious disadvantages but concluded that emotional rewards commonly overrode rational objections.
- PIAS co-sponsored national surveys that defined and measured responsible conduct.
- The 2006 report credited governments, veterinarians, professional organisations and peer pressure with producing movement towards the selected behaviours.
- The same report argued that regulation and social change threatened pet ownership and that policy should protect the responsible majority.

The reasonable inferences

- PIAS was commercially valuable because it enlarged and protected the cultural conditions upon which pet-food demand depended.

- The language of responsibility helped shift foreseeable harms away from the system promoting acquisition and onto individual owners.
- The appearance of independent public education gave corporate interests access to institutions and audiences that would have treated direct advertising more critically.
- The research and measurement programme supplied Mars with a long-term social feedback mechanism unavailable through ordinary product advertising alone.

What has not yet been proved

- The precise PIAS expenditure and the financial return attributed to it by Mars.
- The content of the commissioning briefs, contracts and internal correspondence.
- What Hugh Mackay, Roy Morgan personnel and other researchers were told about Mars's wider strategy.
- Whether particular institutions knowingly assisted a concealed commercial purpose rather than accepting PIAS at face value.
- The location, destruction or transfer of the complete PIAS corporate and research record after operations ended.

These limitations do not neutralise the evidence. They identify the records that Mars and its collaborators should disclose and the questions a properly empowered investigation should answer.

The archive is incomplete and the missing record matters

The current recovery is substantial but partial. Links are broken, some files were never captured and the surviving website represents only a late period in a programme that began in 1966. The Australian Business Register records the cancellation of the PIAS company's ABN on 6 November 2017. That administrative fact does not establish when every activity ceased, whether the company was liquidated or where its records went. [10]

A corporation cannot reasonably invoke research, science and community service for decades and then allow the supporting record to disappear when scrutiny becomes inconvenient. If the advice was sound and the programme genuinely served the public, the research, methods, funding and correspondence should withstand permanent public examination.

Mars and the relevant institutions should disclose

- Annual PIAS budgets, Mars funding transfers, staffing and organisational charts from 1966 onward.
- The complete research register, including unpublished, abandoned and adverse studies.
- Commissioning briefs, contracts, invoices and correspondence for the Mackay and Roy Morgan work.
- Media distribution lists, publication reports, radio records and evaluation of audience reach.
- PetPEP and school-programme materials, sponsor agreements, evaluations and government correspondence.
- Internal assessments of how PIAS affected pet acquisition, product demand, veterinary use, regulation and public attitudes.
- Records showing the custody, destruction or transfer of PIAS files, intellectual property and databases after 2017.

Conclusion

The recovered PetNet documents expose the inner mechanism of the Mars-funded PIAS programme. Mackay's 1992 work mapped the emotional terrain: anxiety, loneliness, childhood, family completeness,

normality, control and parental duty. The Roy Morgan surveys transformed selected behaviours into a standard of responsible ownership and measured whether the population was conforming. Journalists, veterinarians, councils, professional associations and schools supplied reach and authority.

Known harms did not correct the system. They were separated from the emotional case for ownership and reassigned to irresponsible individuals. The corporation retained the prospect of repeated commercial reward while animals, owners and the community carried the consequences.

This was not simply advertising. It was a privately financed system for researching the population, manufacturing norms, recruiting trusted intermediaries, influencing public policy and measuring behavioural compliance in support of the market upon which Mars Petcare depended.

The surviving documents justify public condemnation and a properly resourced investigation. The missing documents will determine how much further the legal case can go.

Sources and recovered records

1. [Recovered PIAS PetNet archive](#). Partial mirror recovered from archived PetNet material
2. [Recovered PetNet About Us page](#). Historical PIAS self-description and Mars funding statement
3. [What Australians Feel About Their Pets](#). MacCallum Research in association with Hugh Mackay, September 1992
4. [Hugh Mackay curriculum vitae](#). Professional history and public roles
5. [Australian National University profile of Hugh Mackay](#). Career overview
6. [National People and Pets Survey 2006](#). Socially Responsible Pet Ownership in Australia A Decade of Progress
7. [Raw Meaty Bones](#). Earlier analysis of diet, disease and institutional failure
8. [Multi Billion Dollar Pet Food Fraud](#). Earlier analysis of the pet food and veterinary system
9. [Pets in Australia 2025](#). Pet population and expenditure estimates
10. [Australian Business Register record for PIAS](#). ABN 85 085 490 857
11. [Mars and the Industrial Pet Food Experiment](#). Investigation page and related papers
12. [Australian Veterinary Association Annual Report 2000](#). PetPEP history, PIAS funding and institutional reach

Note on interpretation Historical reach figures attributed to PIAS are identified as corporate claims unless independently corroborated. Monetary illustrations use current total-market expenditure and do not purport to state Mars revenue, profit or historic PIAS expenditure.