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An increasing number of complaints related to the purchase of “pedigreed” kittens are being brought to the attention of the Southern Africa Cat Council (SACC). People respond to advertisements, they may even receive pictures of the kittens, and may be assured that the breeder will provide “papers” (pedigrees). Once payment has been made, unfortunately heartache and disillusionment follows. In the worst case scenario, the promised kitten never materializes, and the “breeder” cannot be located. Alternatively, the “show quality” Maine Coon or Persian kitten bears little resemblance to the respective breed standards, and/or the kitten is sickly, resulting in huge veterinary costs and then, sadly, the kitten often dies.

When the SACC investigates these complaints, it often transpires that the public is being duped by “backyard breeders” and “kitten brokers”. Backyard breeders are in the business of producing as many kittens as possible and are motivated by monetary gain. They are generally not registered with legitimate registration bodies such as the SACC. They are not concerned with efforts to improve respective breed standards or the principles and practice of responsible breeding and animal husbandry. These breeders tend to keep large numbers of “breeding” cats, often housed in unsanitary conditions, poorly fed and generally neglected. In-breeding is common, resulting in a number of hereditary problems in the progeny. As a result of the sub-standard housing and nutrition, communicable diseases and infections such as ringworm, and “snuffles” (caused by the *Rhinotracheitis* and *Calici* viruses), are common. These diseases may then be transmitted to other animals in the household with the introduction of the new kitten. Backyard breeders tend to focus on popular and “fashionable” breeds such as the Maine Coon and the Persian but often keep several different breeds in order to cater for a broader market. “Kitten brokers” work in close co-operation with backyard breeders. They actively advertise and promote the sale of these kittens generally on a commission basis. They are equally unscrupulous, and are similarly involved for financial gain.

Regrettably, backyard breeders and kitten brokers are on the increase, and they are severely damaging the reputation of the pedigreed cat breeding fraternity. Legitimate breeders are committed to their chosen breeds and constantly strive to improve their breed standards; to this end most breeders actively interact with each other and participate in cat shows. These breeders register their catteries with a recognized regulatory body such as the SACC, and register their kittens with South African Cat Register. Their pedigrees should reflect the official SA Cat Register stamp, a registration number and the signature of the Registrar.

The South African Cat Council promotes the welfare of cats and the improvement of their breeds, along with a code of ethics that it expects all its registered breeders to adhere to. All complaints regarding questionable ethical practices are investigated, and if the perpetrators are registered with the SACC, as necessary, disciplinary action will be implemented. “We are aware of a number of backyard breeders and kitten brokers and hear some horrifying stories from members of the public that have been duped”, says Jan van Rooyen, the President of the SACC. “I cannot over-emphasize the importance of doing your homework and really doing proper investigation when contemplating buying a pedigree cat or kitten. Once you have entered into a transaction with these people, it is generally very difficult to get them to deal with your dissatisfaction. Regrettably, most of these suspect breeders are not registered with our organization and there is very little that we are able to do put a stop to what they are doing.”

Factors that need to be considered prior to buying a pedigreed kitten include: researching the characteristics and personality of the various breeds, the amount of grooming and attention that will be necessary, your lifestyle and what other pets you already have and how they are likely to react to the new addition. In addition, Jan van Rooyen offers the following advice:

- Make every effort to actually visit the breeder and inspect the cattery. Check out the premises where the cats are being housed; cleanliness, access to exercise area and natural light, overcrowding, the general appearance and health of the cats.
- Always see the mother of the kitten and his litter brothers and sisters. It is not always possible to see the

- sire (where the breeder has used an outside mating), but ask if the stud male belongs to the seller and scrutinize his pedigree.
- Always check if the breeder is registered with a body such as the SACC (and ask for proof)
 - Check if the kitten has been registered and insist on a pedigree (even if you have no intention of showing or breeding, and only want a pet). Be wary of deals such as “a cheaper price if no papers are provided”. Pedigrees need to be registered, have a pedigree number and the signature of the registrar. Do not accept a Photostat copy.
 - Pedigreed kittens should never be re-homed under the age of 12 weeks, so be suspicious if you are being pressured to take a younger kitten.
 - When inspecting the kittens, look out for bald patches (usually caused by ringworm), runny noses or mucous discharge from the eyes.
 - Depending on the age of the kitten, check out what food it is eating. Reputable breeders do not stint on the nutrition of their cats, generally using premier brands, sold by vets or vet food shops.
 - Prior to taking ownership of a new kitten it should at least have had its first inoculation; this should have been done by a vet, and a certificate provided by the vet. Here too, ensure that you get an original, signed and stamped veterinary certificate.
 - As a rule, registered, reputable breeders do not advertise on “free” web sites or publications, such as “Gumtree” or “Junk Mail”! SACC registered breeders are also not allowed to sell their kittens via pet shops.
 - Photographs of the kitten and/or its parents are not always reliable and can be falsified. (The owner of a well known, prize-winning cat found that pictures of her cat were being used on a “breeder’s” website, with claims that this was the mother of the kittens being advertised and the said cat was neutered!

If you have any doubts after you have followed the pointers above, and before you make the purchase, contact the SACC Registrar, Johan van Rooyen, at (011) 616 7017, or e-mail: sacatreg@iafrica.com. He will verify whether or not the breeder is registered with SACC, and if he or she is “in good standing”. He will be able to refer you to specialist “breed groups”, such as the Siamese Breeders Group, Burmese Interest Group, Maine Coon Interest Group etc. The Registrar may even know of pedigreed kittens, of the respective breed, that are for sale.

Backyard breeders, kitten brokers and other unethical people, who claim to be selling “pedigreed” cats and kittens, undermine the reputation and dedication of those that are committed to responsible breeding, the well being of cats and the ongoing improvement of their chosen breeds. It is of equal importance to both responsible, committed breeders as well as members of the general public, that every effort is made to identify and alert would-be owners to those who are motivated primarily by financial gain, rather than the welfare of the animals that they exploit.

The final word from the SACC President, Jan van Rooyen, who is a highly respected breeder and international All Breeds Judge: “The purchase and ownership of a beautiful, pedigreed kitten should be a joyful and enriching experience, and the beginning of pleasurable experience for both you and the new addition to your household. Please do your homework so as to avoid disillusionment and ‘Buyer’s Remorse’.