

THE BURMESE BREED CRISIS

The Case for Using Thai-Born Cats



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As a Burmese breeder of 16 years, I have seen gradual changes to the type, and also to the health of this beautiful breed. I am sure that most experienced breeders of Burmese will tell you the same. These changes have been occurring over decades, however one problem has been apparent since the very start, the problem of inbreeding.

For those who do not know the history behind this breed, it all started with a little cat named Wong Mau. This little cat was mated to Siamese, after which she was mated back to her children. Almost every pedigree Burmese cat in the world can trace its ancestry back to Wong Mau. So you see the Burmese breed really started off at a disadvantage. Over the years some cats were imported from Thailand, where they are to be found living naturally, and they were used in small breeding programs. However, these were few and far between, and over the following decades, inbreeding continued, with many show winners being used several times in the pedigree of one cat. You only have to look at the pedigrees of some of the top show winners to see the familiar names repeated on that same piece of paper. The reason for this, it has been argued, is to fix "type", or the look of the progeny. Little thought over the years has been given to the effects of this inbreeding on future generations.

In recent years, many breeders have become concerned about the effects of long-term inbreeding. However even those attempting to outcross as much as possible have found it increasingly difficult to find lines which are not related to their cats. The problem is exacerbated by the tradition of placing restrictions on the progeny of stud cats, and even of queens sold for breeding.

Evidence of the extremely serious effects of inbreeding, line breeding and these restrictions have now become apparent as a result of genetic research. Dr Leslie Lyons, Ph.D., professor emeritus of the University of California, Davis, and now continuing her research at Columbia University in Missouri has warned that worldwide, the Burmese, along with the Singapura, has the lowest genetic diversity of any breed, and in fact "faces extinction" unless Burmese breeders set themselves on a course of outcrossing as a matter of urgency. Her findings are backed up by other venerable institutions, including Langford. This was first reported by Dr Lyons almost 3 years ago, and although some breeders have taken up the challenge, the vast majority have not. Likewise some registries have begun to address the problem, but many have not.

Those breeders and registries, who have discussed the problem, then find themselves with the dilemma of what to outcross to. Bearing in mind that the Burmese have originated from Southeast Asia, notably Thailand, it makes sense to return to the country of their origin, where these beautiful cats can be seen, often roaming the streets, and sometimes in the most horrendous conditions. There are also dedicated breeders there, who work to preserve the ancient breeds of Thailand.

Suggestions have also been made, to use other breeds like the Asian, and even our own domestic shorthairs. However this would detract from the fact that Southeast Asian cats, particularly Thai cats are genetically unique, as also discovered during Dr Lyons research. To my mind, using these breeds is the convenient option, but not beneficial to the Burmese breed. There is a risk of introducing Western problems and genetic disease along with the Western bloodlines, and although Dr Lyons emphasises the need to outcross, she too is concerned about this and she recommends the use of Southeast Asian cats, particularly native born Thai cats as preferential.

The Burmese cat is essentially a Thai breed, and at the moment there is a ready supply of beautiful cats in Thailand, desperate for loving homes, who can also contribute their valuable genes to our Burmese gene pool.

"It just can't be done!" I hear you say. "It's too expensive, I can't afford that", "I wouldn't know where to start", "What about the language barrier?" All I can say is, I have done it, on several occasions now, it can be done. What you do need is faith. The first time you do it; it is daunting and seems a minefield. Indeed when I started it was a minefield. But help and advice is at hand. Read on.

What is definite is that we NEED to outcross our Burmese, we NEED to lobby our breed clubs, our breed advisory committees, and our registries to put in place sensible breeding and registration policies, to accept native Thai born cats as permissible outcrosses for the Burmese breed.

Breeders have said that the “type” of the Thai born Burmese is different to the look of the modern Western Burmese, which is evolving very differently from their ancestors. My advice to these breeders is to stop worrying about type and concentrate on health, or before long there will not be a Burmese breed for you to show and collect your rosettes for. Our first responsibility to this beautiful breed, which survived for hundreds of years before we intervened, we owe it to the future of the Burmese breed to outcross.

Some breeders have chosen to outcross to Burmese cats from other Western countries presumably as a compromise. Whilst this is to be applauded, they are still mating one inbred line with another. Whilst this will indeed serve to lower the inbreeding coefficient, I would still encourage the preferential use of the Thai Burmese which will have extremely diverse genes.

In CFA, native Thai born cats are now accepted as permissible outcrosses, and in fact DNA tested sepia (Burmese coat pattern) cats imported from Thailand, and the sepia progeny of cats imported from Thailand, have full championship status.

In TICA, mink and sepia coat patterned cats imported from Thailand will be accepted on the foundation Burmese register, if signed off as Burmese type by three approved allbreed judges. This means that their kittens can be registered as foundation Burmese, and after the fourth generation are automatically registered as SBT, full championship status.

Sadly, The GCCF currently have no Burmese breeding policy for native Thai born cats. I would urge breeders who register their Burmese in GCCF to be lobbying their breed club BAC representatives and demand that a suitable outcross policy, which includes acceptance of the Thai Burmese be adopted without delay.

There are now several Burmese breeders in the UK who are using foundation cats, and there are Burmese foundation cats at stud from my breeding programme here in the UK and as far away as Finland. Here in the UK, fourth generation kittens now being born, with full championship status. It does not take long, and the feeling that one is contributing to the survival of our breed is very gratifying.

We are working with other breeders internationally, from the UK, Europe, Thailand, USA, and South Africa and soon Australia. We are sharing our lines, in order to keep our Burmese as diverse and genetically healthy as possible.

For those breeders who wish to take the bull by the horns, and import one or more Thai born Burmese cats, I would be very happy to help and advise, and to put you in touch with reliable people in Thailand. And believe it or not, it isn't as expensive as you would expect it to be. We also have a lively discussion group on Facebook. It is called “Outcrossing Burmese x Native Thai-Born Cats”. We have over 300 members, and lots of discussions, advice and support. Feel free to join us.

For those of you thinking of buying a Burmese kitten as a pet, please ask questions of the breeders that you approach. Pressure from you will help to encourage them to consider health above show wins or, heaven forbid, money! Do you know that if you are a member of one of the Burmese breed clubs, you too are able to lobby your club into action?

On a final note, speaking of the Thai street cats. In January 2015, my daughter and I visited Thailand. Before going I began to raise funds towards the care of the street and temple cats there. I opened a fundraising page and would be very grateful if you would consider donating towards a colony of street cats living at Wat (temple) Taphan in Bangkok. One of my Thai import Burmese was found there before I adopted her. We have spay/neutered 35 of the cats there, and have been able to provide food, medical care, isolation pens, flu, enteritis and rabies vaccinations and medical equipment. We still have so much more to do. There is more information on my fundraising page. Please click the following link and consider making a donation.
www.youcaring.com/2016thaicats