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Every dog has it's day ...

... as does every cat, seal, fox or any other creature you care to name, thanks to World Animal Day. Justine Hankins checks out the global celebrations

Saturday October 2, 2004
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I can't keep up with all the awareness days and campaign weeks we have now. For all I know, it could be National Peanut Butter Sandwich Day, or Wear A Hat For Elderly Badgers Week. Hence I've only recently discovered that October 4 is World Animal Day; that's right, the world - not just Taunton or Godalming. The whole planet, and I still didn't notice.

Just in case it's passed you by, too, here's a potted history - World Animal Day was started in 1931 at a convention of ecologists in Florence as a way of highlighting endangered species, and has since expanded to take in everything from pet rabbits to beached whales. This year, there'll be an animal welfare roadshow in Singapore, awareness campaigns in Bhutan and Nepal, Kindness Clubs in Ethiopia and Ghana, and educational programmes in Malta and Cyprus. The Lithuanian Society for the Protection of Animals is promoting a Day of Compassion, urging people to refrain from hunting, fishing, vivisection and slaughter and to give the country's working animals the day off.

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World Animal Day is supported by animal welfare campaigning organisation Naturewatch, and its mission statement promises "to celebrate animal life in all its forms". The date is apt - October 4 is the feast day of St Francis of Assisi, a 12th-century ascetic who renounced a life of fun and frolics to embrace poverty, hang out with lepers, wear shabby clothes and live in a cave. He also preached to birds, delivered sermons to hares and rabbits that he'd released from traps, and talked to fish about God. He was probably mad as a kumquat. Nevertheless, St Francis is the patron saint of animals, and the environment and pets will be receiving blessings this weekend in his honour.

I once went to one of these services (out of curiosity, you understand - my pets are not religious); we sang All Things Bright And Beautiful to a chorus of yelps and barks, and a very jovial vicar sprinkled holy water over the four-legged members of the congregation, including one very special hamster. How much more fun can you possibly have before 10 on a Sunday morning?

Following in the undoubtedly shoeless footsteps of St Francis, the Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals is holding an ecumenical service of animal welfare today at St Margaret's Church, Westminster - the theme this year is laboratory animals. Then, on Monday, there will be a rash of school assembly talks, cake sales, coffee mornings, high street collections, animal

sanctuary open days and wildlife talks across Britain. One fundraising suggestion is to hold a workplace competition to match the pet with their owner. Great idea - wish I'd thought of that.

World Animal Day has celebrity endorsement from Brian Blessed, Nell McAndrew, Jilly Cooper, Uri Geller and Twiggy, as well as cross-party support from MPs including Ann Widdecombe ("As a keen animal lover, I welcome this excellent idea") and Tony Banks ("I cannot adequately express how strongly I feel the need to celebrate World Animal Day"). The WAD website pledge board (worldanimalday.org.uk) is full of good intentions and plans from the worthy to the wacky. One group of teenagers has pledged to stop buying products tested on animals; some people are going to make an extra-special fuss of their pets ("I will be nice to my cat," promises Richard, aged six); and others are going into shops to demand cruelty-free products ("Hit the capitalists in the pocket!"). One person is giving up Sunny Delight - I'm not quite sure how this relates to animals, but it's probably for the best. JW Whitehead from Swanage warns, "I will be playing my accordion throughout the day at the pedestrian precinct in Wareham, Dorset." Must jot that one down in the diary.

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