Summary

Hardly another animal has become so widespread since its discovery than the Syrian Hamster. It was detected in the thirties of this century and since then this little rodent has been bred by the millions. To begin with it was because of its high reproduction rate only used as a valuable laboratory animal but soon became a pet.

Today it is one of the most cherished companion animals. Other species like the Dshungarian Hamster and the Chinese Hamster are kept as pet animals as well today.

In particular little is known about the life of the Syrian Hamster in its natural habitat. That is why the husbandry conditions in laboratories are still the same as for mice and rats. These other husbandry flocks are often not appropriate as well.

The fact that up to today no specific laws nor regulations have been enforced concerning the husbandry and consorting of hamsters seems to be related to the relatively small value of these animals.

The aim of this study is to investigate the different conditions under which hamsters are kept in various holdings according to the reviewed literature and to judge them for meeting the requirements for this species. Moreover recommendations for ideal husbandry conditions are to be compiled.

In order to do so first the terms mentioned in the "Tierschutzgesetz" and its concepts for conversion are discussed in detail and by comparison. The indefinite legal conceptions are looked upon from very different point of views. The only ethological concept which comes to a science orientated acknowledgement of the content of animals is the "Handlungsbereitschaftsmodell nach BUCHHOL TZ (1993)". When trying to recognize the wellbeing of hamsters problems arise due to its small body size and its nocturnal activity pattern. A standardized method for the judgement of content requirements of small animal pets and hamsters does not yet exist.

Hamsters are rodents. Their systematic classification however is still under discussion. Efforts are being made according to colour diversion and body size variations but no consensus has been found up to now.

The biological characterization of some well known hamster species correspond concerning nocturnal activity patterns, reproduction and so forth.
The female Chinese Hamster in particular shows a natural aggressiveness towards adult males which results in major problems in colonies. Therefore numerous breeding strategies have been established.

The Syrian Hamster has about 90 highly distinguished behavioural patterns which can be put into an ethogram in order to predict behavioural deviations. There is no general acknowledged definition for the term behavioural abnormality.

Hamsters show stereotyped behaviour such as gnawing and circling movement moreover an increased aggressiveness and also cannibalism. All this is usually connected with faulty husbandry.

There are no or hardly any legal regulations for the husbandry of hamsters whether they are kept as laboratory or companion animals as well as for their accomodation in animal shelters and pet stores.

Organisations and associations are trying to set up standard instructions and handing out leaflets to take care of this shortage. In laboratories hamsters are kept according to general experience but corresponding ethological concepts are missing.

In companion animal husbandry mistakes are often made due to the general un-awareness of the owners. This can even lead to the death of the animals. In animal shelters as well as in pet stores the situation is less dramatic but nevertheless faulty husbandry can be detected here as well. A huge education deficit remains.

The circumstances under which the animals are kept can negatively influence behavioural patterns and health condition. Therefore it is essential to have a precise knowledge about the specific needs of hamsters. A regular cleaning schedule has to be maintained in order to prevent zoonotic diseases when keeping animals in cages. L CM is definitely the most important zoonosis in hamsters but is transmitted only rarely through young hamsters. The transport of animals by means of fully air conditioned vehicles to meet the content requirements is no problem anymore today.

Most hamsters are originally prairie inhabitants and are used to travel long distances in their natural environment. Their solitary living enables the rodent to meet adverse adult rivals and still survive a hostile and frugal form of living.

In nature hamsters are omnivorous with a wide variety of foods. Their diet consists of various sorts of grain, fruits, grasses and herbs as well as insects and small vertebrates.

Hamsters are not well domesticated and do not care to much for human contact. When trying to draw up substantial regulations for the husbandry of hamsters basic difficulties come up. The knowledge about these animals mostly originates from experience and statements which are mainly made without a scientific basis. Accordingly there is a growing demand for research. Viewed upon the behavioural repertoire of the Syrian Hamster one has to question if
they can be kept under such husbandry conditions at all. Until all the issues are settled on has to be advised against the keeping of hamsters.

Pet owners should switch over to more suitable animals such as guinea pigs as companion animal for their children.