

Animal Shelter Management, Animal Control And Animal Welfare

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ABSTRACT

A review of the current scientific literature showed a lack of knowledge concerning animal shelters and animal control. Without this knowledge, misinformed decisions will be made and best guess solutions may not result in what is best for animal welfare. The paper looks at the shelter environment, the impact which animal control can have on this environment and the benefits for the welfare of animals if control is given priority by local government. Confidence can be gained from councils who have faced this dilemma by accepting their responsibility and highlighting the owners' responsibility through effective animal control.

INTRODUCTION

The explosion of knowledge during the last decade has been enormous. Surprisingly, animal welfare shelters seem to have somehow escaped the review process. The volume of research literature on animal welfare shelters is scarce yet the problems faced by shelters today are the same problems they faced in past years. Animal shelter knowledge certainly lags behind the developments in animal conditions and diseases and the many treatment regimes now in use.

The plight of shelters and shelter animals is however frequently presented in the popular press. This publicity certainly raises public awareness of shelters, and often generates support for the welfare group, but stops far short of developing informed solutions to the problem.

This lack of knowledge must impact on the decision making process and until the decision makers have factual information available, the problem can never be properly addressed. The information is there (welfare shelters are a research project waiting to be investigated), but research into animal shelters and animal control will need to be given some priority.

The funding of most shelters generally prohibits anything but reactive management i.e. mopping up today's problems only to face the same ones tomorrow. Animal shelter management implies that welfare shelters can be managed and therefore must utilise some form of proactive management to prevent today's problems recurring. This is the successful management strategy now being applied at Fairfield Refuge and in developing this strategy a number trends became obvious:

- Not enough people have questioned the management of shelters.
- A welfare shelter is a very complex environment.
- Animal control is arguably more complex.
- The pressure on the shelter is inversely proportional to the priority given to animal control by local government.
- The pressure on animal control is related to human population and socioeconomic trends.
- Animal welfare and animal control are directly related, i.e. animal welfare benefits from adequate animal control.

Therefore animal shelters, welfare and control are interdependent and simple solutions are unlikely to solve what is a complex problem.

Historically, many shelters were established by concerned citizens because of a real or perceived inadequacy shown by local government in addressing animal control and especially euthanasia. Interestingly, the same circumstances have recently occurred in the Caboolture Shire, just north of Brisbane. There the Council attracted adverse publicity because of their method of kitten euthanasia - a blow to the head. The outcome is likely to be the establishment of a shelter, with the support of the Council, so that impounded animals may be rehoused or euthanased by the local welfare group. Unfortunately the priority will probably go to the establishment of a shelter at the expense of better animal control.

Ideally, a shelter is a haven for lost animals waiting to be reclaimed by their owners and to allow the remainder to be rehoused. The reality is that euthanasia has become the most likely fate of animals in shelters.

The animal shelter, welfare and control environment becomes even more complex when you include the three areas of influence which also impact in an interrelated manner. In every animal consideration there are practical, emotional and political influences. These three influences make the problem as complex and as difficult to solve as any of our social issues. Indeed if headway is to be made then it should be realised that animal welfare is not simply an animal problem.

WHAT HAS CHANGED

A search of RSPCA Qld annual reports, some dating back as far as 1923, reveals that little seems to have changed. The animal statistics, although increasing in number over time, seem to parallel the population growth of Brisbane. In 1954/55, 5 900 dogs and 7 000 cats were admitted to Fairfield Refuge and of these 17.4% were rehoused and less than 1% reclaimed. Of those reclaimed most were reported to be dogs. In 1991/92 14 256 dogs and 13 745 cats were admitted resulting in 19.9% rehoused and 2.3% reclaimed, and again most reclaims were dogs (583 dogs, 64 cats).

A detailed summary of animal statistics for Fairfield Refuge over the last three years (Figure 1. & Figure 2.) shows little variation between years except for an apparent decrease in dogs admitted in 1990/91. In 1991 the Brisbane City Council opened another pound, at Willawong, and dogs going to that pound used to come to Fairfield. Three interesting results emerge from this three-year comparison: first, the uniformity of admissions and the fate of animals between years; second, if more animals are admitted, they are euthanased not rehoused (see dogs and puppies for 1989/90); and third, there seems to be little effect due to the economic downturn since 1990, which is generally reported to be the cause of animals now flooding into shelters. Obviously the problem is a constant one and one not destined to improve due to economic recovery. Also, in a survey of people relinquishing ownership of their dog at Fairfield Refuge during 1991 (Table 1), only 6% gave a lack of finance as their reason for this action. The major reason given for not wanting the dog (49%) was because it had a behavioural problem.

Other issues which recurred in these reports over the years included: calls for better facilities at council pounds; increased priority for dog control by local government; animal registration; desexing and humane euthanasia. Clearly little has changed over the years.

- Figure 1. Dogs and puppies presented to Fairfield refuge by year.

THE ANIMAL SHELTER

Fairfield Refuge should be a good shelter to review because it is the only welfare shelter in the city of Brisbane. Also, unlike other Australian capitals, Brisbane has one local authority, the Brisbane City Council (BCC), to enforce animal control. Although animals do come from other shires to Fairfield, the relationship between RSPCA and the BCC should be a good interrelation to study.

By world standards, usually measured by throughput of animals, Fairfield is a large shelter, with over 30 000 animals per year, and yet Brisbane is not a large city. On the Australian scene Fairfield has a similar animal throughput to shelters in Sydney and Melbourne. The population of these cities however, is approximately three times that of Brisbane. Could it be that Brisbane has an animal problem disproportionate to its population and if so why? I believe there is a problem and that the animals in Fairfield are, in many ways, a symptom of that problem. The cause of this problem is the low priority given to animal control and is evidenced by the poor dog registration figures (approximately 55% of dogs are unregistered). This encourages greater numbers of irresponsible owners.

Table 1. Reasons owners relinquish adult dogs.

Shifting house	20
Yard too small	4
Cannot devote time	1
Simply don't want	6
Owner sick/dead	6
Can't afford	6
Allergic to dog	1
Fence jumper	8
Uncontrollable	14
Hole digger	2
Biting	17
Barking	3
Neighbour complaining	2
Overly friendly	1
Veterinary health problems	7

When you consider the total transactions, conservatively estimated to exceed 100 000 per year and include admissions, rehousing, fostering, reclaims, euthanasia, lost and found enquires, desexing, cruelty cases, sick animals, pound transfers, general enquires you start to get some appreciation of how complex this environment has become. Therefore Fairfield should be a good window through which to view the attitudes of Brisbane residents and the activity of BCC towards animal control. Armed with this understanding, solutions to the problem may emerge and some myths may be dispelled.

Although there is much individual variation of attitudes towards animals within the community, when you profile a dog and cat at Fairfield Refuge some interesting trends emerge.

Dog profile

From records of the 14 256 canines presented to Fairfield Refuge during 1991/92 a profile of admissions emerges:

AGE

59% are over three months old and the majority of these are young adults less than two years old. Most dogs admitted have had an owner. They are not part of an unwanted litter; they are an unwanted dog.

SEX

Of either sex unless transferred from a council pound where 66% are male. Dogs out straying on the streets are more likely to be male.

ENTIRE/DESEXED

21% of stray dogs admitted were desexed; 32% of owned dogs admitted were desexed. A survey of registered dogs in Brisbane, unpublished, showed that 77% were desexed. Desexing is not a high priority for the owners of dogs admitted to shelters.

BREED

The crossbreed predominates.

SIZE

A survey of adult dogs in 1991 showed that 86% were medium to large dogs; German shepherd, cattle dog, bull terrier and labrador retriever were the most common crosses, reflecting the popular breeds in the community.

REGISTERED/IDENTIFIED

Only 91 stray dogs were presented wearing registration or identification tags. When current dog registration figures for Brisbane are quoted to be 53 000 out of an estimated total of 116 000 or 45% of the total dogs, it is not surprising that the reclaim rates from shelters are poor. Duhs and Collyer (1979) conducted a dog survey of Brisbane and estimated that 43% of dogs were registered.

Registration and identification are not a high priority for owners who allow their animal to stray.

RECLAIMED

Puppies 0.5%

Adult dogs 6.4%

Shelters are not fulfilling their primary aim of reuniting animals and owners.

ORIGIN

Stray transferred from pound 18%

Stray presented by public 29%

Presented by owner 53%

Most dogs end up at our shelter because that is where the owner wants them!

ORIGIN - BY LOCATION

The majority are presented from suburbs south of the Brisbane River which have a greater number of unwanted dogs. This distribution parallels the lower socioeconomic areas of Brisbane. (Appendix 1).

REHOUSED - BY LOCATION

Most are rehoused south of the Brisbane River and there is a strong correlation between suburbs of origin and suburbs where animals are rehoused.

SEASONAL VARIATION

There appears to be no significant seasonal variation.

REHOUSED

puppies 40%

adult dogs 17%

RETURNS

It is estimated that the return rate may be 20% or higher. (A return is an animal brought back to the shelter by the new owner.)

Cat profile

The profile for felines presented to Fairfield Refuge in 1991/2 would be:

AGE

58% are kittens under three months old presented with litter mates.

SEX

Of either sex and the majority are entire.

BREED

The domestic short hair predominates.

ORIGIN

Strays presented by public 59.1%

Privately owned 40.9%

IDENTIFIED

There is no registration system for cats. Only 12 stray cats were presented wearing identification.

SEASONAL VARIATION

Kittens - dramatic seasonal variation with 52% (4 188) of the years total presented during November, December and January.

Cats - fewer cats are presented during winter.

REHOUSED/RECLAIMED

Kittens 11.3% rehoused

Cats 17.2% rehoused

Cats and Kittens 0.45% reclaimed

Management implications of admission statistics

Analysis of monthly variation of total animals admitted and rehoused shows rehousing to be fairly constant whilst admissions vary seasonally with a peak in summer and a trough in winter. The summer peak is often explained by welfare groups and presented in the media as the Christmas dumping of animals at shelters by heartless owners.

Examination of monthly variation of animals entering the refuge divided into their subgroups (Figure 3.) shows that the admission of dogs, puppies and cats is less seasonally variable than that for kittens. Kittens by comparison required the X axis to be adjusted with a range from 0 to 2 000 to cover this enormous monthly variation.

It is the seasonal breeding pattern of cats that produces the kittens which causes the more than doubling of all animals entering Fairfield from August to December. A normal phenomena has been interpreted as a heartless gesture.

If more kittens than cats are presented to shelters, which is the opposite to canines where privately owned adult dogs predominate, then a cat desexing program may have greater justification than a dog desexing program. A cat desexing program may achieve the desired result. Put simply, if there were 2 000 less litters per year, out of the cat population of Brisbane of about 193 000, at an average of 4 kittens per litter then there would be 8 000 less kittens in Brisbane and no need to euthanase any kitten.

- Figure 2. Cats and kittens presented to Fairfield refuge by year.
- Figure 3. Animals admitted/rehoused during 1991/92 by group - Fairfield Refuge

A strategic plan for such a proposal could be developed and the results monitored against the known parameters.

The trends that emerge include:

- There are notable differences between dogs and cats in shelters
 - Dogs - mainly privately owned adult dogs
 - Cats - mainly kittens presented during summer.
- Few animals are registered or identified.
- Few stray animals are reclaimed, especially cats.
- Few animals are already desexed.
- Most are euthanased.
- Of those rehoused, a significant proportion are returned to the shelter.

Altogether it presents a dismal picture for animals entering shelters and one which highlights a lack of responsible attitudes towards animals within a section of the community. Luckily, most of the residents of Brisbane do accept responsibility for their animals as Fairfield only sees approximately 8% of Brisbane's dog and cat population. Duhs and Collyer (1979) reported that 8% of Brisbane residents obtained their dog from the RSPCA. Obviously then, the problem cannot be solved from within the shelter.

Most dogs in shelters are adult dogs who have had an owner who now does not want the dog. These dogs aren't the result of overpopulation and their existence cannot be prevented by desexing programs. Owners either privately surrender or fail to reclaim the dog after it has been presented as a stray. The human-companion animal bond either never formed or has broken, usually by the development of a dog behaviour problem that the owner cannot or won't address.

Bandow (1982) wrote "It is not surprising that there is a certain segment of the population who makes little effort to try and locate their 'lost dog'. In fact, these people are relieved to be rid of a nuisance Now they have the opportunity to go out and get involved with a new cute animal."

So the cycle continues. Shelters may have contributed to this, by accepting all animals without question, thus making it easy for people to abdicate responsibility for their animal.

Overpopulation as the cause of the dog problem is further flawed because we find new homes for 40% of all puppies presented. Of all the subgroups - dogs, puppies, cats and kittens - puppies have the highest rehousing rate. There seems to be less justification for a desexing program for dogs because here the major problem is the unwanted adult dog, not puppies, and the unwanted adult dog results from a shortage of responsible owners.

ANIMAL CONTROL

Few local authorities have succeeded in the department of animal control. Some have. The difference is very basic; it's proportional to the priority they give animal control. Successful councils haven't made revolutionary changes to their by-laws; they simply decided to enforce what was already in place. Registration is the management tool that is required because without it there is no way to identify the animal back to the owner, and without this the by-laws cannot be enforced. The target all councils should aim for is to have at least 90% of all dogs registered. Until a management system is in place animal control can only be reactive and driven by issues.

Pressure on councils will force them to look for solutions; however they need look no further than councils like Mt. Isa and Noosa. The methods employed at Mt. Isa are well publicised however Noosa's experience is less well known but interesting because of the similarities. Alderman at Noosa were complaining of public pressure because 60% of complaints received concerned dogs. They called for a tougher stance on dog control and a registration drive. To their credit they held firm as public pressure mounted and complaints actually increased. Now over this hump, Noosa has 85-90% of dogs registered, sound by-laws, good staff and a supportive council. Their problems have diminished and arguably animal welfare in the area has improved.

Historically, a similar experience was recorded in the 1962/63 RSPCA Qld Annual Report which highlights the dilemma of nearly thirty years ago.

" The Brisbane City Council conducted a campaign against dogs straying on public streets, on school grounds and at shopping centres. Two poundsmen were engaged and 557 dogs were impounded, during a three-month trial period. Shortly after the campaign commenced a protest was lodged against the indiscriminate collection of dogs by the poundsmen."

The Brisbane City Council, unlike Noosa, ceased the campaign as a result of the protest and still has the problem. This experience and the experience at Mt. Isa and Noosa should give other Councils the confidence required to tackle animal control.

An analysis of suburbs of origin of dogs admitted at Fairfield Refuge demonstrates that the problem is not uniform and parallels socioeconomic areas of Brisbane. (Appendix 1). It would be surprising if complaints made to the BCC did not also follow this pattern. Strategic management says that you allocate resources to where the problems lie; it also says you don't waste your money in areas where there are no problems. The analysis shows where the problems are and these are the areas that should be targeted by the BCC.

CONCLUSION

The study of animal welfare shelters has been neglected in Australia. Consequently, there is an absence of comprehensive information about the purpose and conduct of shelters and the interrelation between shelters, the community, local government and the veterinary profession. The information that is available however, suggests that the pressure absorbed by animal shelters is inversely proportional to the priority given to animal control by local government. Some local governments, the bodies responsible for the enforcement of animal control by-laws, do not fully accept their responsibility and offer little support for the local shelter. This apathy results in increased pressure on the shelter to the extent that it could jeopardise the welfare of animals.

Another, and perhaps more important factor, is the attitude of the community toward responsible animal ownership. The idealistic reason for shelter establishment was to provide a facility to take all stray animals, hold them to be reclaimed by their owners and rehouse the remainder. Shelters may have unwittingly contributed to this decline in responsible animal ownership by making it too easy to obtain a pet and far too easy for the owner to abdicate all responsibility by either not retrieving a strayed animal or by relinquishing ownership.

It should be the aim of all involved, whether they be in shelters or animal control, that there be no unwanted animal or none born only to be euthanased. This would be a giant step forward for animal welfare.

REFERENCES

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Every veterinarian holds the welfare interests of animals as a primary concern. I became directly involved with the welfare side of our industry, as a private practitioner in the early eighties, through the export of horses by sea. Because of the controversy of this trade at that time, I was approached by the RSPCA to draw up acceptable guidelines for this practice and I am pleased to report that these guidelines were adopted by the Commonwealth Government and are still in place. This association with the RSPCA led to my appointment as the first Education Officer in 1983 and later as an RSPCA Council member. In 1986 I was the RSPCA representative called before the Senate Select Committee on Animal Welfare.

Whilst working for AQIS (Australian Quarantine Inspection Service) I gained first hand experience in the welfare aspects of our rural industries as well as international experience whilst seconded to MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Farming and Fisheries) U.K., during 1987.

In 1990 the RSPCA underwent a management restructure and as a result the new position of Refuge and Branch Manager was created. I have been working in this position since its inception. You can't work in this environment without having your veterinary ideals challenged and without wondering about solutions to the problem. My direction is clear. It is to highlight the problems of animals in shelters, and to assist those capable of addressing these problems to develop solutions.

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