

Pet Access and Urban Animal Management: Quality of Life and Public Amenity

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ABSTRACT

The benefits derived from pet ownership have been researched extensively since the 1970s. There is no doubt that a close relationship with companion animals is of benefit to the emotional and psychological development of children, provides much needed companionship and support to the elderly, assists in the recovery rate of patients suffering from serious illness and decreases the rate of minor illness, and may substantially reduce the risk of heart disease. Pets-as-therapy programs around the world have highlighted the benefits of assistance dogs, horse riding for sufferers of cerebral palsy and other disabilities, and the use of companion animals with mentally disturbed children and adolescents. With such strong support for the benefits of pets it could be suggested that pet ownership should in fact be actively encouraged by governments and health authorities, and it is not inconceivable that pets may be prescribed for the sick or disturbed in the future.

However the increased pressures of urban consolidation high stress lifestyles and a lack of understanding of the behaviour of companion animals is responsible for an increase in the problems associated with the care and management of companion animals.

In this paper I will present the finding of a research project commissioned by the Petcare Information and Advisory Service and conducted by CONTEXT Pty Ltd and Environment & Technology Policy Unit of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. This project looked at the perceived problems associated with pet management in urban areas and solutions to these problems. From this study it is apparent that a simple solution is not possible. More responsible pet ownership can only be achieved through a combination of community education, increased awareness of the benefits of pets and the rights of pet owners and non-pet owners, more attention to development and planning to include provisions for pets, and suitable punitive measures for those who deviate from acceptable standards of animal treatment.

INTRODUCTION

The association of the human species with animals dates back to the prehistoric emergence of the species *Homo sapiens*. While we tend to view the early relationships between mankind and animals as being for purely utilitarian reasons, it is interesting to note that the species that were chosen, or chose, to become the companions of man had very similar social habits to the human species. The dog for example is a gregarious, pack animal with a well-structured social order that ensures the welfare of the group while providing security and protection for the individual. It is little wonder that the dog is the most popular companion animal today, and one of the first species to live closely with humans.

Companion animal ownership is not a solely western phenomenon, nor is it only seen in so called civilised cultures. On the contrary, the care and indulgence of non-productive animals can be shown in virtually every culture from the New Guinea Highlanders, through the native American tribes to Australian Aborigine and Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Why do humans, in so many different circumstances, seem drawn to animals and share their lives with pets?

HUMAN BEHAVIOURAL NEEDS

The basis of the relationship between people and pets is attachment. Attachment is a firmly accepted component of human evolutionary behaviour. Attachment is the behaviour of the young. Its complimentary behaviour in the adult is care-giving or nurturing.

Psychiatrists in the 1970s began studying the nature of the attachment between people and pets. Alasdair MacDonald wrote: "Pets are less threatening and more controllable than human attachment figures. At the same time, the combined qualities of warmth, touch, non-threatening movement and sound produce a simple analogue of human attachment behaviour." Dr Kenneth Keddie said: "Animals bolster the pet owner's morale and remind him that he is, in fact, a special and unique individual."

So we must accept that the basis of pet ownership is not a quirky eccentricity but has a sound behavioural explanation. This information has been used extensively in a variety of pets-as-therapy programs around the world. Whether dealing with socially inept children, emotionally disturbed adolescents, adults recovering from severe illness or the elderly and alone, companion animals have played a significant role in reducing stress and increasing the feeling of self-worth.

In our everyday "normal" lives pets play an important role also. Despite the trend towards urban consolidation, more and more people tend to lead isolated lives. The number of single person households is increasing rapidly, as is the number of crimes against women and the elderly. The role of pets becomes increasingly important in these situations.

Herein lies the dilemma. While there is probably a greater need for pet companionship than ever before, the changing urban landscape is creating an environment that makes pet ownership more difficult.

Urban consolidation, decreased size of private open space (backyards) and increasing competition for public open space (parks) places enormous pressures on dog owners in particular. Similarly for the non-pet owner, closer proximity and increased contact with other peoples' pets seems inevitable.

Urban planning, education programs for pet owners and non-pet owners alike, and the development of realistic and enforceable animal control laws are the key to maintaining the balance between the needs of the majority of our community ie the pet owners, and the welfare and rights of others.

ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH COMPANION ANIMALS

In 1989, a report, Approaches to Pet Management for Local Government, was commissioned by the Petcare Information and Advisory Service. The research was co-ordinated by the Environment and Technology Unit of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. This report identified certain areas of concern:

Noise

- barking/howling dogs
- cats calling at night
- parrots & cockatoos screeching

"Barking dogs are by far the most common cause of animal-related disturbance handled by the Victorian Neighbourhood Mediation Centres. Barking dogs are also a common cause for complaint to municipal councils. Councils receive a lesser number of complaints about noisy cats; these are mainly a problem in the mating season and at night." (CONTEXT Pty Ltd et al 1990)

Fouling of public places

Fouling by dogs and cats in public places causes concern from a public health view point (zoonotic infection such as round worm and toxoplasmosis), and because of the unpleasant experience of dodging droppings on footpaths and in parks.

Odour

Odour is likely to occur where a number of animals are confined to a small yard. There is little documented evidence as to the extent of this problem; however it does highlight some of the difficulties facing owners when they must dispose of faeces and cat litter.

Predation

- dogs worrying livestock and wildlife
- cats hunting native birds and mammals.

The evidence suggests that both these problems are likely to occur on the fringes of urban settlements. More data on the extent of the impact of owned, domestic cats, as opposed to unowned, wild or feral cats, must be tabled before any conclusion can be drawn. Recent surveys of bird watcher's clubs in SA on the number of prey brought home by domestic cats appears to be biased in that there is no indication of whether the cat is the primary cause of death or is merely a secondary predator of injured or sick animals, or a scavenger of dead creatures.

Aggression

- dogs attacking people or other animals.

There has been a great deal of interest in the dog attack issue over the past two years. Unfortunately this has not been helped by the media and highly emotive claims from unsubstantiated sources. In reality, "from 65 to 93% of dog attacks occurred in or near the dog owner's home" (Podberscek & Blackshaw 1990). Despite popular opinion, stray dogs are rarely aggressive towards humans (Beck 1979).

It is important to note, however, that the most common behavioural problem seen at the University of Queensland Veterinary Clinic is aggression (42%) towards people, dogs, cats and chickens (Podberscek & Blackshaw 1990). This problem is obviously a vexing and important subject.

Disease

While there are around 100 zoonoses that may be communicated to humans from dogs and cats, they are of minor importance in Australia where rabies is not prevalent.

Wandering or stray animals

- Owned
 - wandering
 - lost
 - dumped (once owned)
- Never owned
 - partly dependent on humans for food, shelter etc, but not intentionally supported by humans
 - feral animals that live away from human settlements and do not depend on humans for food.

Damage to persons or property

Damage to people or property is a problem closely associated with wandering or stray animals; however owners walking pets may not demonstrate sufficient control to prevent dogs from impinging on the rights of others.

Competition for open space

Parks and other public open space are popular among dog owners for exercising their animals. Two issues can be identified in regard to these areas: on the one hand dog owners may feel there is inadequate provision of open space close to home, and on the other hand the use of such places by dogs may interfere with their enjoyment and use by other members of the community.

EVALUATION OF SOLUTIONS

Education

- **Children**
Children must obtain a basic grounding in the care and management of companion animals. They must be taught to respect all animals and to realise they have a responsibility to care for pets. In schools this can be effectively achieved through the Pet Pep program which should be in every Australian primary school by the end of 1993. Younger children however must also be targeted from as early as possible through their parents and preschool classes.
- **Adults - pet owners**
The expectations of pet ownership and the associated responsibilities have changed rapidly. In the past two decades it has become unacceptable to allow a dog to roam the streets or defecate in public areas. These attitudinal changes in the community are often ignored by pet owners. Educational material aimed at pet owners must aim at raising the awareness of these changes and assist them in being able to meet the more demanding expectations of a far more vocal non-pet owning group.

This education process can occur through:

i. media

- advertising
- human interest/current affair programs
- regular stories in print.

ii. seminars

Highly successful community seminars can be held at local venues with speakers like the local vets and the animal control officer (ACO). Incentive to attend such seminars can be generated by pre-publicity, free gift or bonus eg decreased dog registration fee for attendance.

iii. information booths

This popular concept can access the general public in shopping centres, local festivals and other community activities. The booths must be approachable and staffed by trained personnel who can answer queries.

iv. videos

There are a number of pet education videos available for all age groups. Local libraries could stock these as could veterinary surgeries and council offices.

v. signs

Clear posters and signs indicating acceptable behaviour are essential eg a graphic depicting dog's droppings with a slash through it (AFIRAC 1986:65). This signage must be accompanied by supportive action by councils to provide for the disposal of faeces.

vi. leaflets

Multilingual, easy to understand information brochures should be provided for dissemination at all possible venues.

Letter-boxing such leaflets could be effective.

- The community
The status of pets in the community must be promoted. It should be unacceptable to denigrate the importance of the people/pet relationship or stipulate areas that are exempt to pet owners. The education of the community to accept pet ownership as an integral and important right of its members must be achieved in conjunction with raising the consciousness and concern of pet owners for others.

Identification

"The identification of pets is an important factor in animal control" (CONTEXT et al 1990). While there are ongoing discussions about the effectiveness of microchipping as permanent identification, it does not answer the overriding requirement that identification is easy to read. Collars and tags are still the most effective (and cheapest) method of identification although they have the disadvantage of being easily removed.

It is far more effective for ACOs to be able to return a wandering pet directly to its owner rather than take it to a central pound area that may be a long distance away. This approach also facilitates face-to-face counselling on the problems associated with roaming dogs and the penalties incurred.

Mandatory registration

"Registration is one method of animal control.....Legislation requires that the animal (dogs) be registered with the local government authority with information identifying the name and address of the owner....Mandatory registration aims to facilitate the control of animals in the community, to promote the animal's welfare, provide for punitive measures against irresponsible owners and provide revenue for the implementation of local animal management programs." (CONTEXT et al 1990)

The Social Development Committee (1989) in their report on the role of companion animals in society pointed out that although there is adequate provision in the Victorian Dog Act for the control of dogs, it is not being effectively enforced by all municipalities and that there is a significant number of unregistered and unidentified dogs. This is supported by unpublished data obtained by the Petcare Information and Advisory Service which indicates that registration of dogs across Australia runs at less than 50%.

The problems of compliance with registration requirements has been discussed at length by all those involved in urban animal management, and short of door-to-door registration drives on a six-monthly basis there appears to be no workable solution.

Central Registry

A national Central Animal Registry is in operation through the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales. This registry is based on microchip identification techniques. There have already been several documented cases of lost dogs, with no visible identification, being reunited with their owners through the Registry. While such a scheme has been heralded by some as the key to urban animal control in the future, its role is still limited.

A central registry, whether on a state or national basis, will not address the pressing issues of returning wandering pets to their owners before they become a "welfare case". The welfare of the animal is far better served if it can be quickly returned to its owner with a minimum of fuss and trauma. A central registry, at this stage, will mean a straying pet will be removed to a central pound while its owner is traced through the massive central register; surely this means an increase in the stress placed on both pet and owner.

Planning for pets

- **Housing**
Urban consolidation is leading to a decrease in the size of private open space and increased pressure on public open space. With this in mind it becomes obvious that housing developers should consider designs that will facilitate the owning of pets. A current project by the Petcare Information and Advisory Service has incorporated the skills of a town planner, architect and animal behaviourist to produce some recommendations for developers, builders, architects and local government.
- **Numbers of pets**
Many municipalities have enacted by-laws which limit the numbers of companion animals permissible on each premises. There is a need to have some consistency between these by-laws.
- **Barking**
"Participants in the Local Government workshop (1989) considered owner education to be the best method of dealing with the problem (barking)." (CONTEXT et al 1990)
Education to prevent the public nuisance factor associated with inappropriate behaviour of dogs such as excessive barking would include advice on appropriate breeds of dog, home environment design, easy access to basic obedience training with some form of incentive scheme, and behavioural modification training for those people who already have a problem.
- **Open space usage**
Dogs that are uncontrolled are the most common problem in public open space. This problem can be overcome by leash laws and obedience training (so the dog walks properly on the leash). Park planning should incorporate water and toilet facilities for dogs.
Free-running exercise areas for dogs are suggested by some behaviourists however these should not isolate the pet owner nor deny them the right to access in the general park areas. Children's play areas should be fenced and dogs not permitted in them.
- **Toilets**
"Doggie toilets" have proved successful in France where fouling was a severe problem. Toilet facilities may be installed in high usage parks; however the provision of disposable pooper- scoopers in all parks and bins designed for this refuse should be considered. Signage in parks should ensure that park users are aware of the requirement to clean up after their pet and provide information on the location of pooper-scoopers and bins.
- **Other facilities**
The introduction of various public amenities in urban environments could enhance the quality of life of the companion animal. AFIRAC (1986) suggests some facilities that could be introduced by local government authorities:
 - Shops that prohibit entry to dogs could have tethering hooks located outside, and some shelter from weather.
 - Drinking water could be made available at various locations.
 - Shallow wading areas could be provided for dogs to bathe.
 - Large sandy areas could be provided for dogs to mark and play in.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Companion animals must not be regarded as a luxury, but as an integral part of every Australian household. The benefits and advantages of pet ownership to the community overall, as well as to individuals, are enormous.

Because companion animals are so important we must be supportive of responsible pet ownership and innovative in the ways we approach the problems encountered in urban animal management. It is unacceptable to suggest that increased fees and harsher restrictions will solve these problems.

CONTEXT (1990) recommended specific trials of:

- use of microchips as a means of identification
- mandatory free registration
- voluntary registration used in conjunction with education programs
- use of a nationally standardised dog warden scheme where the warden is an adviser to the community, not just a dog catcher or law enforcer

The Petcare Information and Advisory Service recommends:

- The support of Pet Pep
- Community seminars and dog training programs
- Improved housing design and more effective use of public open space
- The promotion of the ACO as an adviser and friend for those with pet problems rather than merely a dog catcher

The implementation of appropriate penalties for pet owners who transgress from the acceptable management of companion animals, based on a code of practice. These penalties should include educational and training programs.

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A Brisbane girl, Kathy graduated with a Bachelor of Veterinary Science from the University of Queensland in 1982. Kathy has undertaken a variety of mixed practice positions in central Queensland, New South Wales and South Gippsland. She was a lecturer/instructor at Emerald Pastoral and Agricultural College specialising in genetics, microbiology, horse health and nutrition. Following the completion of her Graduate Diploma in Education from the Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education, Kathy spent 18 months with the Victorian Ministry of Education where she was involved in the implementation of new programs and policies. In 1990 she joined the Petcare Information and Advisory Service as the National Manager. Petcare is a non-commercial, community service set up to promote responsible pet ownership and funded by Uncle Ben's of Australia. Her work at Petcare has included the promotion of pet education programs for children and adults and coordinating original research in the area of urban animal management and the human-companion animal bond. She is well known for her media appearances and writing for popular magazines.

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