

Information Document on Unwanted Companion Animals

Solving the problem of unwanted companion animals (UCA) – the five principles.

1. Understand the root causes of the problem

- a. Conduct good quality research and compile accurate meaningful statistics
- b. Identify where animals are coming from and why they have been surrendered to a shelter

Important considerations:

- There are regional differences – due to climate¹, location², human demographics³, legislation⁴, enforcement⁵, education⁶, surrender policy of shelter⁷, local veterinary capacity⁸
- Strong consideration must be given to not just the quantity (numbers) of animals involved, but an assessment and evaluation must be made about their suitability as a potential pet animal through adoption program. Analysis of this “quality” measure enables a deeper understanding of root cause⁹
- There are *multiple* causes for animals being surrendered to shelters – they need to be identified for each shelter / region.

2. Education in responsible pet ownership / guardianship

- a. Education is to be encouraged at all levels and through all channels

Important considerations:

- Education programs should be of high quality and be independently evaluated
- Education is a powerful adjunct to most other programs
- The provision of education must have both short and long term objectives.

3. Identification

- a. Encourage identification of owned animals in order to differentiate them from un-owned animals
- b. There are multiple methods of identification

Important considerations:

- Many animals (particularly cats) in the shelter population are not identified.
- Definitions of ‘pet’ and ‘owned pet’ will help to clarify much contention within the issues¹⁰.

¹ eg: cat breeding season is longer in warmer climates than cooler climates

² A shelter located in a high profile position may attract a higher number of surrenders

³ Surrender rates have been known to vary in different human socio-economic areas

⁴ eg: a ‘cat curfew’ or legal trapping of roaming cats will increase the rate of cats entering a shelter

⁵ Well enforced legislation has a different effect on surrender rates than poorly enforced legislation

⁶ The introduction of a good quality education campaign may reduce the burden on shelters where no education was provided before

⁷ Shelters that have open, unrestricted surrender policies may see more surrenders than limited entry shelters

⁸ Regions with poor or zero access to veterinary services may have a greater animal welfare burden

⁹ eg if most dogs surrendered to a shelter are young adults with behavioural problems, then the problem is not one of numbers ‘born’, it is a problem of numbers ‘retained’ as pets

¹⁰ It is recognised that not all ‘pets’ in welfare shelters have come from homes, which suggests that the meaning of ‘pet’ needs clarification. If they are not ‘pets’, then how should we refer to them? This is particularly true of the term ‘pet overpopulation’.

4. Strategically target programs such as desexing

- a. 'Blanket' whole-population desexing campaigns are unlikely to achieve considerable further reduction in shelter admissions, due to the already high level of voluntary compliance with desexing practices¹¹.
- b. Targeted ('niche') desexing campaigns can be well managed, measured and evaluated in the short term, and can have a profound effect on the surrender rates¹²

Important considerations:

- Accurate data enables identification of target animal populations (eg semi-owned cats); target demographic segments; or target geographic area.
- Accurate data further enables a decision as to whether a desexing program occurs in isolation, has adjuncts such as education, or is completely replaced by another initiative.

5. Balance population to demand

- a. Supply and demand mismatches are known to occur¹³
- b. Improved adoption processes can dramatically increase the adoption rate and reduce the return rate¹⁴

Important considerations:

- There are complex inter-relationships of cat subpopulations which confuse our understanding of supply and demand of cats into pet ownership.
- The kitten season phenomenon makes matching the demand for kittens a challenge.
- If a demand for pets by responsible pet owners is not filled by responsible sources, then irresponsible sources will fill this gap
- Balancing population to demand will require creative solutions¹⁵

¹¹ Annual surveys of the owned pet cat population find that desexing rates within this population exceed 91% for breeding age female cats.

¹² eg the NSW RSPCA CAWS program

¹³ RSPCA ACT has recently received several hundred kittens flown from northern QLD to satisfy the demand in ACT. RSPCA Yagoona (Sydney) brings puppies and kittens in from rural centres to alleviate a supply – demand mismatch.

¹⁴ At least one welfare shelter has increased adoption rates by 20% over 2 years through the use of an integrated temperament / matching / training program. Improved cat adoptions have occurred through increasing exposure of adoptable cats through responsible non-shelter outlets.

¹⁵ eg interstate relocation of puppies and kittens, a recent initiative by RSPCA QLD and ACT.