

Queensland Government's initiatives in animal welfare

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ABSTRACT

The Animals Protection Act has been reviewed in Queensland. As a result, an Animal Welfare Advisory Committee is to be established and codes of practice are to be introduced to support the legislation. A Bureau of Animal Welfare has been established to co-ordinate the Government's policy. Education is an important part of this policy. The Queensland Government is a major sponsor of Pet Week and is trialing Pet Pep in primary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Animal welfare is now well and truly on the agenda in Queensland. Since 1990 there has been a substantial increase in interest and awareness of animal welfare issues. Central to our understanding of animal welfare is the Animals Protection Act, "an Act for the more effectual prevention of cruelty to animals". The current Queensland legislation was written in 1925 and does not adequately reflect modern society's views on animal welfare. Consequently, a committee was established in 1990 to review the legislation and to make recommendations for changes. As a result of the review, a Green Paper was issued for public comment. A Bill is now being prepared which incorporates the public submissions and which will better represent the viewpoint of the community in the 1990s.

As well as establishing the legislative framework, the Government has recognised the importance of education in spreading the animal welfare message. The Government is a major sponsor of Pet Week and is trialing a petcare education program (Pet Pep) in primary schools.

LEGISLATION

The proposed legislation will introduce a new approach to animal welfare which, as well as determining what is considered cruel, also emphasises the obligation to care for animals under our control and to ensure they are not subject to unnecessary cruelty.

Animal Welfare Advisory Committee

A statutory body called the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC) will be established to facilitate the development of a balanced and co-ordinated approach to animal welfare matters and to provide expert advice to the Minister on animal welfare issues.

The specific functions of the Committee will be:

- to advise the Minister on any matter relating to existing or proposed legislation affecting the welfare of animals;
- to advise the Minister on any matter, policy or practices, affecting the welfare of animals;
- to participate, in conjunction with the Bureau of Animal Welfare, in the development of codes of practice and regulations relating to animals and their welfare and to review and endorse existing codes where appropriate;
- to provide advice to government and non-government bodies on programs to improve community awareness about animals and their humane treatment;
- to develop such education programs as the Committee deems necessary;
- to develop such training programs for officers appointed under the Act as the Committee deems necessary including examinations for persons who have applied for appointment to the position of an officer;
- to form special committees and boards to oversee, investigate or research any matter which is within the authority of the Committee;
- to report annually to the Minister on activities and achievements of the Committee

Codes of Practice

Statutory regulations can be a cumbersome and somewhat inflexible way to deal with all situations involving the use and treatment of animals. While the new legislation will identify specific behaviour which clearly amounts to cruelty, there are a number of areas in which regulations would prove to be clumsy and unworkable.

The preferred option in these situations is to adopt codes of practice as a minimum standard for the use and treatment of animals in particular situations. There are numerous benefits to the use of codes of practice to supplement legislation. These include:

- a clearer and more manageable main body of legislation while maintaining base lines for animal management and care;
- provision of flexibility to modify and improve animal welfare regulations in line with changing community standards, scientific knowledge and technological change;
- balanced representation of current community views through community involvement in the development of the codes;
- significant educational value through use of the codes as a tool to improve community awareness of animal needs; and
- provision for consistency in the standards of animal welfare from state to state if the codes are developed and accepted as national codes.

Acceptance of new codes of practice or alterations to existing codes will be through endorsement to the Minister by the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC).

The preparation of codes of practice will account for the advantages to be obtained by consulting and involving those affected by the code, while recognising that:

- there is usually a strong case for adopting codes that are the same as those used interstate; and
- many codes already in existence have been prepared on a basis of extensive consultation and consideration of the issues.

Bureau of Animal Welfare

The Government has established a Bureau of Animal Welfare which has the following functions:

- the administration of the provisions of the new Animals Protection Act, regulations and codes of practice;
- the review of existing, and development of new, legislation pertaining to animal welfare;
- the co-ordination and provision of policy advice to the Minister, Government and non-government bodies on animal welfare issues;
- the provision of secretariat services to the AWAC, various other sub-committees and boards;
- the development and implementation of both initial and on-going training programs for persons appointed as "officers" under the Animals Protection Act;
- the improvement of animal welfare through:
 - the initiation and encouragement of studies of animal welfare problems;
 - the review and development of codes of practice and regulations for the welfare of animals; and
 - the implementation of efficient community information systems to disseminate knowledge of the needs of animals and animal welfare developments;
- representation on national animal welfare committees and bodies to facilitate national approaches to animal welfare issues.

EDUCATION

No matter what the legislation, if there is no understanding or support for it, it will be difficult to enforce. This is particularly so with animal welfare legislation. Hence the need for a widespread awareness and education program to support the main aim of the Animals Protection Act which is to prevent cruelty to animals.

The Government is a major sponsor of Pet Week and works in close association with a range of groups such as the Australian Veterinary Association, RSPCA, Canine Control Council, pet shops and local authorities to promote responsible pet ownership.

Last year, we targeted our support to a pilot school kit which provided a video, posters, books and worksheets to primary school children. Primary schools were chosen as this was considered to be the age at which children would be most receptive to this material. Building on last year's success, a modified version of the program has been sent to all primary schools in Queensland this year. It was our intention to eventually develop a program which could be incorporated into the school curriculum.

Fortunately for us, an excellent Petcare Education Program has been developed in Western Australia specifically to enhance children's understanding of animals.

I'd like to quote from the foreword of this program (Hopkins, 1991) as I think it sums up the Government's attitude very well.

"Our society places many pressures upon us and urbanisation may lead to increased alienation from animals. Pet Pep provides the opportunity for all children to learn about and have contact with animals.

"The human-animal bond has been shown to have many benefits to both parties. Animals are better cared for and an increased awareness of environmental conservation and the preservation of endangered species is often apparent as people learn and understand more about animals. A positive association with animals provides people with the opportunity to love, share and enjoy companionship and security.

"A close association with pets has also been shown to enhance childhood development in many ways. These include the encouragement of a caring, nurturing attitude, development of observational and exploratory skills as well as promoting healthy emotional development and socialisation behaviour. Pets also play a special role in the lives of aged people, by giving comfort, security and companionship.

"Mutual respect, unconditional love and trust are important attributes which are freely exchanged between people and pets but can only exist when a clear understanding of the needs of pets has been established.

"There are some negative aspects of living in a society where pets are kept. Uncared for and unwanted pets often results in acts of negligence and cruelty as well as contributing to the perpetual problem of stray animals. Animal bites and attacks by pets, especially poorly controlled dogs, can leave long standing physical and emotional scars on victims.

We can all live safely and happily with pets in our society if we learn and understand how to care for animals."

Essay competition

MLAs have run an essay competition in primary schools for Pet Week. Prizes for this competition are usually animal books which reinforce the message of responsible animal ownership.

CONCLUSION

The revised Animals Protection Act sets the foundation to provide a basis for support, education and advice to the general community. The legislation recognises that we use, but should not abuse animals.

Significant resources are being channelled into means of ensuring there is a widespread understanding of animal welfare issues and the consequent responsibility of owners to meet minimum standards of care.

The stage has been set to ensure that all aspects of animal welfare are examined and that co-ordinated efforts are made to improve the welfare of animals in Queensland.

REFERENCE

Hopkins, D. 1991, Pet Pep: Petcare Education Programme, Australian Veterinary Association.

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In 1981 I moved from clinical veterinary practice into the government service. Whilst working for the New Zealand Government, I was able to further my interest in animal behaviour and husbandry by undertaking an MSc in Animal Health at London University. My thesis, which was entitled "Behavioural Indicators of Animal Welfare", examined the information we can get about husbandry systems by observing the reactions of farm animals.

Since that time, both in New Zealand and Queensland, I have been involved with government animal welfare policies and legislation.

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