

Pet Overpopulation: A Public Concern

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Reaction Statement

[P]et overpopulation remains a major problem because the most intelligent animals of all, human beings, don't think before they buy or adopt pets. North Carolina euthanized more than 265,289 cats and dogs in 2002, and the state's euthanasia rate is more than double the national average. In the last fiscal year, Guilford County euthanized 2,980 dogs, 2,196 cats and 1,085 other pets. In July of this year alone, 311 dogs, 212 cats and 122 other pets were put to death in Guilford County.¹

Importance

I have felt a deep connection with animals from an early age. Having Asperger's Syndrome, I was relatively uninterested in other people as a boy. People were too complex for me to understand. I got along much better with animals, who express their emotions much more simply. Around age thirteen, I was informed of the animal protection movement, whose goal of ending the abuse and exploitation of our fellow creatures appealed to me. Since my junior year in high school, I have followed animal protection issues in the political arena, believing laws and regulations to be the most effective ways of securing short-term improvement in our treatment of animals.

Humans possess the capacity for reason and for moral behavior, which is unique in the animal kingdom. This capacity, I believe, gives us the obligation to do the right thing, to behave morally and ethically, both to members of our own species and to members of others. Through laws which govern the actions of people towards animals, government is the primary human institution through which our capacity to enforce ethical behavior is put to the test. Government at all levels in the United States, however, fails to live up to this responsibility.

¹ Allen H. Johnson, "Letting sleeping pups lie: pet tax proposal stuck in political doghouse," Greensboro News and Record, 12 September 2004, sec. H, p. 2.

The statistics given in the *Greensboro News and Record* article quoted above are abhorrent. Our twenty-first-century society is perfectly capable of achieving a nation in which no healthy animal is put to death for lack of a home. What is lacking, however, is education and concern. Many Americans, both those who have pets and those who do not, are unaware of the problem or do not see it as affecting them. Without attention to the issue among the general public, government has not realized its role in affecting a true solution, while it continues to send loads of taxpayer money to the capture, sheltering and disposition of unwanted companion animals.

Definition

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the number of Americans keeping pets in urban and suburban areas has greatly increased. In 2001, out of 80,000 households surveyed, 36.1% owned at least one dog, 31.6% had cats and 6.3% had other animals.² Before the 1970s, many people let their pets breed indiscriminately. This led to a crisis of cat and dog overpopulation which has not abated to this day. In the 1940s, county and municipal governments began to take responsibility for dealing with large amounts of stray animals and the public health hazard they pose. Thus, most American cities and towns hired dog catchers and established dog pounds for housing strays, while the issue of feral cats was all but ignored. Since it was impossible to find homes for all the stray dogs, local authorities began euthanizing dogs and cats in high volumes.

“Euthanasia” comes from the Greek roots “eu-,” meaning good or kind, and “thantos,” meaning death. Despite the intended meaning of the word, death is often not kind for cats and dogs. Early on, most “euthanasia” was done by gassing, electrocution, or gun-shot.

² U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States 2004-2005, 124th Ed.

Since the animal welfare movement of the 1970s and 1980s, however, lethal injection of sodium pentobarbital has become a prevalent method of euthanasia. Growing public concern also affected changes in semantics: pounds have become animal shelters and dog catchers have become animal control officers. Even though the cultural emphasis is now on humane care and adoption of stray cats and dogs, the stray pet population is bigger than ever before, and growth shows no signs of slowing.

This crisis is maintained not only from uneducated people indifferently or misinformedly allowing “backyard pets” to breed, but the majority of animals who end up in shelters come from massive commercial breeding operations, often called “puppy mills,” which churn out thousands of animals for sale to pet shops. Many pet shops then sell these animals to people without educating their new guardians about their responsibilities. Each of these components make up the vicious cycle that perpetuates the current crisis.

Animal shelters remain necessary, though publicly undesirable, institutions in most cities and counties. In many locales, animal shelters are operated by non-profit animal welfare organizations which either contract with governments that perform animal control duties or exercise these duties themselves. Whether or not they actually perform the service, city and county governments generally pay for it. In North Carolina, for example, cities and counties spend a total of \$33 million annually on animal control, sheltering and euthanasia.³ This constitutes a significant portion of local taxes for the state’s residents. While more urbanized counties generally have better-run animal shelters, rural areas still keep impounded animals outdoors and use gas or gunshot for “euthanasia.”

Position

³ Op cit. Johnson.

The primary problem with government's current approach to pet overpopulation is that it only addresses the symptoms and not the disease itself. By spending more each year on rounding up, sheltering, trying to adopt out, and euthanizing more unwanted cats and dogs, local governments are implicit in allowing the crisis to grow to a point where it will be beyond the scope of our control. Despite the continued funding increases, animal control offices are chronically understaffed and officers are underpaid, spending most of their working hours catching strays and bringing them to the local shelter. The overabundance of stray animals in crowded cities, as well as in suburbs and rural areas, creates a health hazard (facilitating the spread of rabies and other diseases) and a safety hazard (the possibility of stray animals attacking people, especially children).

The solution is for state governments to fund and promote high-volume sterilization of cats and dogs through safe and effective spay and neuter surgeries. Sterilization targets the problem at its source by preventing unwanted animals from being born in the first place, and the procedure also benefits the health and longevity of animals. State legislatures should then go a step farther by requiring domestic cats and dogs to be sterilized unless the owner possesses a breeding permit. State or local governments should also license and regulate dog and cat breeders, particularly mass commercial ones. Publicly funded low-cost spay-neuter programs should be operated by nonprofits that target low-income and rural areas, where indiscriminate breeding is most rampant.

The benefits of having the pet population under control are numerous. Not only does it save tax dollars in the long run, it eliminates a public health and safety hazard and frees time for animal control officers to focus on their main duty: to enforce animal welfare

and public safety laws. Controlling it would also prove that our society is capable of being one in which no animal has to die for lack of a home and which cares for other creatures.

Supporting Arguments

High numbers of stray and feral cats and dogs pose several dangers to the public. A primary health concern from stray animals is rabies, a brain infection that is uniformly fatal in many animal species, including humans. Estimates of worldwide annual human deaths from rabies run as high as 70,000.⁴ It is spread through the bite of infected animals. Rabies vaccination and treatment for humans and animals are readily available in the United States, but the disease is still not fully under control. Stray cats and dogs, usually the feral descendants of household pets, contract rabies from wild animals or their carcasses. Rabid animals are more likely to bite people than healthy ones, making stray cats and dogs two of the primary transmitters of the disease to humans. Not only that, but many strays are more aggressive than other domestic animals. Every week at least one American newspaper reports of a painful or deadly mauling by a loose dog. Reading these stories causes those who dislike dogs to advocate for stricter regulations on their guardians as well as better animal control services, which only serves to prolong the vicious cycle.

Not only strays, but pet dogs and cats who have spent their entire lives with humans, end up in animal shelters. Relinquishment of companion animals is the second largest source of incoming animals to shelters behind the capture of strays. In a 1999 study, respondents listed several reasons for giving their pets to shelters, the top reason being “human housing issues,” meaning that an animal did not do well in his or her indoor living situation (30.4% of relinquishers cited this reason). The second most cited was “nonaggression

⁴ Daniel G. Hankins and Julia A. Rosekrans, “Overview, Prevention and Treatment of Rabies,” Mayo Clinic Proceedings, Vol. 79 Issue 5 (May 2004): 671.

behavior problems,” e.g. chewing on couches, not being housetrained (29.5%), and third was “human health and personal issues, meaning that the guardian(s) were no longer physically or otherwise able to care for the animal (27.1%).⁵ Many of these factors are uncontrollable, but a lot of relinquishment can be prevented through better education of those who decide to take animals into their homes, including visits to the animal’s new home by animal care professionals. Some governments require people adopting shelter animals to be educated on animal care and matched to the right animal for their lifestyle and a few pet stores and breeders do similar screening of potential buyers.

Laws requiring or financially promoting spaying and neutering have been passed in many locales, with counties and cities in the Northeast and in California adopting the most stringent measures. One example of an effective policy is the institution of differentiated licensing fees, which means that those who have unsterilized animals pay more for a pet license than do guardians of sterilized animals. The City of Los Angeles has what some consider to be the most stringent differentiated licensing law in the nation, charging \$100 per unsterilized dog versus \$10 per sterilized dog.⁶ New Hampshire is the first state to have a state-funded spay-neuter campaign which is already significantly lowering its pet population as well as sheltering and euthanasia costs. The funds come from dog licensing fees, which are two dollars per dog per year, with 25 cents of each fee going to the program, providing more than enough operational funding. Every dollar the state spent on its sterilization program in its first seven years saved \$3.15 in impoundment costs.⁷ The Granite

⁵ Janet M. Scarlett, Mo D. Salman, John G. New Jr., Philip H. Kass, “Reasons for Relinquishment of Companion Animals in U.S. Animal Shelters: Selected Health and Personal Issues,” Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1999): 41-57.

⁶ Pat Morrison, “Doing the Right Thing for Pets and People,” Los Angeles Times, 24 March 2000, sec. B, p. 1.

⁷ Peter Marsh, “The New Hampshire Spay/Neuter Program: Lessons from the First 10 Years,” Pet Savers, 25 August 2003 <http://www.petsavers.org/articles/Spay_Neuter/State_Programs/NH_Spay_Neuter.html> (3 March 2005)

State has also implemented licensing fees for commercial kennels and raised the sales tax for dogs or cats who have not been spayed or neutered.⁸ In North Carolina, a state legislative study commission proposed legislation that, in its original form, would have implemented statewide differentiated licensing, breeder licensing as well as a state-funded sterilization campaign. The spay/neuter campaign and enforcement of licensing laws would have been funded by an assessment on pet food. Its passage would have made the Tar Heel State the first U.S. state to implement all of these measures simultaneously. Unfortunately, the bill failed due to strong anti-tax sentiment in Raleigh, but its components are now being reintroduced in smaller pieces of legislation.

Opponents of many companion animal population control and welfare measures include both commercial and hobby breeders, hunters who use hunting dogs, some veterinarians, as well as industries that profit from a high pet population and high euthanasia numbers, such as pet food manufacturers. Breeders argue that high license fees hurt their business and that new laws do not discriminate between responsible breeders and untrained “backyard breeders.” While breeders’ interest groups, such as the National Animal Interest Alliance (NAIA), are quick to argue that “puppy mills” do not reflect the practices of most breeders, the American Kennel Club continues to issue pedigrees to commercially-bred dogs without investigating the conditions under which they are bred. Groups like NAIA see proponents of these policies as animal rights zealots whose ultimate goal is to end breeding and even pet ownership in its entirety. The reality is that the call for a policy solution to the overpopulation crisis has come mostly from guardians who would not want to give up their companions.

⁸ Jack Kenny, “Lawmakers mull neuter surcharge on pet purchases,” *New Hampshire Business Review*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (4 February 2005): 20.

Some veterinarians charge that nonprofit groups offering government-subsidized low-cost sterilization cut into their profits and that such spays and neuters are done less professionally, although the American Veterinary Medical Association does not endorse this position. In fact, most low-cost sterilization is done by AVMA-licensed veterinarians. Pet food companies argue that they are not the cause of the problem, but rather irresponsible people who happen to buy their products are to blame. However, many of these companies buy raw meat for pet food from dealers who buy the carcasses of euthanized animals from shelters. Lowering the pet population would remove this undesirable element from pet food.

Conclusion

Although the reality for many of the animals most Americans cherish still does not conform to the cultural ideal, a lot of progress has been made in reducing the population of cats and dogs and, as a result, euthanasias. A lot of work remains to be done, however, and the efforts of animal protection advocates need to be focused in the political arena: lobbying state legislatures, county commissions and city councils to pass needed laws and working with executive agencies (usually agriculture and health departments) to ensure that these measures are properly enforced. These political strategies must always be complimented by consistent mass public education.

Most Americans care about the welfare of companion animals. If more of these people knew about what goes on in animal shelters every day, and the root causes of the vicious cycle that causes the needless suffering and death of thousands of animals, there would be a broader outcry for stronger government action. Although many are resistant to the idea of paying more in taxes or fees to control the problem, the money that will be saved in the long

run will benefit all taxpayers, not just those with pets. In the end, a better world for animals and people is possible when the public is informed and involved and elected officials are responsive to their calls.

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