

Pets in Today's Society

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The present pet population explosion is an important public health problem and is becoming potentially more serious each year in terms of injuries from animal bites, transmission of disease from stray and unwanted animals, and other health hazards. The American Humane Association's position on pets in today's society is presented.

Introduction

Since the beginning of recorded history, man has demonstrated his desire for the companionship of some animal, most frequently, but not always, a dog. According to Dr. Boris Levinson, "Pets upgrade the quality of life, bring us closer to nature, provide companionship and emphasize the fact that animals must be accepted as desirable participants in society."¹

This need for close association with pet animals has not changed drastically during the last few centuries. The diminishing sense of responsibility of some pet owners, however, as well as several other dominant factors, has contributed to the present, perplexing "pet animal population explosion."

It has not been the purpose of The American Humane Association (AHA) to attempt to determine the cause of specific problems other than when prevention of cruelty is under consideration. Rather, it has been the philosophy of this organization to consider the problem with a broad and positive viewpoint. With this approach and especially in concert with the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), and hopefully with the American Public Health Association, all possible answers will be evaluated. It is hoped that this will ultimately result in an acceptable and effective pet animal population control program. To assume this posture, it has become apparent to the AHA that certain philosophical guidelines have to be adopted. In view

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of this, the history of the humane movement has to be reviewed and policies must be modified to meet present-day demands.

It is well known that historically the function of the humane movement has been that of *prevention*; e.g., "to prevent intentional and unintentional mistreatment and deprivation of animals' essential needs, whenever the animals are directly or indirectly in human custody."² The mission of The American Humane Association is to prevent cruelty, a term used with the legal connotation!

Additionally, it has always had a sincere concern for the public health and safety of this great country. Legislative history will indicate that the AHA has led campaigns for legislation, regulation, inspection, and enforcement, including, but not limited to, the elimination of "swill" milk dairies, the growth of veterinary services, rabies control in pet animals and wildlife, humane transportation, humane slaughter of food animals, as well as pet animal population control programs.

The AHA is not an anti-vivisection nor anti-hunting organization but it has the philosophy that when an animal must be killed, this act must be performed in a dignified and humane manner.

The Pet Animal Population Explosion

Within the above frame of reference, the AHA has viewed the present pet animal population explosion with dismay. No one segment of our society must receive all of the blame for this explosion, but if pressed to identify the major offenders, most of those actively concerned with this ever-growing problem would consider irresponsible pet owners to be the primary culprits. The AHA postulates that the pet animal population explosion has occurred primarily

when irresponsible pet owners have deprived their pets of "essential needs" by indiscriminate breeding and/or abandoning unwanted dogs or cats. These acts have resulted in a direct contribution to the feral or stray pet animal population. The AHA therefore condemns the irresponsibility of pet owners as demonstrated either in the form of abandonment or by other means mistreating an animal, such as by permitting an estrous bitch or queen to roam at large. This lack of responsibility subjects her to the attentions of an alert male or to the traumatic impact of a fast moving vehicle. In the former instance the irresponsible owner is contributing to the pet population explosion, while in the latter such an owner is directly responsible for the suffering and possible death of the accident victim.

The pet animal population explosion problem has been with mankind for years³; however, the average citizen has not been aware of the seriousness of the problem. If government officials other than those concerned with public health have recognized the problem, they have done very little to date to correct it. According to a recent survey,⁴ only 50 per cent of the estimated 34,000,000 dogs in the U.S.A. were licensed. Is this a sufficient percentage to indicate strict and/or proper animal control? Does it suggest evidence of responsible ownership? In this same survey, with 27 per cent of the counties in the U.S.A. reporting, 12 per cent of these indicated that no animal control laws were enacted. It is submitted that this is frank evidence of governmental irresponsibility. To illustrate the magnitude of this catastrophe: in an attempt to express this problem in terms of human population growth, one research group⁵ reported that while approximately 415 human beings are born each hour in the U.S.A., approximately 2,000 to 3,500 dogs and cats are born during the same period (assuming an average life span of 3 to 5 years).

Stray Animals

Instances of irresponsibility as described above are repeated innumerable times each day and are the principal cause for the stray animal population plaguing most of the world today.

The presence of large numbers of stray animals greatly increases the public health hazard of rabies and of animal bites and the secondary infections associated with such bites. All of these can be costly in terms of human suffering and tax dollars. Consequently, some progressive communities have taken the necessary action to keep the number of stray animals at a practicably low level.⁶ Nonetheless, according to a recent interim report of the AVMA Council on Veterinary Service, "Elected officials have been derelict in providing for and effectively enforcing animal control laws. . . ."⁷

The stray animal problem is seldom called to the attention of the citizenry until some unfortunate incident is experienced; likewise, few people are aware of the true sources of stray animals, the principal ones being abandonment of animals and lack of confinement of animals with enormous reproductive potential. It has been calculated that one female dog, under ideal conditions, can be respon-

sible for the birth of 494 female dogs in a 5-year period, if the initial female and all subsequent ones produce two females per litter. If, however, each female produces three females per litter, the end result in 5 years might be approximately 4,900 females. These are startling figures when we consider that any community with a human population of 50,000 might have from 100 to 300 stray female dogs within its boundaries on any given day. Fortunately, ideal conditions seldom exist, and all stray females do not live 5 years. If it were not for these natural forces intervening, it is difficult to imagine what would happen.⁶

These figures illustrate the potential problem confronting any community and why it is imperative that appropriate animal control programs be evaluated, strengthened if necessary, and strictly enforced. The most important programs in this context are: animal pickup, impoundment, and euthanasia, augmented by licensure, rabies vaccination, and confinement.⁶

The Neutering Program

Reams have been published extolling the beneficial results derived from strict enforcement of pet animal neutering programs. While these authors might have documentary evidence to support their claims, it does not appear logical, nor is it financially or physically possible, to eliminate the pet animal population explosion by surgical means alone. The AHA avidly supports the premise that surgical neutering is only an adjunct to the total solution. It further strongly urges that municipal and state governments enact laws which would be favorable to the neutered dog or cat with respect to animal licensure fees. The Association has also been a champion of the policy of insisting that all animals "adopted out" from an animal shelter or city pound be neutered before the adoption process is finalized. It is readily admitted, however, that to champion a cause and to have the legal and financial support to implement the plan successfully are considerably different. For this reason among others, it is submitted that an intensive education program be directed toward all pet animal owners.

Recently the development of a mechanical contraceptive device has been announced.⁸ This is an intravaginal device as opposed to an intrauterine device. The modus operandi of this method of birth control is prevention of intromission and thus avoidance of ejaculation.

Review of the preliminary research data pertaining to this device by the AHA revealed evidence that the potentialities of it were great. This method of contraception should be especially helpful in instances where the pet owner desires to avoid pregnancy but cannot afford the prevailing ovariohysterectomy (spay) fee. The AHA will continue to follow the technical development and field trial results of this device with the anticipation of recommending its use in selected shelters.

The immunological approach to contraception in dogs and cats is also being studied by several investigators. The AHA is sponsoring one such project. To date, none of these research efforts has produced an acceptable and marketable product.

Protecting the Environment

It is a well known fact that the majority of pet animals are given the best of everything, both materially and emotionally. This premise taken at face value has certain esthetic, public health, and ecological implications that must be evaluated critically. As a direct result of the increasing numbers of both controlled and stray pets in a given area, the incidence of animal bites and property damage can also be expected to increase. Furthermore, in many large city parks today, one must walk with his eyes glued to the walking surface—lawn, sidewalks, etc.—as though he were in a military mine field in order to avoid being confronted with pet excrement. The esthetic as well as the public health aspects of an environment of this type need no further elaboration. It is important, however, to mention that the possibility of transmitting the larvae of the intestinal parasite, *Toxocara canis*, through this contaminant is real and particularly serious in the instance of barefooted children. The AHA supports wholeheartedly the enactment and strict enforcement of laws requiring pets to be under the direct physical control of their owner or attendant at all times.

Prevention of Rabies

The ever-present public health problem of rabies must always be kept in critical focus. While the majority of rabid animals diagnosed in this country within the past 10 to 15 years belong to the "wild animal" species, dogs and cats continue to become infected even though at a much reduced incidence and thus are a constant potential vector of this fatal disease. Of equal importance in this context is the fact that pack dogs frequently become infected with rabies virus. When this occurs, a serious threat confronts man and other animals—both feral (skunk, opossum, and raccoon) and domestic (especially dogs and cats). In this regard, the AHA supports all federal regulations, as well as the recommendations of the AVMA, regarding immunization and other control programs designed to eliminate this fatal disease.

Exotic Animal Pets

During recent years, numerous fads have been in vogue, e.g., raccoon coats, countless dress styles, long haired male youths, and the ownership of exotic pets. Of these life styles, exotic pet ownership is without question the most dangerous to the health and welfare of the owner and equally as cruel to the animals concerned. Did this sad state of affairs develop as a result of our affluence and acute awareness of exotic pets as status symbols? Or could it be a combination of affluence, status consciousness, and exploitation by commercial interests? The latter are all too eager to capitalize on the persons who are not animal oriented at the expense of the well-being of the species being exploited. If this last possibility were thoroughly investigated, it is conceivable that commercial exploitation would be shown to share much of the responsibility for this pathetic fad.

Associated with this detestable fad are several facets of serious concern not only to the AHA, but to all sensible

individuals whose interests include conservation, public health, and provision of a normal life style for all animals. Some of the fad pets, such as the cheetah, ocelot, and some nonhuman primates, are rapidly becoming extinct. Others are known vectors of zoonotic diseases such as tuberculosis, infectious hepatitis, shigellosis, and salmonellosis, to mention only a few. In practically all instances these fad animals live an abbreviated life span, most likely as a result of their new environment and human overindulgence.

With the foregoing as a prelude, the AHA is adamantly opposed to the sale and use of exotic fad animals as pets. It does not subscribe to the "sales pitch" that human exposure to these wild animals stimulates the owner's concern for their survival. It most vigorously supports all organizations whose efforts are directed to the protection of wildlife from exploitation and especially endorses the action of the AVMA, American Animal Hospital Association, US Animal Health Association, International Union for Conservation of Nature, and the signatory nations of the Treaty on International Trade of Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna in opposing the individual ownership of exotic pets.

Euthanasia

No discussion of the pet animal population explosion problem would be complete without mentioning the proper and humane methods of euthanasia. The AHA supports completely the views of the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia.⁹ Regardless of the euthanasia method of choice, competence and integrity of the operating personnel as well as the operational status of the equipment used are essential to provide a dignified and humane death.

The AHA is unequivocally opposed to the use of succinylcholine for purposes of euthanasia. It also condemns the practice of intracardiac administration of euthanizing agents unless such procedures are actually performed by a veterinarian or other medical scientist proficient in this technique.

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APPENDIX A

The position of The American Humane Association on this vital but broad subject can be stated as follows:

1. Implement at an early date the following steps, as

recommended by the AVMA at its meeting in July, 1973,¹⁰ which are:

- Strict enforcement of existing animal control laws and development of more comprehensive and improved regulations;
- Substantial differential license fees for unspayed and unneutered animals;
- Control measures for cats comparable to those for dogs;
- Intensive public education designed to help pet owners become more responsible and concerned;
- Mandatory sterilization of all domestic animals released for adoption from humane societies and animal shelters;
- Support for research aimed at finding safe, inexpen-

sive, and effective nonsurgical methods of birth control for dogs and cats.

2. The American Humane Association is concerned with the prevention of cruelty. It recognizes, therefore, that a dignified and humane death is preferable to the slow and agonizing death stray or unwanted animals might otherwise experience from injury, starvation, neglect, or disease. The ultimate, most humane kindness would be to prevent pet animal proliferation—not to destroy the offspring. With the combined efforts of the AVMA, APHA, AHA, and others, this goal can be attained.

3. Every effort possible should be devoted to the elimination of the sale and/or ownership of any exotic (fad) animal as a pet.

NOMINATIONS SOUGHT FOR MINDEL C. SHEPS AWARD

Nominations are requested for the Mindel C. Sheps Award in Mathematical Demography, to be presented for the second time in 1976 and every second year thereafter. The award has been established by the Mindel C. Sheps Memorial Fund and is sponsored by the Population Association of America and the University of North Carolina School of Public Health. It is given in recognition of outstanding contributions to mathematical demography or demographic methodology.

Individuals should be nominated for this award on the basis of important contributions to knowledge, either in the form of a single piece of work or a continuing record of high accomplishment. The award is intended to honor an individual whose future research achievements are likely to continue a past record of excellence rather than as a tribute to a demographer who is ending an active professional career. There are no specific requirements as to age, nationality, or place of residence; nor is the award restricted to members of the Population Association of America.

The award is named for Mindel C. Sheps who, at her death in January, 1973, was Professor of Biostatistics at the University of North Carolina School of Public Health and Second Vice-President of the Population Association of America. She enjoyed a distinguished career as physician, biostatistician, and demographer, applying mathematics and statistics to studies in these areas. She received greatest recognition for studies of the relationships between the biological determinants of fertility and observable demographic variables; this work focused on the development of mathematical and computer simulation models of human reproduction and population change and on analysis of measurement problems in actual populations. She served as advisor or consultant to many international projects. Her extensive publications include several books, *Public Health and Population Change*; *On the Measurement of Human Fertility*, an annotated translation of work by Louis Henry; and *Mathematical Models of Conception and Birth*.

The recipient of the Mindel C. Sheps Award will be selected by a committee appointed by the President of the Population Association of America and the Dean of the University of North Carolina School of Public Health. Presentation of the award, comprising a certificate and \$1000, will be made at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America. The recipient of the first award was Ansley J. Coale.

To be considered for the second award, nominations must be received by February 15, 1976. Nomination forms may be obtained from the: Chairman, Mindel C. Sheps Award Committee, Population Association of America, P.O. Box 14182, Benjamin Franklin Station, Washington, DC 20044.