

Theft by finding

Frank Burke

I think we've all seen cartoons of the dog catcher roaming the streets, catching dogs in nets and throwing them in the back of his truck, to be taken away to the 'slaughterhouse' - the dog pound. Did you ever see one of these dogs reunited with its owner? Probably not. The pound was a place where dogs went in, and never came out again ... unless of course the dog was wily enough to escape its captors and its fate.

But in reality if your dog goes missing, where do you *know* to look for it first? The dog pound. And with pounds increasingly being operated by animal welfare organisations, they are more and more removed from the stereotypical image so long portrayed in cartoons and, unfortunately, by some animal groups.

Certainly dog pounds used to be all 'doom and gloom', particularly with some councils supporting the transfer of impounded animals to research institutions for use in scientific experimentation. Public reaction against these actions in recent years has seen most, if not all, councils back away from these activities. Dog pounds traditionally had very limited opening hours, so the opportunity for an owner to be reunited with a lost pet was limited indeed, especially as the holding time of the animal was kept to an absolute minimum.

Thankfully, the old days of tying impounded dogs up at the tip and shooting them, or herding them into death chambers for gassing are long gone. Euthanasia is still a necessary evil, but humane methods are used to minimise trauma to the animal.

Nevertheless, a huge amount of damage has been done by the 'normalisation' of the image of a pound as a slaughterhouse. Animal refuges and sanctuaries, whether they be linked to a council pound operation or not, have been tarred with the same brush.

It is a sad reflection upon our belief that good news doesn't sell, that animal groups have concentrated on publicising the negative side of their activities. 'Thousands of Animals Euthanased Each Year' is a headline we have probably all seen at some time in our lives. This form of editorial only perpetuates the bad image that we have inherited, and does nothing to enamour the public of the tremendous amount of good work that is done.

In promoting animal refuges, there are always a few 'hard luck' or 'horror' stories thrown in for good measure, for example the abused and near death dog nursed back to health over a period of months by devoted animal care staff. The sad truth is that cases such as these are few and far between - no publicly funded animal refuge or charity has the funds to provide such loving care for every mistreated animal that passes through its doors. But in the eyes of the public if one saved animal makes heart rending reading, then perhaps it excuses the thousands of others that have had to die. We are becoming desensitised to the harsh cruelty of animal abuse because it makes animal groups appear as heroes.

As councils are becoming more aware of their constituents' opinions on animal care and pound operation, they are handing over operation of these facilities to animal welfare organisations and charities. With proper management this has enabled a dramatic turnaround of the situation, and the 'doom and gloom' image no longer need be associated with a modern-day pound.

A modern pound facility may be called a 'refuge' or 'sanctuary', and may be open seven days a week. Staff, employed by the animal welfare group, care for the animals and liaise with the public, and work in conjunction with council animal control officers who bring straying dogs into the facility. Privately owned animals which are no longer wanted are also taken in.

Nevertheless it is evident to anyone working at one of these facilities that they are operating in the shadow of the image of a pound as a slaughterhouse. Probably the most commonly asked question by visitors to these facilities is 'how long before you put the animals down?' It seems that people come to pounds, sanctuaries and refuges to 'save' an animal from death - but surely that step has already been taken by the modern-day pound or sanctuary itself. What the public are in fact doing is saving an animal from the image of a pound.

One of the most serious side-effects of this negative image is that so many finders of a stray animal refuse to take it to a pound, because they perceive it will simply be 'put down' as a matter of course. What these finders of animals seldom realise is that by holding onto an animal which they find, they are committing a crime punishable by law - that of 'theft by finding'.

Just consider: if everyone obeyed the council bye-laws regarding straying dogs, there would never be a 'found' animal advertisement in the classified section of the newspaper. All stray dogs would be taken to the council pound in their local area where they would have the maximum chance of being reunited with their rightful owner. And in a modern-day pound, if the animal remained unclaimed, then the finder could have the first option to purchase the animal in a legal and proper manner.

Let us investigate further why finders of animals are unwilling to comply with the law. There are several compounding factors to be considered here. With the 'normalisation' of animal abuse someone who genuinely loves animals may believe that the dog they have found has been mistreated or abandoned simply because it is shy, unkempt or starving. But not all dogs take to strangers, and even a normally well kept dog can appear dishevelled if out and about for a few hours. And missing just one meal can make a normally well fed dog act as though famished.

So the emotional decision of the finder can be to hold the dog on their private premises, and to keep the dog if they fail to locate its owner. The pound is seen as a place where the dog is sure to meet its untimely death, so it is generally avoided. Perhaps a telephone call will be made to the pound asking if anyone has lost a dog but that is often as far as the finder wants to proceed. Quite often when asked for details of the animal and a contact phone number, a finder reacts with surprise that this information would be wanted. There is also often reluctance to give further detail in the fear that a false claim of ownership may be made for the dog.

What chance does a dog have of finding its owner if it is held on private property - especially if the finder has doubts about the owner's genuine care for the animal, or has taken a particular liking to it? Under these circumstances, attempts to find the owners may be unenthusiastic!

There is another factor which many people don't consider. One person's description of what their animal looks like can be completely different to another person's description of the same dog. So even informing the pound that you have found an animal doesn't necessarily mean that an accurate match can be made between that animal and a report of a lost dog.

The best chance a dog has of being reunited with its owner is if the match is made through a central source where the dog can be viewed and an accurate description obtained. Unfortunately, despite council insistence, few dogs are identified by their registration tags, or have any other form of identification.

Let me tell you of an incident which occurred at the Animal Protection and Welfare Leagues of Queensland's Coombabah Sanctuary. A gentleman called having lost his Bull Terrier-cross dog, a distinctive white dog with a brown eye patch. This information was entered in the Lost Dog Register. No dogs matching this description came into the pound until three months later a lady handed in a dog which she no longer wanted - a white Bull Terrier-cross with a brown eye patch. She informed the staff that she had found the dog three months previously and, having taken a liking to it, she had decided to keep it. Being a vet nurse she had also arranged for the dog to be desexed during the time that she had it.

The staff at the Sanctuary checked back through the Lost Dog Register and contacted the man who had reported his dog missing three months previously. The dog turned out to be his, and it was an extremely happy reunion (although the desexing came as a bit of a surprise).

If only the finder had brought the dog to the pound in the first place, the three month separation would not have occurred. And how many other hundreds of dogs and owners are never reunited?

So, if the problem is the negative image of pounds and sanctuaries, where does the solution lie? If the purpose of a sanctuary is to reduce unnecessary euthanasia and maximise the re-homing of animals, then the aim of promoting the facility must be to encourage the public not only to hand in their unwanted pets, but also to visit the facility when they are intending to purchase a pet. The sanctuary must be a place where you feel okay about leaving an animal, and where you don't feel emotionally pressured to save an animal and give it a home. Responsible pet ownership begins with making an informed and proper choice on the type of animal purchased.

On the Gold Coast which is now the second largest municipal area in Australia, this approach has been employed by the Animal Protection and Welfare Leagues of Queensland with very encouraging results. In the past 12 months re-homing figures of all animals coming into the sanctuary have increased by 59.4%. And although there are two other pounds operating in the area, 73% of all animals re-homed are from this one sanctuary. This facility is open seven days a week to the public, and has a policy to hold stray dogs for seven days to maximise the opportunity for an owner to locate the missing animal.

All dogs which remain unclaimed after the holding period are checked for temperament and health. Certainly not all unclaimed animals are passed through for sale. Taking responsibility for the type and health of animals sold is a prime concern of any shelter. But healthy, suitable animals need not be euthanased if the right approach to pound management is taken. The saleable animals are then vaccinated, wormed and desexed. And if the animal was originally a stray, the finder of the animal has first option to purchase the animal.

When a stray dog is sold from a recognised animal shelter or pound, ownership of the animal legally transfers to the new owner, whereas keeping a stray dog could lead to a legal battle if a rightful owner does make a claim against a finder. Legal ownership versus 'theft by finding'. Which would you choose?

It is almost as though the animal welfare industry has tried to promote the euthanasia of animals as being the problem - that this one function is the main reason for the existence of a sanctuary or refuge. If we compare this approach to human welfare organisations we find a completely different philosophy employed. Human welfare works on the principle of people needing help - so much suffering can be relieved by public support, and so many good things achieved. Certainly, thousands of children may still die each year, but not because of the organisations set up to assist them.

If we take a look at a commercial business, for example McDonalds, you don't hear McDonalds speaking badly of hamburgers. They promote the positive family oriented good things they offer. To speak badly of their product would only deter people from buying their product. It's simply not good business practice.

In an ideal world pounds and sanctuaries would not be necessary. Nor would a police force. But crime and violence in our society are increasing and a lot of the blame for this is directed at increased portrayal of crime and violence on TV, in magazines, video games and movies. Crime and violence are being normalised in our every day lives. Perhaps abuse of animals is also being normalised and animal groups are seen as the heroes. Certainly abuse exists and must be addressed, and education on proper and responsible pet care is part of the solution.

But before the solution becomes effective the symptoms need to be addressed. Encouraging people to use the sanctuary instead of abusing or abandoning an animal should be a main focus of promotion and publicity.

To ensure maximum matching of lost and found animals it is imperative that the pound system develops a positive image to facilitate its main function: *to find homes for animals whether it be with their original owner or, if unclaimed, with a new owner.*

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[UAM 95 Index page](#)