

Multi-disciplinary – multiple stakeholders

Mr John Cohen and Ms Selena Neill, Gold Coast City Council

Abstract

The objective of Urban Animal Management (UAM) is to facilitate pet ownership in the community whilst maintaining the community's quality of life. Achieving this objective is challenging considering the diverse range of stakeholders involved in UAM.

Inherent in this multi-disciplinary environment is a complex set of stakeholder drivers and perspectives, leading to inevitable philosophical clashes. As a result the balance that is essential to the delivery of optimal outcomes in UAM can quickly be compromised.

In order for UAM to maintain balance there must remain in the maelstrom of debate the ability for the group to arrive at a consensus and thus progress in strength towards the achievement of its original objective.

Who are the UAM stakeholders?

Whilst the objective of UAM can be simplified as being the facilitation of pet ownership in the community, Jackson (2003) wrote that UAM means different things to different people depending on where you live, where you work and what your particular interest is in the field. Consider the diverse range of UAM stakeholder groups and sub-groups:

- Local Government
 - Animal Management Officers
 - Environmental Health Officers
 - Policy Makers
 - Councillors
 - Town planners
- State Government
 - State legislation makers
 - Members of parliament
- Pet Health Services
 - Veterinary clinics and hospitals
 - Alternative medicine providers, eg: chiropractic
- Pet Breeders/Retailers
 - Breeders
 - Pet Shops
- Pet Produce Retailers
 - Pet shops
 - Pet accessory suppliers
- General pet services
 - Pet groomers
 - Animal boarding
 - Pet walkers
- Pet Trainers
 - Obedience & training schools
 - Private trainers
 - Animal behaviourists
- Pet Food Manufacturers
 - Suppliers to manufacturers
 - Employees
- Animal Welfare
 - Bureaus & agencies
 - Volunteers
- The community
 - Pet owners
 - Non-pet owners
 - Pet owners affected by other pet owners
- Non-pet owners who have no problems with other peoples' pets
- Dog attack victims, including those closely associated to the victim such as family and friends
- Special Interest Groups
 - Endangered Dog Breed Association
 - Dog & Cat Breed rescue groups
 - Stakeholder coalitions
- Wildlife agencies
 - State government departments
 - Wildlife carers
 - Wildlife interest groups eg: Wildlife Preservation Society
- The media

In considering this list, the complexity of UAM is illustrated. While each of these stakeholders has an interest in UAM, their interest is often motivated by different philosophies and clashes may subsequently arise. Murray (1997) recognised this, listing some of the UAM stakeholder interests that must be balanced:

Animal welfare issues

An environmentalist who is deeply concerned about the effect of feral cats on native animal populations vs A cat owner who feels euthanasing cats in cat colonies is immoral

Public administration issues

A state politician who believes the solution to irresponsible ownership lies with more legislation and regulation vs A local politician who supports community self-regulation

Physical and mental health issues

A nervous resident who has a noisy dog patrolling his property day and night vs A shift worker who resents the neighbour's dog barking, even for a moment

Owning a pet issues

A dog owner who wants to throw balls to his dog in a public park vs A person walking in the same park who is scared of dogs and hates seeing dog faeces

Financial issues

A middle income pet owner who is able to prove commitment to a pet by meeting all acquisition and desexing costs vs A low income earner who risks being barred from owning a pet because he/she can't pay upfront costs of buying and desexing

Opposing stakeholders may not necessarily disagree with each other's vision, but rather by the ways they propose this vision be achieved. They may perceive that it will impact on them detrimentally and debate therefore becomes subjective, heated and defensive, with no party willing to give ground. The emotionality of UAM can become its downfall.

The emotionality of UAM

Storch (2003) neatly summed up UAM in local government with the following statement:

Question: How do you prolong a Council meeting?

Answer: Raise any issue about dogs.

As a local government manager I have often wondered what makes UAM so different from other local government functions such as environmental health or general local laws.

These functions also form a mix of service provision, regulation and enforcement and often deal with contentious issues. However, they rarely provoke the same reaction. Consider the following true-life scenarios:

Scenario 1

The Court finds a restaurant manager guilty of breaching the health act with offences relating to vermin, substandard maintenance and rusty kitchen equipment, and subsequently fines him a total of \$30,000. Of particular media interest during the case was a picture taken of the restaurant's kitchen floor upon which lay a dead rat. The carcass of the rat had been ignored by restaurant staff to the point that it had been included in the new paint job performed on the kitchen floor.

It is reasonable to think that there would be a great deal of public interest in this story considering the implications to public health and Gold Coast tourism. However, despite media attention, the story barely rated an interest from the community.

Scenario 2

An article appears on the front page of the local newspaper announcing, "*Weed Police – Council slashed his garden and pruned his account*". The article goes on to explain, that council officers tore up the native garden of a resident and subsequently charged him \$575 for "*the privilege*" – money taken directly from his bank account without his permission (The Gold Coast Bulletin, 2005).

The story is featured on a national prime time current affairs show. It has all the ingredients that should strike at the hearts of citizens and cause outrage:

- Entry onto private property without permission;
- A personal possession and source of enjoyment destroyed;
- Money taken directly from a personal bank account without permission.

The result? Once again, the story barely rated. No editorial comment. No letters to the editor. No reaction.

Scenario 3

The local paper reports on a man who has been told that under the local law, his property is too small to keep chickens on and he must remove them. The result this time?

- Numerous letters to the editor are published, all in support of the chook owner;
- Numerous emails, letters and telephone calls to the Council are received, each expressing their outrage at Council's "bullying";
- The story is featured on a national current affairs television show;
- The local councillor seeks legal advice as to how the chook owner can circumvent the local law;
- The case attracts endless discussion and debate in Council, with requests for further investigations and reports, and a review of the local law.

How can a story on a man and his chooks rate such a response?

The above story illustrates that pets truly form an integral part of today's society. As two out of three Australian households own one or more pets (McHarg, Baldock, Headey & Robinson, 1995) nearly everyone can relate to such stories as they have had experience as a pet owner. Furthermore, this experience is usually strong due to the emotional ties people form with their pets. The family pet is something that we have grown up with. It has given us unconditional love and companionship. It is a relationship that is common in its occurrence in the community, but nonetheless unique and special to each pet and owner.

Wilks (1999) commented that pets manipulate human responses that have evolved to facilitate human relationships.

The human owner is able to derive continuing satisfaction from interacting with the pet and in some cases this is greater than derived from relationships with other people. In fact, pets are able to infiltrate people's lives to such an extent that the grief experience associated with the death of a companion animal can be similar to that associated with the loss of a significant human.

Animal Management Officers will tell you that they are often told during their investigations, "You can take the wife or the kids, but please don't take the dog!"

The challenge facing UAM

The management of domestic pets in the urban environment is becoming more and more complex. Many of the new issues are subjective and the solutions being bandied about, such as breed specific legislation or new developments with a 'no cats allowed' policy raise concerns because they impose restrictions on an already pressured pet population. Jackson (1998) commented that a regulatory approach is always tempting when problems are not well understood, particularly when political pressure is applied, because it smacks of conclusive action – the problem will be 'solved' if a new regulation is enforced.

The challenge for UAM is not to simply criticise such proposals, but to come up with viable solutions that satisfy community need. Whilst regulation may be the answer for some matters, I do not believe that it is, in itself, the answer for UAM. Indeed, it is imperative that a multi-disciplinary approach, having regard to competing perceptions be taken.

All UAM stakeholders have something to contribute. For example and without limitation:

- Veterinarians contribute their professional and scientific knowledge of pet health & behaviour;
- Pet trainers share their knowledge of animal behaviour and trends they have observed in pet ownership;
- Politicians express the needs and wants of the community;
- Animal Management Officers share their knowledge and observations of pet ownership trends, attitudes to regulation, and problem solving;
- Policy and law makers share their experience in drafting and implementing legislation
- Special interest groups such as the EDBA strive to ensure their cause continues to advance despite pressure from legislation or the media.

On their own, each of these stakeholders can only achieve limited success for the ultimate cause of UAM. But together, they can participate in informed debate and arrive at a best-outcome consensus for the group. Invariably, we will not please everyone, but at least we must take and be seen to take, a balanced approach. As Morris (2002) has stated, the key question is when will each group or individual realise that their objective is really no different to any other sphere of influence and that the aims are nearly (if not exactly) the same.

Consolidated views however, are not always easy. While there are many stakeholders in UAM, not all stakeholders are equal. Not all of them get a fair voice and some voices are heard substantially more than others. For example, at the Gold Coast City Council the argument against breed specific legislation was lost when a victim of a pit bull terrier attack was wheeled into the Council meeting for all to view the fresh stitches that tracked her face, arms and leg. Months of careful research and analysis were discarded for the emotion this image gave rise to.

This illustrates the loss of balance that can occur when one voice is heard more than others. While breed specific legislation may have some merit at a micro level it does not consider the broader requirements of cohesive UAM.

To avoid this kind of occurrence, the UAM group must continue to position itself as the expert body on UAM matters. It needs to debate the issues and circulate its advice *before* decisions are made at a political level. It must continue to be regarded as the 'go to' group, the resource for expert advice. More importantly it needs to be recognised as such and its advice should be compelling in terms of its influence on legislators and policy makers.

Summary

Society continually demonstrates that pets are important. UAM is vital in ensuring that pet ownership continues to be enjoyed by the community, by promoting the benefits of pet ownership and minimising any adverse impact on community quality of life.

UAM stakeholders represent a diverse source of knowledge and experience. In their own right they achieve limited success for UAM. Harnessed together they have the ability to become the one voice that will resonate strongly across local and state government and achieve quality outcomes for UAM.

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John Cohen

John is the Manager Health, Regulatory and Lifeguard Services Branch with the Gold Coast City Council. He has been in Local Government for thirty-three (33) years, commencing as a Cadet Health Surveyor and progressing to his current position, which he has held for ten (10) years. John’s formal qualifications are in Public/Environmental Health. His portfolio covers such functions as Public and Environmental Health, Animal Management, Regulated Parking, General Local Laws, Pest Management, Catchment Management and Lifeguard Services. The Branch has a permanent staff of 249 and utilises up to 100 Casual Lifeguards. John’s Animal Management Team has won three (3) awards, they are as follows:

- AMO of the Year 1999;
- AMO Team of the Year 2002;
- AMO of the Year 2004.

Selina Neill

Selina Neill is the Project & Public Awareness Officer for the Animal Management Section of the Gold Coast City Council. She has been in Local Government for eleven years and has held previous positions as an Animal Management Officer and Animal Management Inspector. Selina has a CIV in Frontline Management and a CIV in Workplace Assessment & Training. She was the team leader of the AMO Team of the Year 2002 and was awarded AMO of the Year 2004.