The relevance of animal welfare in Urban Animal Management

Andrew Foran

Abstract

Animal welfare in the new millennium is a brave new world and the challenge is to maintain a strong focus on the primary goals while dealing with ever changing attitudes and new partnerships. The role of welfare groups is also changing as they recognise the importance of being accessible to a broader community audience.

One of the chief ways of doing this to through partnerships with local government. The result? Animal welfare groups are impacting positively within the urban animal management environment, are getting a strong message out to a larger demographic and have developed rewarding partnerships along the way.

Background

Animal welfare organisations have been active in this country for 135 years. Historically established to predominantly care for the welfare of production animals used in the course of daily life in 19th century Australia, animal welfare has expanded to include a myriad of functions.

These include canvassing support for welfare change through local, state and federal government, education, inspectorate services, shelter and pound management and influencing public opinion regarding animal welfare.

Animal welfare is often misunderstood in the broader community and can often be confused with animal liberation. The two are similar only in their concern for the welfare of animals. The manner in which they achieve their goals, and indeed those goals they set out to reach, are significantly different.

The organisation I represent is RSPCA Victoria, one of eight incorporated societies that form the federation of societies known as RSPCA Australia. While each society has slight variations to its structure, we are united in our goals and objectives and the manner in which we seek to achieve them. RSPCA societies are Not for Profit organisations that receive little funding from state and federal government to fulfil their functions. Indeed, in some cases, RSPCA receives less than 2% of its total yearly budget from state government, a budget that manages to fund operations that include investigation and prosecution of offenders under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. With such little government support, the RSPCA seeks funding from the community to fulfil all of its functions.

Each society contributes greatly to the management of animals in the urban environment (production animals don't live in the urban environment). This is done through a range of functions that include that management of municipal pounds, jointly or separately operated animal shelters, desexing and microchipping campaigns and education and awareness campaigns plus a range of special projects.

Across Australia the RSPCA has established relationships with 61 local government animal management authorities in which the RSPCA contributes either partly or wholly to the urban animal management infrastructure. These relationships are mutually beneficial and enable the RSPCA to not only provide an excellence in service to the community but to work closely with local government in order to seek solutions to ongoing animal management issues.

In total, there are 39 shelters with the eastern seaboard of mainland Australia contributing 29 of the total number. With the exception of just one shelter, each of these has a formal agreement with at least one local government animal management authority to manage some or their entire animal management sector.

The impact of those relationships can be tested by the number of animals admitted in the 2004/2005 financial year. With a percentage of surrendered animals equalling about a quarter of the total number admitted, the figures for the admission of stray animals speaks for itself and gives rise to the appeal of organisation like the RSPCA being actively involved in the animal compliance field.

Animals received nationally by the RSPCA for the 2004-2005 financial year

Total Animals Received: 132,159

Dogs		
Total Admitted	60,030	45.4% of total animals
Reclaimed	16179	27.0% of total dogs
Rehomed	17520	29.2% of total dogs
Euthanased	20658	34.4% of total dogs
Cats		
Total Admitted	55,291	41.8% of total animals
Reclaimed	1365	2.5% of total cats
Rehomed	16589	30.0% of total cats
Euthanased	31941	57.8% of total cats

But RSPCA is not alone in representing Animal Welfare in the UAM framework. Other organisations have and continue to make significant contributions just as worthy as RSPCA.. The Animal Welfare League, Cat Protection Society and a vast range of other organisations, both large and small, contribute significantly to the management of animals within our broader national community.

The contributions described are best evidenced in the number of animals cared for by Animal Welfare Groups as a result of those animals becoming lost, being voluntarily surrendered by their owners or seized by a warranted body due to neglect or cruelty.

In Victoria there are 79 metropolitan, regional, semi-rural and rural council bodies. Of those councils, animal welfare organisations have agreements to provide pound services for 42. Examining the admission and disposal figures for the larger organisations across the state for the 2004/2005 financial year can easily assess the outcomes of those agreements.

Statistics for Major Victorian Animal Welfare Group 2004

	RSPCA (Vic)	% of Total	Victorian Animal Aid Trust	% of Total	Lost Dogs Home (Vic)	% of Total	Australian Animal Protection Society	% of Total	Lort Smith Animal Hospital	% of Total	Cat Protection Society (Vic)	% of Total	Geelong Animal Welfare	% of Total	Accumulated Total	% of Total
Dogs Admitted	16506		2483		10988		1611		780				3066		35434	
Reclaimed	6667	40.4	1286	51.8	4846	44.1		0.0	222	28.5			1729	56.4	14750	41.6
Adopted	4534	27.5	585	23.6	1474	13.4		0.0	396	50.8			537	17.5	7526	21.2
Euthansed	4717	28.6	510	20.5	4499	40.9	243	15.1	162	20.8			778	25.4	10909	30.8
															0	
Cats Admitted	16411		1588		10250		3393		3400		15387		2666		53095	
Reclaimed	647	3.9	57	3.6	344	3.4		0.0	56	1.6	630	4.1	94	3.5	1828	3.4
Adopted	5520	33.6	794	50.0	375	3.7		0.0	1600	47.1	5139	33.4	573	21.5	14001	26.4
Euthansed	8933	54.4	593	37.3	9394	91.6	2320	68.4	1744	51.3	9618	62.5	1982	74.3	34584	65.1
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Total	32917		4071		21238		5004		4180		15387		5732		88529	

The impact of the relationship between local government and animal welfare in Victoria is significant when you consider the numbers associated with the relationship. A total of 88,529 animals were admitted into these welfare run facilities in the last financial year. The provision of care sat well above the accepted benchmark in every instance with the key objectives of high provision of direct animal care and rehoming percentages achieved at great expense to the Animal welfare organisation.

The income derived from joint ventures with local government is commonly sourced through the admission totals or lump sump contracted agreement. The income derived is designed to fund the initial statutory holding period at which time, should the animal remain unclaimed, they are transferred into the care and responsibility of the welfare organisation. The costs associated with any further action on the animals rests with the welfare organisation.

The chief aim of all welfare groups in this situation is to assess the suitability of the animals for rehousing and find an appropriate home that meets both the needs of the animals and the new owner. In Victoria, without exception all animals are desexed, microchipped and vaccinated. The cost of this exercise is estimated at anywhere from $250 – 400 dollars. (A recent cost model at RSPCA Vic indicated that the operational cost alone of rehousing a medium sized 4 year old female dog is $468.48.). Last year (2005/2006) RSPCA Victoria rehoused 10,256 cats and dogs. RSPCA organisations across Australia rehoused over 34,000. Every one of these animals was desexed, vaccinated, microchipped, and temperament and health checked

The core business of animal welfare organisations reaches far beyond the micro of animal adoptions and is as broad as influence in the national and international animal welfare and management arena. It includes lobbying and marketing of ideals and beliefs to a wide audience but is also practical in its approach to 'real' animal management issues.

Animal welfare groups are active within the community through independent or in-partnership programs promoting and facilitating microchipping, desexing, education, health care and vaccination and a vast array of other activities. These programs benefit the community and greatly enhance the ability of state and local government to effect positive change in the urban animal management arena.

The key stakeholders of 'in- partnership' programs are predominantly local government, veterinarians and some state government departments such as the Department of Primary Industry or Department of Sustainability & Environment. But the most prominent partnership arrangement and the one that has the greatest impact in the urban animal management arena is the partnership animal welfare groups have with local government bodies.

The ability to reach a wider range of community demographic and maintain a credible program of positive change can only be enhanced when a reputable animal welfare organisation joins in partnership with a local government body to promote the cause of animal management best practice.

Examples of these partnerships and the positive effect they have had are present everywhere in Australia, indeed they are present everywhere in the world. And will continue to flourish while animal welfare groups continue to migrate their management approaches in a progressive and positive direction that embraces the fundamental relationships with key stakeholders required to move forward.

Positive outcomes can be witnessed through the RSPCA's impact in indigenous communities in QLD and NSW through assistance to desex and vaccinate a vast number of animals and assist in best practice management techniques for those animals that remained in the various camps. RSPCA organisations also participate in microchipping and desexing programs across Australia and make significant investments in time and money to not only promote animal welfare but to impact in a very positive way. Each state organisation has an education department that visits ten of thousands of students each year promoting key responsible pet ownership messages such as registration, microchipping and desexing.

But the RSPCA isn't the only organisation that is putting its money where its mouth is and working closely with local government to effect change.

Last year we heard about the Animal Welfare League in QLD and the program they jointly sponsor with the Gold Coast City Council to promote responsible pet ownership. The AWL has also been extremely active in the formation of a coalition group of key stakeholders to address the problems of overpopulation within the Gold Coast community. This was extended this year when the AWL (QLD) played a key role in the organisation and facilitation of the inaugural National Summit to End Pet Overpopulation.

The outcomes of that summit are yet to be fully realised. Every indication is that there will be significant and positive outcomes, not least of which is the collective agreement by all the participants to move forward and drive change within the community regarding overpopulation. This is not something that would have been envisaged even five years ago, but thanks to the progressive thinking of animal welfare groups across Australia, this behaviour is now the norm rather than the exception.

Summary

While enforcement of current state legislation and by-law along with local education programs forms an integral part of UAM along with the vast range of other services provided, it should be recognised that Animal Welfare and the organisations that contribute to animal welfare greatly enhance the overall UAM picture and offer diversity and expertise in a range of ways.

Andrew Foran

Andrew Foran is employed with RSPCA Victoria as Manager, Animal Shelters. In his capacity he oversees the management of 11 metropolitan and region shelters across Victoria that admit over 37,000 animals per year and employ the services of over 100 paid staff and 700 volunteers. His role includes the development of continuous improvement strategies and welfare policy across the range of functions within the shelter environment.

Andrew has been with RSPCA Victoria for over four years and has previously been employed in the hospitality industry as well as seven years experience as a member of the Victoria Police in a variety of roles.

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