

Making sure there *is* room for pets in our society in the next millennium — providing for, not preventing, pet access

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What is the future of pet ownership in the next millennium? Will we be able to own pets? Or are we heading towards very low levels of pet ownership; a trend that will prove irreversible?

I believe we have a stark choice. Left untouched, pet ownership may well become a thing of the past, due to a constellation of forces making it more difficult to own pets. Changing lifestyles and housing type, increasing restrictions on pet ownership and declining tolerance suggest the trend is with us already. But delve further and we find a community that still yearns for the companionship of animals in their lives. To trivialise this relationship is to ignore a vast literature on the benefits of owning pets.

The alternative path, still ill-defined, is to actively make provision for people who wish to own pets. This involves more sophisticated approaches to animal control that focus on prevention. It involves consideration of the needs and benefits of pet ownership in a range of other policy areas like housing, public open space, public health and social planning.

Local government in Australia is grappling with this choice. Part of the problem is a set of deeply-rooted mindsets on the relevance of pet ownership to local government policy, as something other than a problem. We call this ‘the smirk factor’ and it needs to be overcome.

This paper outlines the challenges afoot and takes the first tentative steps towards defining the alternative path that must be taken to ensure there is room for pets in society in the new millennium.

INTRODUCTION

The new millennium is approaching fast and, while reflection has become an over-worked past time, I think it is important to reflect on the future of pet ownership at this, our last National UAM conference for the century. As a commentator on pets and public policy for most of this decade, I swing wildly between optimism and despair. I hear stories all the time about the importance of pets in people’s lives and the lengths to which they will go to look after and hang on to them. However I also hear about changing demographics and lifestyles, rising level of complaints and the development of a culture where it is apparently acceptable to ‘hate’ companion animals.

This paper is all about taking stock of where we are and where we are going. I argue that pet ownership in Australia is now on a different trajectory to the one it’s been on for most of this century. The 1950s image of suburban backyards filled with dogs, cats, kids and the hills hoist is fast being replaced by a new image that is still to be defined. Far from becoming a thing of the past, I argue that pet ownership in Australia will continue to be as important as it has always been. Fewer people might opt for pet ownership, but those that do will have a more intimate relationship with their animals, enjoying much needed companionship, leisure and release from stress. The old approaches won’t suit this new breed of pet owner who will increasingly demand a greater say in policies that affect them and their pets. Ignoring them means incurring the wrath of more than half your population.

In this paper I examine the changing structure of our cities and the role and place that pets will have. I then outline why we need a new paradigm for urban animal management (UAM) and ways we might accelerate the shift.

THE CHANGING FACE OF AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

Management theorists tell us there's nothing surer in life than change itself and, in urban policy circles, the same dictum applies. When I gave my first paper to this conference in 1993 I talked about the policy of all Australian governments to get people to live in more compact accommodation. The policy was called urban consolidation. It was all a bit of a pipe dream back then, since Australians were seemingly wedded to suburban living. Today consolidation is still government policy, but it's no longer a pipe dream.

After decades of pushing outwards from the city in pursuit of the quarter acre dream, there is a distinct shift occurring in the way Australia's urban dwellers live. A growing number are forsaking spacious houses in the suburbs for dwellings in which some would argue you couldn't 'swing a cat'. They're doing it because they want to swing — not a cat in this case — but they're looking for lifestyles that revolve around theatres and cafes and minimum travel. Our inner cities, which only a few decades ago practically closed after the 6pm swill, are now magnets luring people in droves.

Inner Sydney (already with the largest number of inner city residents in 1986 — 12,100 people) recorded the highest growth in residents adding about 6,700 people over the between 1986 and 1996 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). However the proportionate increase was largest in inner Melbourne, where the number of people in occupied private dwellings more than tripled, increasing from about 1,200 to about 3,800 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). The number of people living in the inner city areas of both Brisbane and Adelaide increased at a more moderate rate; 28% in Brisbane, which was on a par with the high rate of growth for the city as a whole and 26% in Adelaide, which was more than three times the growth rate of the entire city (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999).

Of course this doesn't mean that we will all be living in a villa unit by the year 2010. Most residential growth does and will continue to occur on the urban fringe, where families with children still embrace the suburban ideal. It's just that the old idea of the 'womb to the tomb' approach to housing no longer applies. Empty nesters, whose child rearing days are over, are much more likely to sell the suburban home, put half the money towards their super and move into an apartment or townhouse. They want the chance to concentrate more on eating out than tending the garden and they're happy to sacrifice space to get it.

All around us people are spending less time at home. With work demands increasing fewer people are getting home for the 6pm news, once synonymous with the family dinner. Increasingly, people have little time to maintain huge houses. More minimal housing seems the practical option.

... AND PET OWNERSHIP?

So where does pet ownership fit into all of this? Will it be confined to an ever-decreasing proportion of the population that fit the mould of Mum, Dad, 2.5 kids and a quarter-acre block? Will we have to rent a dog by the hour to take it for a walk, like they can in Tokyo? (Newby, 1997). It is tempting to say yes but that would be way too simplistic.

A recent Gallup poll of American pet owners (Avanzino, 1996) looked at the attachment of people to their pets and it found that their attitudes are reflected in their behaviour:

- 65% give their pets Christmas presents;
- 48% give their pets special foods designed for their age or dietary needs;
- 41% display their pet's picture on a mantelpiece or wall at home;
- 29% celebrate their pet's birthday;
- 17% carry their pet's picture in their wallet or purse.

And, given a hypothetical choice of whose company they would prefer if they were stranded on a desert island, more than half (54%) said they'd rather have a dog or cat than another human.

The fact is people still yearn for the companionship of pets.

All around the world, off-leash parks are buzzing with people. Talk to anyone who's been to one and they'll tell you it's the social phenomenon of the decade. People chatting, people getting to know one another ... people getting married! People everywhere waxing lyrically about them — the dogs get exercised and the 'grown-ups' have fun. I even heard of one group that had breakfast together to celebrate the passing of the winter solstice.

"Yarra's dad always brings a football. I stand aside with Mo's mum and watch as George's dad learns how to kick. Mo is an enormously shaggy long-haired malamute visiting from America — dad's in banking, predicted mergers." (Gray, 1998)

We have industries mushrooming everywhere to cater for the lucrative market in pet products — gourmet dog biscuits, public lap pools for dogs, puppy pre-school, even professional dog walkers. In Brisbane, the BCC is about to launch its Doggy Day Care program — yes a crèche for dogs!

In Melbourne, several thousand people came from far and wide, braving the elements to attend Port Phillip Council's annual Dog Day complete with Jack Russell Races, Look Like Your Dog face painting, dog portraits, Create Your Dog in Clay and so on and so on.

Shows like Harry's Practice and Animal Hospital are booming. The current classic is the advertisement portraying a man who claims he got the dog for the kids but can be found checking the fat content on his dog's food labels and has a wall-size oil painting of his pooch hanging behind his armchair in the lounge.

A friend recently held a birthday party for her 10 year old corgi. The dogs all wore party hats, were given lolly bags and yes, we sang happy birthday around a cake made out of dog food (complete with 10 candles). Eccentric? Yes. Something wrong with us? Maybe. Lacking in social networks? No way. The dog side of the party wasn't serious at all. It was a very, very funny way for a group of busy *people* to get together and catch up.

The interesting thing about all these examples is that they are about *adults* having fun, which is where the modern day image of pet ownership diverges from its predecessor. In the 1950s, pet ownership was something that you 'did' without a great deal of thought about why or how. Today the image is increasingly one of Pets as Lifestyle.

This trend was first highlighted in 1996 by Richard Avanzino, of the San Francisco SPCA, when he talked about how North Americans were becoming decidedly more pro-pet. As he put it so aptly "*...the more frenetic our lives become, the more we need our animal companions to remind us to sit back and (take stock). Their ability to live in the moment, to savour the simple pleasures of life and find joy in loving and being loved is the perfect antidote to 21st Century alienation*".

A NEW PARADIGM FOR UAM

But let's not delude ourselves. It won't be easy to own a pet in the new millennium. There will be hurdles every step of the way starting with our complicated and busy live styles, our smaller homes, and the complaints councils regularly receive from neighbours. Yet if pet ownership is something that more than half of the community wants, then I think that it is up to us as policy makers to give some thought to helping make it happen. Otherwise we'll be doing as the Japanese do and hiring by the hour.

It is easy to trivialise our relationship with animals; to say there's something missing in people's lives if they lean so heavily on a pet — "*its only a cat (or dog) for god's sake*". I call this the smirk factor and believe me, it's alive and well, especially in public policy circles. Try getting a town planner or a park manager to think about planning for pets and he or she will look at you as if you've gone mad or developed a second head. However if community satisfaction surveys were set up to *hear* about pet ownership, then I think that their minds would start to change. Walking dogs, for example, is something that is done by anywhere between 20 and 50% of park users but in surveys and questionnaires, dog walking tends to get subsumed within the more general categories of walking or passive recreation. And the result? We only get to hear about dogs when respondents are asked about conflicts.

Fitness policies are the same. Health services around the world are struggling to meet increasing demands on finite resources. Not all illnesses are preventable, but a very large part of the chronic conditions which we put down to 'aging' are not due to biological aging as much as to abuse or lack of use of our bodies. It is now recognised that the only way we can possibly continue to cope in future is to divert some of those resources from treatment into the realms of prevention and we now have calls for all sorts of elaborate sporting facilities. Yet walking the dog can be done by anyone, anytime, anywhere and at no cost to the government! Why then is it so inconceivable that we could suggest increasing opportunities for dogs and their owners?

"I kept going. Past the lifesaving club and the pier. Struck that, even without all those Magpies¹, I was not alone. There were people roller blading and walking dogs and, on the beach, shuffling through the sand. A pack of cyclists, all fluorescent outfits and pumping legs, whirred past on the road. A thought occurred to me: is this becoming Fit City." (Attwood, 1998)

Don't get me wrong. Dog owners can be the most infuriating group in the community to deal with. They're often greedy, they won't listen to reason and in Victoria, at least, will get positively feral if you dare suggest they put their dog on the lead. But when they are continually relegated to the level of third class citizens, as they are in some parts of Australia, then you can start to understand where they are coming from.

There is a variety of reasons to explain the failure of state and local authorities to develop programs for pet ownership in anything but the most minimal sense, including the lack of resources, lack of support that departments have been given by upper management and council and so on. The trouble is all our policies and programs, and the institutional structures we have to support them, are all geared to dealing with pets as problems. The community too remains deeply divided about pets, pointing perhaps to the failure of state and local government to explain where they think pet ownership is going in the future.

There is however some encouraging signs. Port Phillip Council in Victoria has its Pet Links program, which matches volunteers with frail or elderly pet owners needing help with their pets (bathing, grooming, trips to the vet, etc). Port Phillip is also instituting a pet adoption scheme since it found a concern among elderly residents about the fate of their pets when moving into assisted accommodation. Unfortunately such programs and services are still scarce. While resource constraints (eg. budgets, staff, facilities, etc) may account for some of this inadequacy, its main cause appears to be a lack of understanding about the needs of pet owners and inappropriate methods to facilitate their participation.

Urban animal management professionals have established their paradigm of animal management around the role of 'protector' and 'enforcer'. Continued narrow reliance on such methodologies and management concepts is likely to mean that animal control will continue to struggle for proper recognition and, most importantly, much needed resources.

A new paradigm will require a more multi-disciplinary approach to UAM, where expertise in enforcing regulations becomes less important for managerial effectiveness. This is not to say that technical expertise is no longer necessary, rather that managers themselves must be able to adopt a whole-of-government perspective on UAM. New policy directions will not be seriously pursued by managers who rigidly view pet ownership as diametrically opposed to the objectives of quality of life. Leadership is required at all levels of management so that appropriate messages are passed up to the executive and down to staff who implement plans, serve customers and deal with the community.

A new paradigm for UAM is likely to give much greater emphasis to developing strategic alliances with stakeholders both inside and outside the organisation. The resources and expertise that exists all around you is there to be tapped. Sometimes it is only a matter of establishing the dialogue.

Managers will also require a greater capacity for strategic thinking, an understanding of the diverse ways in which people respond to government and public policy. They will require a higher level of negotiation skills and a greater understanding of communications and public relations. Ultimately this paradigm shift will provide UAM professionals with a more diverse and rewarding future in facilitating a greater appreciation of the real benefits of owning pets in cities of the future.

THE NEED FOR PLANS (AND ACTION!)

Ultimately too, I believe, all municipalities in Australia will need to seriously consider a comprehensive plan or strategy for animal management in their area. I am presently involved in a great many around the country and I am constantly amazed at the capacity of local authorities for innovation in both enforcement and education when they sit down and think about what they are doing and why.

The difficulty arises in transforming plans to action. The essential ingredient is political will — unless council deems the matter important and conveys this to senior management there is no chance of improving service delivery.

Then there is the need for good staff who are prepared to accept change. The competence of individual managers to bring about change depends little on technical competence and more on leadership. The knowledge, skills and attitudes of managers determine their capacity to individually and collectively lead their organisations through periods of resistance and uncertainty, periods when staff tend to hold on to the logic of traditional methods. New operating paradigms will bring resistance from officers who define their jobs by the old mould. Reform therefore requires that managers are able to communicate at a high level so that they are able not only to devise new policies ‘on paper’ but are also able to positively influence staff attitudes and behaviours in a way that produces real change. This is the real challenge of reform.

¹ Referring to AFL Collingwood football players who were training in the vicinity.

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