

Animal management in Central Australia — Alice Springs Town Council

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ABSTRACT

The Alice Springs Town Council By-Laws Compliance Officers work in a unique town, with unique animal management situations. A usual day could include dealing with a dog, cat, horse, pig, rabbit or camel, the owner being from town, interstate or overseas, with a cultural background of Australian, Indigenous Australian, American, or simply from 'out bush'.

An Officer may receive calls from the local paper or radio station for an interview, attend Imparja Television station for filming of the children's television series Yambas Playtime, then walk the beat through the Mall only to be stopped by tourists, asking for directions.

ABOUT ALICE SPRINGS

The town of Alice Springs is home to over 27 000 people covering an area of 327 square kilometres. Alice Springs is a diverse, isolated community. The nearest major city is 1500 kilometres away, twenty percent of the community are Aboriginal people and 500 000 people visit Alice Springs annually.

BY-LAWS COMPLIANCE UNIT

Currently the unit consists of a Manager, five By-laws Officers and an Administration Officer. Officers are not only involved in duties of animal management they also enforce by-laws including camping, abandoned vehicles, parking, permits, fire control and swimming pool fencing. Hours of duty are Monday to Friday from 8am to 5pm.

All calls after hours are diverted to a contractor, Red Centre Security, who attend any emergency situations. Since July 1 2001, 24 calls have been attended to. Red Centre Security only attend to the immediate safety issues of the call out. The next working day they inform Council Officers who follow up with further action.

Officers are authorised under the Alice Springs (Animal Control) By-laws and are gazetted Animal Welfare Officers under the Animal Welfare Act.

DOGS

Below are statistics from our comprehensive database of complaints received.

Compared to other Councils statistics may seem high with no rapid improvement of complaints received. The cycle of newcomers to town is one of the major factors.

Due to a high transit rate, approximately 26% of the town's housing is rental property. Officers find many dog owners, who rent housing, feel they are not responsible for fencing or improving conditions of the yard. They are reluctant to spend money on these details. Constant education to newcomers is necessary. Council has become more involved in educating the community.

Increases of complaints also come from urging residents, schools and businesses, especially Power and Water and Australia Post, to report dog complaints. Complainants are assured their details are managed in the strictest confidence and that Officers are not going to automatically 'put the dog down' (a common myth).

Council invested in three citronella collars approximately

	1999	2000	2001
Dog general	158	89	78
Dog at large	493	613	691
Dog menace	117	76	94
Dog attack	88	78	72
Dog nuisance	208	206	171

three years ago to manage a high dog barking problem. Residents pay a \$50 deposit fee to borrow the collar for three weeks. Owners are reluctant to 'buy before they try', so this service is provided free of charge. Most residents are happy with the use of the collars, many buy their own collar, others say the dog has improved after a few weeks - basically very few say the collar did not work.

Dog barking complaints are at the highest in January as this is when many residents of the town are on holidays. Dog owners leave their dogs at home with friends to assist in feeding and they usually only spend short periods of time with the dog. Of course, dogs are not aware that their 'family' will return and the dog often becomes bored and distressed. Currently the dog nuisance by-law states that a dog cannot bark repetitively 'for periods of more than 2 minutes' or 'more than three times in one hour'. Council wishes to alter these by-laws.

The current Alice Springs (Animal Control) By-laws state that a dog must be 'under effective control'. This means that your dog does not necessarily need to be leashed in a public place. Council is reluctant to change these laws mainly due to the Indigenous owned dogs and dogs that normally live on a station.

Indigenous owned animals will be discussed further in the paper, but these animals do not like and are not familiar with being restrained. When trying to capture these animals, Officers cannot simply put a lead around the dog, walk it to the vehicle and the dog jumps in. The situation is similar with dogs that may live on a station.

The Council offers annual or lifetime registration.

Annual registration is identified by a tag at a cost of \$45 per annum (\$15 for sterilised dogs).

Lifetime registration, in Alice Springs only, is identified by a microchip at a cost of \$135 (\$50 for sterilised dogs). Due to the high transition rate of the town, income is not affected by offering lifetime registration.

There are two Vet clinics in Alice Springs who insert microchips. They charge the Council \$15 per animal which is included in the registration price.

There are currently 1,580 dogs registered annually and 3,200 lifetime registrations.

Council also lends out dog traps. In most cases, a person requesting a trap wants to capture an unowned dog. As the resident is assisting Council, we see no reason to charge a fee. Officers deliver and collect the trap and impound the dog caught. Residents that request a trap are usually in a rural block or reside near an indigenous town camp.

Infringement penalties:

CATS

Dog attacking person	\$100
Dog menacing person	\$100
Dog attacking animal	\$50
Dog menacing animal	\$50
Dog causing a nuisance	\$50
Keeping unregistered dog	\$50
Dog at large	\$50

Below are statistics of complaints received:

Alice Springs has a large feral cat problem.

	1999	2000	2001
Cat	194	201	128

Approximately 50% of cat matters dealt with are related to feral cats.

To assist with this problem, Council lend out cat traps. The residents set the trap on their property, when a cat is caught Council Officers collect the trap and impound the cat. Council does not charge for traps as the community sees this partly as their responsibility.

Alice Springs (Animal Control) By-laws state that it is an offence for a cat to be 'repetitively at large'. The infringement fee is \$50. If a domestic cat is caught and can be identified, it is generally returned to the owner on the first occasion, otherwise it is impounded.

The Council offers lifetime registration for cat owners. Cats must be sterilised, unless the owner has a breeding licence in which case the cat may be entire. Registration is identified by a microchip at a cost of \$50. Currently there are 45 cats registered.

Council introduced cat registration approximately 3 years ago due to demand by the residents.

INDIGENOUS ANIMALS

There are 20 town camps situated within the Council region. These are non-ratable properties and are managed by Tangentyere Council. Council By-laws Officers have permission to enter these properties for animal purposes by Tangentyere Council.

'Camp runs' are generally conducted twice a week. Camp runs are where two Officers drive through the camps and are waved down by residents to take any unwanted animals, mainly dogs, which are referred to throughout the town as 'camp dogs'. Animals may only be taken with permission of the owner or camp President.

As stated previously, the dogs do not like to be restrained, which often makes capture difficult. Officers usually require help from the residents to capture the dogs and place them in the vehicle. Officers may instruct town camp residents to pick up the dogs in a way that may seem unsafe, but the result is less stress on the animal.

For dogs that will not come near residents or Officers, a dog pole, net or the dart gun may be used. Officers are trained in firearms use and trained in using Ketamine and Xylazine drugs which are used in the dart gun.

Animals are taken to the Pound and usually euthanased due to poor condition. Most dogs that are no longer wanted have a severe case of mange and/or ticks. It is not cost effective to treat these animals.

Camp dogs that roam throughout the CBD and Mall are usually captured with difficulty. We use different strategies of entrapment due to their cunning nature.

Many of the public assume that camp dogs are all attackers, which is incorrect. Of the 238 dog attacks reported from 1999 to 2001, approximately three of these have involved camp dogs. Generally these dogs will only attack if you are hurting them, another dog or one of the owners.

Statistics (at June 1):

	1999	2000	2001	2002
	223	135	254	70

Statistics do vary over the years, depending on the number of visits being made to the town camps. For instance, most of the year 2000 staffing levels consisted of 2 or 3 Officers compared to a normal staffing level of 6 Officers.

POUND

Since 1992 the RSPCA has managed the Council Pound. Initially this contract was set up to house the RSPCA and allow them to conduct their business. The Council and RSPCA pound workers liaise regularly and have a close working relationship. The RSPCA has two employees, one manager and a casual employee, who works full time hours. There are also numerous volunteers.

Officers take an animal to the Pound, register the animal and after the legal requirement of 48 hours, the animal is then the possession of the RSPCA. The RSPCA is then responsible for making all decisions regarding that animal.

The release fee charged to a cat or dog owner is \$40 plus a daily maintenance fee of \$10. Dogs must be registered before they leave the pound.

The Pound is set on 4.5 acres, has 25 kennels plus an isolation area consisting of 6 kennels. There are other kennels around the ground that can house up to 6 adult dogs or 11 puppies. There are 6 catteries that can house up to 30 cats. One cattery is left vacant for feral cats. There are areas to house other animals such as a horse, pig or ducks. At the front of the property are 4 kennels, which are open 24 hours a day for residents to drop off unwanted or lost pets.

There is an Office located on the property, which is the base of the RSPCA. The RSPCA Manager chooses to live on the property and has two guard dogs to protect the area which is also the location where abandoned vehicles are impounded.

Statistics for Council Impounded Animals:

	1999	2000	2001
Cats	168	175	114
Dogs	709	575	442
Other animals	1	14	1

RSPCA Officers are on 24 hour call out to attend injured animals and cruelty complaints.

Animals get surrendered directly to the RSPCA. The RSPCA President was reluctant to disclose statistics.

EDUCATION

As mentioned, Alice Springs is a unique, isolated town, but lucky enough to have resources of media. Alice Springs has two locally produced newspapers, one being published twice a week, the other fortnightly. Alice Springs is home to Imparja Television which is televised to country Australia (except Western Australia), and there are nine local radio stations.

When the By-laws Compliance Unit wants to make residents aware of a matter, papers and radio stations are happy to assist and write a story on the issue. For example, when two horses were galloping around streets within the town, a call was made to 8HA radio station, who were happy to make a live announcement.

Within half an hour the owners had secured their horses and notified Council. When dog attacks are reported to journalists, they generally call Council to ensure they obtain the correct information. They relay this information through a story in a positive manner towards the Council.

Imparja television produces a children's show, "Yamba's Playtime" and once a month an Officer is a guest on the show to talk about pet care. This is a good opportunity for children to be exposed to uniformed officers in a friendly, non-threatening environment.

Officers have visited schools on many occasions. Most schools have requested a visit to talk about their classroom pet or safety around unknown dogs.

Other opportunities to promote pet care include the annual Business Expo and the Alice Springs Show.

In 2001 Steve Austin and his famous dog "Bobby" were special guests of Council at the Business Expo. Their schedule included visits to 7 schools in one day, educating on how to act around dogs. Over two days at the Business Expo regular shows were given which included participation by an Officer.

The By-laws Compliance Unit would like to develop more education programs, as resources become available.

GOALS & AIMS

The Unit currently has 3 vehicles between 6 Officers. The Manager has a Ford Courier twin cab utility which has one area for an animal. This vehicle is used to deliver and collect dog traps. There is a Toyota Hilux, 4WD utility. This vehicle has 2 cages. Finally a Mitsubishi 4WD utility which has 8 cages. All vehicles are equipped with leads, dog poles, snares and a dog net. When the 2002/3 budget is finalised, the units aim is to have 2 identical 4WDs. Both will have room to keep more equipment and include hoists.

The next financial year's budget has included more funding for education. Officers are aiming to develop programs such as PetPep throughout schools and town camps.

The Alice Springs (Animal Control) By-laws will shortly be reviewed. Changes will be made to dog barking by-laws. No longer will there be time limits on how long a dog may bark for, instead we are introducing similar provisions to other states. This places the onus on the complainant to monitor and provide evidence to determine genuine nuisance levels.

Dangerous Dog Laws will be defined and introduced. Currently if a dog attacks a person the infringement is \$100. If a dog attacks another animal, the infringement is \$50. The only other option our by-laws provide is to euthanase the dog. The new Dangerous Dog Law will provide another option for Council to enforce.

Dogs that are warranted dangerous will be required to wear a specially marked collar, be leashed and muzzled when in a public place. The dog owner's fence must have adequate signage, stating that the dog living on the premises has been deemed dangerous by Council.

Infringement notices will be doubled for a dangerous dog that offends. All current infringements will be increased when the by-laws are reviewed.

A more thorough understanding between Alice Springs Town Council and Tangentyere Council is another aim. Council Officers would like to introduce education into town camps, hoping that dog owners will become more responsible.

Council is attempting to introduce sterilisation and immunisation programs in town camps. Some local vets have offered support for this initiative. While residents generally have indicated acceptance to these programs, the main hurdle is funding. Preliminary enquires with Aboriginal organisations and Government bodies have revealed a reluctance to provide funding.

Currently dogs are left to breed indiscriminately leading to a high number of dogs per household, resulting in low health standards.

Council collects a large number of unwanted, neglected and sick dogs, takes them away to be put down, only to turn around and repeat the exercise over and over again. It is not our preferred option.

CONCLUSION

As indicated Alice Springs By-laws Officers have many unique challenges and experiences like no other Council in Australia. This calls for us to develop creativity in problem solving, building of a strong support team and provide a quality service to our isolated community here in the “heart of Australia”. Often words and pictures can not describe the roll we play in animal management in Central Australia, only experience.

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Clem started in Local Government in 1979 at Moree Municipal Council as an Ordinance Officer. Since then he has worked in a number of positions in state and local government in the regulatory area. Since 2001 the Alice Springs Town Council has employed Clem as the Manager of the By-laws Compliance Unit.

Elara Bozich

From 1996 to 1999 Elara was employed as a Ranger at the Town of Victoria Park, Western Australia. In 1999 Elara moved from Western Australia to accept the position of By-laws Officer at the Alice Springs Town Council.