

## Pet Industry groups and urban animal management

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One constraint to the development of effective animal management strategies is the disparity between the actions of some members of key animal interest groups, and the objectives of state and local authorities. This disparity takes on many forms, from inappropriate practices and providing incorrect or insufficient information, to the lobbying of legislators to introduce changes that result in minimal impact on their activities, but are also impractical and ineffective. If progress in animal management solutions is to be made, then state and local government must identify such constraints, change them, and take control by having the fortitude to implement their own agenda. For without addressing problems within the pet industry, and ensuring all interest groups are working in the same direction, any attempt to change the behaviour of animal owners and their pets will be a futile exercise.

### Introduction

Companion animals play a significant part in people's lives, providing their owners with companionship and security, and having a positive therapeutic and utilitarian role in the community. A close relationship has come about because, like a number of other species, the cat and dog had certain traits that facilitated domestication, and better prepared them to adapt to living with humans and for humans to manipulate them to mutual advantage (Chenoweth and Landaeta-Hernandez 1998).

Today, whilst the dog and cat are firmly integrated into our lives, their behavioural patterns have remained essentially unchanged from their wild ancestors, in spite of many thousands of years of domestication, environmental changes and selective breeding. The dog for example, is capable of carrying out all of the individual behaviours of wild canids, although as a result of selective breeding, a component of a behaviour may be exaggerated or ritualized, carried out in isolation or in another context, or the threshold for a behaviour or component of a behavioural sequence to occur raised or lowered (Fox 1978, Coppinger and Coppinger 1998). Dogs still bite, bark and wander, and both species still breed indiscriminately and predate on other animals. It is when these normal behaviours occur inappropriately or excessively, when an animal fails to adapt to its environment, that there is a negative impact on the community and the animal becomes a problem for the local authority.

In an effort to resolve these problems, controlling authorities and pet industry groups have met regularly over the past 100 years. Debate has largely centred around the same issues; registration and identification, pet population numbers, unwanted animals and the negative impact of uncontrolled dogs and cats on society. Each time similar conclusions are arrived at; that there is a problem, some animal control is necessary, owners need to be legislated for, and provisions made for penal sanctions and animal destruction orders when non-compliance occurs. As a consequence the same recommendations are put forward: sterilisation and more sterilisation, tighter leash laws, non specific educational initiatives and more recently breed specific legislation, each failing to address the fundamental reasons for the meetings; an animal's inappropriate behaviour and the owner's inability to manage this.

Although considerable advances have been made as a result of this debate such as; relatively uniform legislation Australia wide, an improvement in the overall welfare of animals and pound/shelter management and the provision of special dog exercise parks, there has been little improvement in an owner's ability to manage the behaviour of their pets. For in spite of these advances and those in health care and nutrition the average life span of a dog is still only 3-4 years, far short of its biological lifespan of 10-16 years. A further indictment of our pet mismanagement is the over 150,000 dogs destroyed annually in pounds and shelters in Australia (many more in veterinary clinics or by their owners) with nearly 50% of the dogs euthanased under 12 months of age being for an inappropriate behaviour. A dog's behaviour is killing it, and this cannot seem to be prevented. Why?

Firstly there seems to be several inherent assumptions in UAM; that people can manage their dog and cat's behaviour within arbitrary legislative constraints, that only irresponsible owners offend, that practices within the pet industry are compatible with legislative objectives and that there is an infrastructure within this industry that can effectively assist pet owners. They are mistaken assumptions, but ones that have guided the animal management debate for many years.

### Focus of strategies

Most animal control legislation is fundamentally similar in that; it attempts to manage the behaviour of dogs by leash laws and penal sanctions, is not supported by educational programs that encompass behavioural management and still grapples with the pros and cons of registration, identification and sterilisation, issues that should have been long resolved. Attempts have also been made, usually on a local level to introduce a range of compulsory initiatives such as; licensing dog owners, banning crossbred dogs, backyard breeders or certain breeds, and mandatory sterilisation or obedience training. Most are impractical, or target groups whose population numbers are so insignificant that there is minimal overall effect on the reduction of problems. Two examples of these type of solutions are breed specific legislation and mandatory sterilisation.

### Breed specific legislation

Breed specific legislation targets a minority of breeds of dogs considered, because of their breed or perceived behaviour, to be dangerous to the public and usually sets out conditions for their ownership. Such legislation is fundamentally flawed in principal, for it targets breeds involved in a small number of serious attacks, is inclusive of individual dogs of the banned breeds that have no history of aggression and is exclusive of other breeds that are currently involved in most attacks on humans and other animals. There are further difficulties with identifying a dog as a member of a particular breed, and when crossbreeds are included, fails to provide a means of ascertaining which of the two breeds the dog was crossed with was responsible for the behaviour of concern. The impact of breed specific legislation is usually lost because of the disproportional amount of resources required to administer it, and the perception it creates in the community that other breeds, which make up the majority of the dog population, are a lesser problem.

As a result the legislation, wherever it has been implemented has really never been successful in reducing the overall number of dog attacks.

### Mandatory sterilisation

Sterilisation (whether voluntary, compulsory or subsidised) is to many the key animal management strategy, mainly because of the rationale that; since a sterilised animal does not breed and if less dogs are breeding, then population numbers will decrease and with it, a proportional decline in companion animal problems. Unfortunately such a rationale is too simplistic. Sterilisation changes only a few behaviours and usually not those that result in most dogs being surrendered to pounds and shelters, or come to the attention of local authorities. It may reduce inter-male and inter-female aggression, but not aggression in dominant, fearful or poorly socialised dogs, and has minimal effect on barking or predation. Whilst there are many benefits in promoting sterilisation, and these are well documented, like breed specific legislation there is a disproportional amount of time and resources allocated to programs associated with sterilisation, to the detriment of other equally beneficial programs. Nowhere is this more apparent than with subsidised sterilisation, a residue of the late 80's movement to assist people with their pets, and a concept that fails to place a realistic cost on the management of pets and the owner's responsibility for this.

### Who is to blame?

A second area where UAM can lose focus is to attribute blame for an animal related problem to obvious, but sometimes incorrect factors such as "irresponsible" or "careless" owners, and to a lesser degree "backyard breeders" or "crossbred dogs".

"Irresponsible owners" is a commonly used but vague term that does not clearly define who is one, and also implies that an owner's behaviour was intentional. In reality, persistent offenders who have no concept of responsibility for their pet are a minority, for most owners who have a problem are either uninformed about, or unaware of a pet's behaviour, or have inadvertently mismanaged the animal prior to an incident occurring. Such owners care very much for their pet, feed it correctly, give it regular veterinary checks up, exercise, train and sterilise it and are often willing to rectify the problem by modifying the dog's behaviour.

It is also common to attribute a greater proportion of blame to crossbred dogs, dogs of a particular breed or type, or "backyard" breeders. Realistically all breeds, sizes, sexes and ages of dogs can cause a problem, many crossbred dogs make ideal pets and pedigree dogs have often bitten. Crossbred dogs however are usually considered to be a greater problem than pedigree dogs because they are proportionally found more often in shelters and pounds, and more commonly appear in council statistics. When such claims are made it is usually without a knowledge of the percentage of crossbreeds in the general population of dogs, no understanding that there is a 66% likelihood that a problem behaviour was reflective of one of the dog's parent breeds, and a lack of awareness that pedigree dogs are just as likely to bark or bite in the home (Wright 1991), an area not usually included in the quoted statistics. Backyard breeders are also not necessarily the main source of problem dogs, for the puppy that is raised in the home, surrounded by children, is perhaps more likely to become a well socialised and adjusted pup than one raised in a breeding kennel with limited human contact, or one that has spent several weeks early in its life in a pet shop or shelter.

### Industry groups

A third area where UAM can lose focus is to overlook practices carried out by members of pet industry groups (breeders, recyclers, trainers, local authorities and veterinarians) that are not compatible with its objectives, and the failure of industry controlling bodies to recognise and address these practices.

Restricting who can breed cats and dogs is often suggested as a means of reducing the number of animals entering the community. As with sterilisation it is reasonable to assume that if fewer dogs are bred, then there will be fewer to cause problems. Again, the assumption may be incorrect, and is likely that further and different problems would arise if breeding or supply was restricted to "professional breeders" or "suppliers".

Dogs enter or re-enter the community via four main sources; pet shops, registered breeders, private homes or shelters/pounds. Management practices that adversely affect the current and subsequent behaviour of an animal can be found in all these sources. For example a common practice in pet shops, and one that predisposes a pup to dependency problems, is to take a pup that has been removed at four to five weeks of age from its mother and litter mates and sell it by six weeks of age. Conversely it is common for registered breeders to hold onto a pup until its breeding or showing potential can be assessed, and then sell it at an age well beyond the optimum period for socialisation, thereby affecting its ability to integrate with people and other dogs. In both cases economics override the behavioural needs of the pup and the supplier's responsibility to a new owner and the community. Further practices of concern by registered breeders that may negatively impact on the community include; the sale of aged, poorly socialised kennelled dogs and bitches, breeding to a predominantly physical and not a behavioural standard, and breeding from lines and animals with a history of aggression. Whilst it is unclear what behavioural characteristics are inherited, young pups will learn inappropriate behaviour from nervous or aggressive mothers. It is fortunate that these two sources have either a governing body or a professional association that functions to regulate and guide their members, who by joining, abide by its code of ethics. It is through these organisations that changes to a member's behaviour should be initiated.

Until such changes are made all breeders and sellers of dogs and cats should be treated equally in legislation and perhaps levied on each pup or kitten over a given number that they breed or sell. At present there are minimal restrictions on the numbers of animals that can be bred or sold from one source, and no accountability for the consequences of an individual or business releasing large numbers of animals into a community that is already having to euthanase many 1,000's of unwanted dogs and cats each year.

Animal shelters, pounds and private homes offer a regular supply of older pre-owned animals and the former, pups from abandoned or surrendered litters. Unfortunately many of these older dogs in particular have behavioural problems. An important function therefore of a pound or shelter is to ensure that any animal is stringently assessed prior to sale, in order to identify any inappropriate behaviour, so that only the most suitable are re-homed into the community. Such information should then be passed on to the new owner for currently too many are inadvertently duped, and end up with a dog that they cannot enjoy.

Unfortunately some recycling of animals today is still carried out by well meaning people, who not only feel sorry for a dog that has been abandoned or neglected, but seem to mistakenly believe that by giving such a dog a new home and identity, its problems will be solved.

Major upheavals and multiple homes during a dog's first 12 months of life can lay the foundation for many later behavioural problems, some of which are not present at the time of purchase, but become obvious very quickly to new owners. Tighter controls on such people and the sale of dogs from only approved pounds and shelters may reduce the number of problem dogs recycled back into the community. For owners who buy older dogs from private homes, obtaining a declaration from the previous owner regarding the dog's temperament and past history is becoming a necessary safeguard.

### Dog trainers and animal behaviour consultants

Possibly the most serious problem facing UAM is the complete absence of any set standard of training for people advising dog and cat owners, or who offer services for the treatment of behaviour problems. Partly this is as a result of a lingering belief in the community, and by some obedience instructors that dog training equates to the correction of behavioural problems such as barking and biting, and that dog trainers are always sufficiently competent to carry this out. Training is only one possible treatment option for a behavioural problem and usually needs to be carried out in conjunction with drug therapy, surgical intervention and behavioural modification. In a changing environment, where the dog owner requires more than a formal set of obedience exercises, dog training clubs endeavour with a mixed degree of success to maintain a high standard of instruction. Unfortunately with an increasing demand for their services and their reliance on volunteers it is increasingly difficult for them to obtain and keep experienced instructors. As a result few current instructors have any formal training or extensive experience in animal behaviour, and as a result are limited as to how effectively they can deal with the many and varied problems people have with their dogs.

A similar situation occurs with the private dog trainer/behaviour consultant who, with varying degrees of experience, skills and training offers a range of services in animal behaviour. Most have completed only a short course in animal behaviour, often by correspondence or have attended one or two day seminars or workshops run by qualified animal behaviourists or held at a recognized academic institution. Frequently the trainers or lecturers teaching such courses are not fully qualified themselves. As a result, there has in recent years been a proliferation of "behaviour consultants", behavioural trainers and therapists offering advice and assistance in the treatment of behavioural problems, services that they are not always adequately qualified to provide. The readily availability of equipment such as electronic devices in retail outlets or by mail order further increases the likelihood of a serious behavioural problem being treated incorrectly.

A further cause for concern is the "setting up" of organisations that people with an interest in animal behaviour can join to aid their credibility, and by agreeing to the organisation's code of ethics, promote themselves as a member. Unfortunately there is usually minimal independent verification by the organisation of the trainer's level of knowledge or expertise such organisations (usually not registered academic accrediting bodies) frequently provide "certification" or "accreditation" to their members upon completion of their courses, or by meeting the certifying criteria of that organisation.

"The term "certificated" or "accredited" does not always equate to "qualified". Certification only tells you that the individual has met the requirements of education, experience, and professional ethics of the organisation that has certified them, without any information given on the criteria for "certification" or "accreditation".

In accordance with the standards of the Animal Behaviour Society, an internationally certified animal behaviourist must have at least a Masters degree in either Ethology, Psychology, or Applied Animal Behaviour, must have apprenticed for an extended period under an applied animal behaviourist certified by the society, and must have conducted a significant amount of peer reviewed behavioural research. Application for certification is voluntary, as is membership of the society. Today few that call themselves "certified" or "accredited" meet these standards.

### Veterinarians

Veterinarians whilst primary concerned with health issues, often hold puppy socialisation classes at their surgery, further obedience training or a behavioural referral service for older dogs. Such services are important, for after the dog's final vaccination at 16 weeks of age, its owner may not receive any further expert advice in the community until they return to the surgery 12 months later for the dog's next vaccination, by which time a problem may have already developed. Veterinarians and veterinary nurses are therefore in a pivotal position to take a key role in the behavioural development and management of a client's dog during this intervening period, for it is often in the clinic that the first signs of a pending more serious problem is apparent. When an older dog develops a problem with its behaviour it is often the veterinarian, a person the owner trusts, that they first seek assistance from. The veterinarian, if unable to treat this in the clinic should refer the client to an appropriately qualified animal behaviourist, just the same as they would for any other specialist referral service. Failing to offer such services can lead to many problems being left untreated, or the client having to find the right person to assist them on their own, a task that can almost be as difficult as treating the dog itself.

### Local and state authorities

Ultimately it is state and local authorities that have the responsibility for dog control, either by developing legislation, or by administering and enforcing this. State government when consulting with key animal interest groups need to be aware of problems from within the pet industry that may be counter productive to its objectives or incompatible with the legislation it is proposing, and to address these back through the groups concerned. It is also the responsibility of the state to ensure that drafting of any legislation to address animal management issues is done only after carrying out adequate research on these, and after widespread consultation within the community. Once drafted and implemented the legislation should be clearly understood by all to whom that it is directed towards, not disadvantage any person or group that can manage their pet effectively and can be enforced by those required to enforce it. Too often this does not occur.

Local authorities must administer any legislation pertaining to animal management consistently and fairly, and overcome any reluctance to prosecute ratepayers when they have sufficient evidence and a willing complainant. For it is a futile exercise to demand tougher legislation and heavier penalties when the current milder legislation is not being enforced to the degree that it was intended, and appropriate penalties are not given to offenders. If there are inherent difficulties with any piece of legislation, then local authorities must advise, and then continue to lobby legislators and other decision makers of the problems that they are experiencing. A local authority also allocate adequate resources to ensure complaints are properly investigated, that funding is available for prosecutions, that there is appropriate equipment and facilities available for staff to carry out their duties properly and that it has a comprehensive animal management strategy in place.

For only when the local authority is meeting its own responsibilities can it, along with the state government, take a lead in UAM and guide other groups along a similar pathway.

## Conclusion

There is a perception in the community that problems associated with companion animals are increasing in seriousness and frequency. Whether this perception is a reality is unclear, but what is clear, is that key interest groups, pet owners and the community are largely unprepared to deal with the core issue that results in this perception; inappropriate animal behaviour. There are very few comprehensive strategies in place that can prevent such problems en masse, and also integrate behavioural management within legislative constraints. Instead of focusing on isolated areas of concern, the UAM group, with the support of state government should be working towards developing guidelines to ensure that any strategies implemented, actually target the relevant problems. One area of difficulty that must be overcome is the many practices and objectives within the pet industry that are different, and sometimes incompatible with the effective management of companion animals in the community. At some point, if any progress is to be made in overcoming these, the state government, which has overall responsibility for the legislative control of companion animals must have the fortitude to identify and address these, so all groups are working together in the same direction. For without a cohesive approach by all those concerned with animal management, pet owners, who are the group that is largely affected by both legislation and actions of key animal interest groups, will be left confused and often struggling to manage their animals within the current framework.

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Dr Garth Jennens M.Soc.Sci, Ph.D is an Applied Animal Behaviourist with degrees in Zoology and Psychology and a doctorate in animal behaviour (dog attacks on livestock). Garth brings 25 years of experience in consulting and research in animal behaviour, management, welfare and training to Urban Animal Management. 1990 Garth set up the Animal Management Resource EXtension Program (AMREX), and developed it into one of the largest private dog training organisations in Australia and implemented community based programs such as "Barkline". He has authored several publications relating to companion animal management and behaviour, and is a regular conference speaker, radio talk back and lecturer on these topics. Garth currently works as a private animal behaviour consultant and regularly advises various groups in the pet industry on Animal Management issues.