

The issue of unwanted animals: an unemotional approach?

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"Whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." John Adams (2nd President of USA)

There is continued focus on the issue of companion animals being euthanased in pounds and shelters. Strategies have been identified to reduce the numbers of animals entering pounds and shelters and the techniques to increase the numbers that leave. There has been limited evidence-based assessment of what strategies work best. It is important that addressing the problem is undertaken using whatever analysis is available.

There is no doubt this is a very emotional issue and it is impossible to approach it in an unemotional way. Nevertheless our emotion should not over cloud our judgement. We owe it to the animals that are being killed to deal with the problem in the most effective way that brings sustained change for the better. A holistic view must be taken to the problem and holistic strategies considered with the engagement of multiple stakeholders: - animal management (at local, state and even federal levels), veterinarians and animal welfare agencies.

Consideration is given to whether numbers are declining. There is a focus on current education and desexing programs and other strategies. A consideration is given of unwanted companion animals in other countries- New Zealand and the USA, with discussion on how varying "values" may impact how the unwanted companion issue is dealt with. The difference between the situation in dogs and cats is also discussed as well as variations in different regions within Australia.

Introduction

The term, "Pet Overpopulation" has been applied to the euthanasia of dogs and cats in shelters and pounds. "Unwanted companion animals" (UCA) more aptly describes the issue. What is being referred to by this terminology is a relative overpopulation and increasingly a "relative underpopulation" in some areas. A cause of animal suffering and loss, UCA is a very complex problem. We should examine how other countries have dealt with the issue but realise that very little objective and evidence based analysis has been done. It is critical also to examine the unique, Australasian context and consider how we have managed the problem, whether we have had any success and why this might have occurred.

A thorough understanding of pet population dynamics is essential to comprehend UCA. Consideration should be given to the concept of zero population growth; a hypothesised rate of desexing of female dogs or cats that will lead to a static population (Nassar and Mosier, 1980; Nassar et al, 1984; Nassar and Fluke, 1991; Patronek et al, 1995; Patronek and Rowan, 1995; Patronek et al, 1997; Scarlett, 2004).

UCA is at times an extremely emotive issue. An incident in California in 2005 is a critical case in point where animal rights groups including the militant underground Animal Liberation Front (ALF) ran an intimidation campaign to remove the Los Angeles Animal Services General Manager. It included letting off a smoke bomb in his apartment building after a range of threats as extreme animal rights groups agitated for LA Animal Services to become "No Kill". (Stark, 2005). Arluke (2003) gives a definitive and balanced understanding of the "No Kill" debate in the USA.

The conflict has moderated due to a "truce" between the two sides, the so-called, Asilomar Accord (2004), signed on August 1, 2004. There is still evidence of "extremist" action by some who hold to "No-Kill" philosophies (North American Animal Liberation Press Office, 2005). It is hard to believe in Australia that animal activists would smoke bomb the home of a general manager of animal management services.

The issue of euthanasia of shelter animals is a highly emotive topic with significant buy in from the public, the media, government, animal rights and animal welfare lobbies, the veterinary community and various other stakeholders. The authors believe it is critical that assumptions are not made which will see effort and funding expended on solutions that are ineffective and unsustainable. The ultimate goal should be to reduce companion animal suffering in the long term and of course the horrible waste of canine and feline life through euthanasia. Strategies must be analysed and be cost effective under scrutiny before implementation. This is critically important so that we work towards a reduction in euthanasia numbers as quickly as possible.

A quote from the recent discussion paper from the Queensland Department of Primary Industries that accompanied the invitation to comment on how to manage unwanted companion animals is poignant. "There is a lack of research into the most effective means of managing unwanted cats and dogs. Overall, there appears to be a lack of a coordinated and targeted approach to managing unwanted cats and dogs. We need to look at ways of improving our approach to achieve a real reduction in the number of cats and dogs being euthanased each year." (QLD DPI, 2007)

Assessing the problem

Background on the situation in the USA

The authors have discussed how dealing with UCA in the USA has been hampered by the lack of accurate statistics (Lawrie et al, 2006). Worldwide there have been deficiencies in how shelter population management is assessed. The portions of animals that are adopted or euthanased, why they are relinquished, and their source of acquisition, are all questions for which there have been little data (Salman et al, 1998). Although improvements have been made an integrated approach is still lacking.

The paucity of reliable data has continued to be identified as a problem in dealing with UCA in the USA (Patronek and Zawistowski, 2002; Clancy and Rowan, 2003). It is not surprising that the fragmentation of animal sheltering, with a myriad of smaller groups and shelters having been set up over the last 10 years, is thought to have made data collection and situational analysis even more difficult (Patronek, 2006). It is hard to draw proper conclusions about what has led to the reduction in dogs and cats coming into and being euthanased in pounds and shelters when there is unreliable data. The need for empirical work has been highlighted. (Fennel, 1999)

Clifton (1994) argued that a survey conducted by his publication "Animal People" showed the efficacy of the strategy of low cost sterilization schemes was beyond doubt. The information that was used to come to this conclusion was generated from questionnaires and not from actual statistical data of animals entering pounds and shelters and their kill rates.

It is generally accepted that there has been significant decline in the USA and questionnaire-based information does give an overview. Such data, nevertheless, can be too inaccurate to measure the impact of individual strategies.

It is possible to consider trends within individual jurisdictions, well measured, to extrapolate to national trends, albeit this is fraught with inaccuracy. It nevertheless provides some measure. Consideration can be given to whether the environmental factors that affect one state, county or territory might apply to another. For example it is quite clear that cat numbers will multiply more quickly in warmer climates than in colder ones and where the day length does not undergo as much variation. This is due to the lower death rate of semi-owned or unowned cats in warmer climates, on one hand, and more prolific breeding with more litters being born per cat the closer one gets to the equator, on the other. (Patronek and Zawistowski, 2002).

The picture that we have that comes from the USA is confusing. Decades of significant attention have been given to the problem of UCA and it is believed there has been a reduction in the problem but it is unclear why this has occurred. Many strategies have been championed but few have been measured or analysed in scientific ways. Large sums of public and especially benevolent money have been spent, and much time dedicated to solving this issue. UCA is still an enormous problem in many parts of the USA. One cannot help but wonder if the problem would be less today if more wisdom had been added to the wealth of work that has been done.

Background on the situation in Australasia

As with the USA there is not reliable data on the total numbers of animals euthanased in Australia, although the various states and territories are making efforts to increase the gathering of data and subsequent analysis so that trends can be identified (McMurray, 2006). There is some data in Australia that may allow us to gain oversight of the trends occurring. Some believe there has been no impact on the numbers of animals being euthanased in pounds and shelters over the last 20 years.

It is important that the situation of UCA in Australia is critically analysed. A broad reading of information is recommended. Dr Dick Murray (1992) gave an Australian perspective. Strategies chosen must work in Australia and be based on our experience. In doing so we may be able to better deal with the issue than the US.

The intake of dogs by RSPCA NSW reduced state-wide by approximately 4,000 from a peak in 1998 over a seven year period. Euthanasia dropped by around 5,000. Cats have declined from a peak in 1997 of 20,000 to a trough in 2003 of 10,000 with a worrying rise in the last 2 years up to 14,000. Euthanasia has nevertheless halved. The figures in the next year (05-06) indicated a intake rise in dogs of 2.53% and a fall in cats of 4.26%. The situation in NSW has been influenced by an increase uptake of pound contracts that have increased intake of particularly dogs in the last 2 years. There are still major concerns that cats are not being managed adequately at a local government level in NSW. Research from Victoria indicates "semi-owned" cats and "cat colonies" are major contributors to the cats coming into pounds and shelters in that state. (Marston et al, 2005)

National figures on intake of dogs and cats and euthanasia figures for RSPCA are available on the national website (and represented in Fig 1,2). What is clear from this data is that there has been significant but "volatile" decline in intake and euthanasia. The number of dogs coming into Australian RSPCA shelters peaked at 80, 776 in 1997-1998 and has declined to 60,030 in 2004-2005 this represents a reduction of 25.9%.

At the same time the euthanasia rate declined by 42.7%. Cats reached a peak of 62,163 in 1996-1997 and declined to 49,754 in 2001-2002 (almost 20%) before a worrying rise back to 55,291 (still an 11% decline). Euthanasia was nevertheless reduced by 31.5%.

The figures in the next year (05-06) saw a 10% rise in the intake of both cats and dogs with some phenomenal increases in some states and small declines or stability in others. NSW, Vic and WA showed slight declines in intakes. However SA had a 30% and almost 70% increased intake of dogs and cats respectively. Queensland had a 43% and 29% rise and Tasmania a 20% and 33% rise. The ACT had a 10% decline in dog intake and a 15% increase in cat intake. It is very difficult to work out why these changes are so. There is a belief in Tasmania that the increased activity of the RSPCA there has attracted more animals to the shelters. This highlights the need for more research and particularly the need for accurate and holistic data collection.

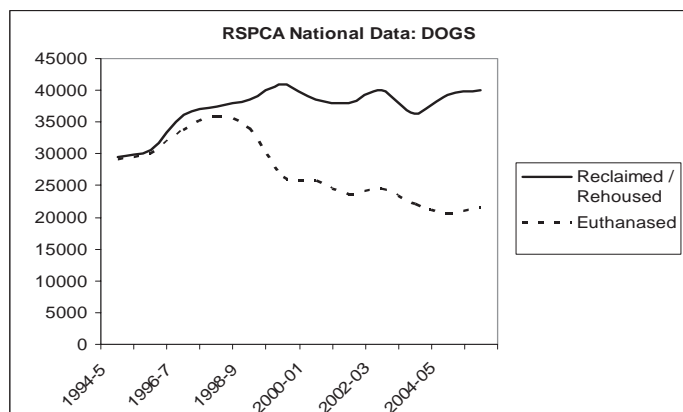


Fig 1. The fate of dogs received nationally through RSPCA shelters (source: www.rspca.org.au)

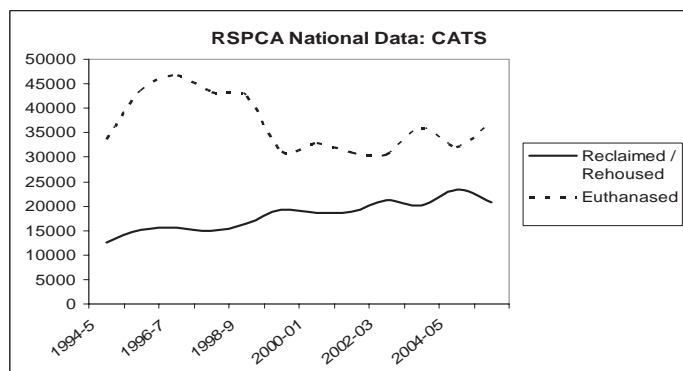


Fig 2. The fate of cats received nationally through RSPCA shelters (source: www.rspca.org.au)

RSPCA NSW now brings dogs and cats from country shelters to city ones, reflecting a decline in animals being euthanased in the city, while "overpopulation" is still a major problem in the rural areas. Most dogs and cats euthanased are not in fact suitable for adoption. In 2004-2005 RSPCA NSW commenced dividing euthanasia figures at Yagoona into reasons. We were stunned by the low percentages of dogs and cats that were adoptable and had to be euthanased.

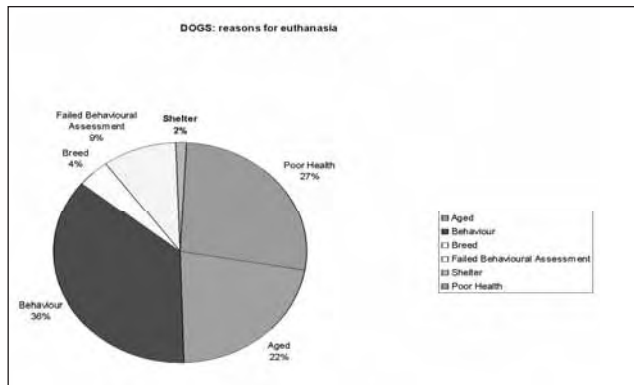


Fig 3: Reasons for euthanasia of dogs (source: RSPCA NSW)

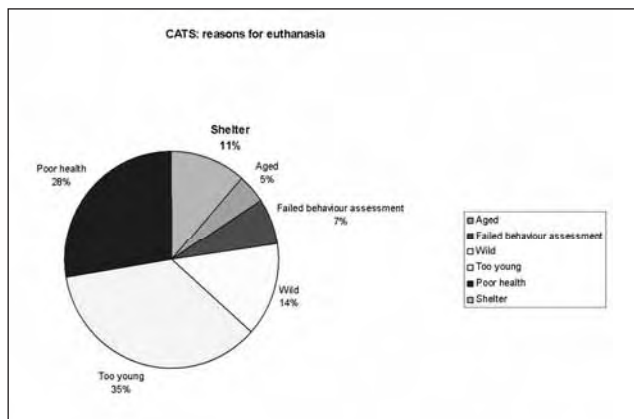


Fig 4: Reasons for euthanasia of cats (Source: RSPCA NSW)

While mirroring the downward trend seen in the US over the last 10-20 years euthanasia figures per capita of human population may be lower in Australia than the USA, albeit proper detailed analysis needs to be done (on the background of poor statistical data in both countries). This is despite the fact that comparatively little has been invested in subsidised desexing schemes in Australia, compared to the USA where literally millions of dollars have been spent in this arena

It is clear that there will be different circumstances in different jurisdictions. In the USA there is a clear north to south trend in increasing euthanasia levels. It is likely that the reverse occurs in Australia. As previously indicated the accuracy of statistics is poor. The jurisdiction where statistics are most accurate is the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). There are only 2 holding facilities for unwanted animals in ACT; the RSPCA shelter at Weston Creek and the ACT municipal pound. The RSPCA figures are published along with the national statistics. The municipal pound figures have been kindly provided from unpublished statistics on the dog and cat impound and euthanasia rates. (Maclean, 2006)

It could be argued that the ACT is one of the wealthiest jurisdictions in Australia and there is likely to be a bias toward responsible companion animal ownership which would lead to less unwanted companion animals. 2060 dogs were dealt with by ACT Domestic Animal Services in 97-98 and 2135 by the RSPCA with around 700 and 554 respectively being euthanased. By 2004-2005 this had dropped to 1943 and 1597 with 191 and 247 respectively euthanased. This represents a reduction of 21.3% in intake and a staggering 65.1% in euthanasia of dogs. This is on the back of reliable reports that dogs are being brought into the ACT from NSW country towns where it is difficult to adopt unwanted strays. The only cat impounding and sheltering is done by the RSPCA. There is a perception that cat numbers are on the increase, however in the 8 year period surveyed cat intake numbers declined by 10% and euthanasia by 18.2%.

Subsidised desexing schemes have only recently begun in ACT and are unlikely to have affected the figures, albeit there is a good baseline for assessment of their impact. As noted above there was continued decline in the intake of dogs to the RSPCA in the 05-06 year but a 15% rise in cat numbers which has meant that there has been little change over the last decade in respect to cats in the ACT.

In New Zealand the SPCA recorded its first ever reduction in the annual number of stray and unwanted animals received by the New Zealand SPCA in 2006 (Mellor, 2007).

Strategies to deal with UCA—(based on the AVA UCA TF “five principles” see appendix).

1. Understand the root causes of the problem

It is critical that good quality research is conducted and accurate meaningful statistics are compiled. There is a need to identify where animals are coming from and why they have been surrendered to a shelter. There are regional differences – due to climate, location, human demographics, legislation, enforcement, education, surrender policy of shelter, local veterinary capacity and other factors. It is critically important that consideration is given to the numbers of animals involved, but also that an assessment and evaluation is made about their suitability as a potential pet animal through adoption programs. Analysis of this “quality” measure enables a deeper understanding of root cause. There are multiple causes for animals being surrendered to shelters – these need to be identified for each shelter / region.

Community input is useful as a research tool as well albeit it is most important that potential bias is recognised in such a process and that relevant weight is giving to more definitive research. In July, 2007 the Queensland Government sought community input on the issue of managing unwanted cats and dogs. A discussion paper was prepared by relevant agencies within the Queensland Government as the first part of the process. It aimed to stimulate discussion and feedback on the key issues that need to be addressed and identify possible solutions. Interested stakeholders and community members were invited to comment on issues raised in the discussion paper and make suggestions to the Queensland state government regarding matters to take into account when developing a policy position on the management of unwanted cats and dogs. The results of this process should be available at the time of the public presentation of this paper

2. Education in responsible pet ownership / guardianship

It is very important to restate the authors’ opinion that education and public awareness are more important than the actual sterilization of the dogs and cats per se. If the public is aware and responsible it will solve the problem more effectively than governments or vets or the not for profit sector. There are excellent programs available that focus on responsible ownership and discuss the issues leading to UCA. AVA (with AVA PetPEP), RSPCA, the Animal Welfare League and others all run excellent programs, as does the Bureau of Animal Welfare in Victoria. In Queensland Government a number of educational initiatives have supported legislative approaches to companion animal management. There has been a ‘Help an animal smile’ campaign run through the Department of Primary Industries. Queensland RSPCA has an Education Mobile Unit, the EMU, which provides a mobile classroom to deliver education on animal care, and the Animal Welfare League has an education team that visits schools.

The new collaborative program, SPOT (Safe Pets Out There) is running in NSW and this may be a model for national consideration if successful.

The SPOT program has been developed under the umbrella of the Australian Companion Animal Council by the Animal Welfare League, the Australian Veterinary Association, Delta Society Australia and the RSPCA. Funded for the three years 2007 through 2009 by the NSW Department of Local Government, SPOT (Safe Pets Out There), is a unique schools program about pet care and kindness and respect for all animals. It also incorporates a specific module about safe behaviour to reduce the incidence of serious dog bites in children. SPOT will include 3 modules: Dog safety, Pet care and Kindness and Welfare. (DLG, NSW, 2007).

Improvement in behavioural management of dogs and cats over the last decade is thought to have contributed to the decline in euthanasia rate. A better behaved dog is more adoptable and also more sustainably adoptable reducing the likelihood of relinquishment. Behavioural assessment has become a priority at the major animal welfare organisations in Australia. Although the exact form that the behavioural test should take is contentious significant progress has been made and together with better environmental enrichment, this has led to better outcomes (Marston, 2005).

3. Identification

Registration is essential in any program to control companion animals, as it enables animals to be reclaimed by their owner and authorities to make informed decisions about euthanasia. Many animals are euthanased because the relevant authority has no capacity to identify and contact an owner. NSW was one of the first jurisdictions in the world to enforce compulsory microchipping and there is evidence that this has led to an increase dogs being reclaimed. (Garrett, 2006)

4. Strategic targeted desexing

a) RSPCA NSW-AVA NSW Community Animal Welfare Schemes (CAWS)

These programs commenced following a program orchestrated by Margi Gaal, the president of the local RSPCA Branch who was also the animal management officer (council ranger) for BCC (now Bathurst Regional Council (BRC) and targeted on the suburb of Kelso.

There has been a significant degree of scepticism in the veterinary community in Australia about desexing programs (Murray, 1992). It was clear to the authors that desexing programs must be highly targeted to be effective. This is a strong theme that has been promoted in the USA in recent years (Marsh, 2004). It is likely that the numbers required to actually have impact on population numbers are so high they become cost ineffective. The author has long held the view that there is more benefit in the awareness (education) of desexing programs than the actually surgeries performed per se. It is likely they add to the cultural acceptance of desexing and lead the public to seeking it out whether subsidised or not.

Most importantly analysis needs to be done on any strategy that is put into place. During 2006 a study on the analysis of the impact of the CAWS programs is being done.

RSPCA NSW decided to set up a new series of programs based on an evolving analysis of UCA with a view to further reducing intake and euthanasia rates. One of these was the CAWS (Community Animal Welfare Scheme) program; a collaboration with the NSW Division of the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA). This joint community program is delivered in country towns. It combines education (through AVAPetPep or RSPCA educational staff), public awareness through joint media releases and desexing programs targeted to the poorer members of the local community as assessed by means testing.

In 2004 programs were carried out in Bourke, Coonamble, Gilgandra and Bathurst. In 2005 with assistance from funding from the M Carroll Animal Welfare Fund and JS Love Trust via Perpetual Trustees Inverell and Griffith were added to the programs. In 2006 Coonamble and Gilgandra were replaced by Dubbo, albeit Coonamble ran their own program through the support of Coonamble Vet Hospital and the Coonamble Shire Council.

We have been very fortunate to have been able to expand the CAWS programs to cover over 10 NSW country towns in 2007. I would like to acknowledge a deep appreciation of the support of the Cameron family which has made the expansion of the program possible.

These programs have been thought to have reduced parvovirus cases in pups as well as unwanted litters. They improve responsible ownership as many involved in the programs had previously never sought veterinary care for their animals, and subsequent did. This was in the order of 25% in one town (King, 2006). Apart from coverage in rural media, it has been the subject of a short communication in the veterinary literature (Lawrie and Constable, 2006). One of the strengths of the CAWS programs is their ability to build veterinary capacity in areas where it struggles to be maintained. The use of current veterinary hospital infrastructure in sterilization schemes has been identified as a strength in some US programs (Marsh, 2003).

b) Discussion of subsidised sterilization

Peter Marsh (2004) reviews future strategies in solving UCA in the USA and says, "The answer lies in working smarter, not harder". He emphasises that with the higher sterilization rates of owned animals 75% of money spent on low cost sterilization schemes is being wasted as many of those participating would have had their animals desexed regardless.

High sterilization rates of owned cats have been reported in both urban and rural areas of Australia. Liliith et al. (2006) found that the frequency of sterilization of owned cats in the city of Armadale, Western Australia, was 96% for females and 89% for males in urban areas. The figures reported in rural areas of Armadale were 91% and 87% for females and males respectively. These compare closely to sterilisation rates of 88-93% (REARK 1994, Perry 1999) and 93% of all cats (Murray et al. 1999) from other areas of Australia.

Peter Marsh says that "To be effective, neutering programs must reach pets in the breeding population and result in sterilizations that wouldn't have occurred otherwise. Because they are not cost effective, untargeted programs are prohibitively expensive." He also points out how vets are disaffected when programs are not targeted. It is interesting that these comments are based on the US experience where there has been significant benevolent and government funding for sterilization programs.

Bob Christiansen (2000) has advocated making spay neuter the domain of government rather than veterinarians. It should be funded and managed by governments employing vets to do this. It is hard to see this being acceptable in economically rational Australia today and there are signs that the ability to publicly fund sterilization in USA is faltering. Christiansen also highlights that kittens are coming from the semi-owned or wild populations.

Australia has less need for subsidised desexing programs than the USA albeit they are still warranted. Australians are more likely to seek unsubsidised desexing than Americans for 2 main reasons. Firstly, Australians are more responsive to "social marketing" than Americans. High success in implementing public programs like seat belt wearing and skin cancer prevention (Slip, Slop, Slap) support this. Secondly, there is more even distribution of wealth in Australia than in the USA. A greater percentage of Australians can afford unsubsidised sterilization.

This has led to higher sterilization rates of owned dogs and cats in Australia (Lawrie, 2006). There is nevertheless scope for highly targeted desexing programs to be run in areas that are contributing more significantly to the problem of UCA. In NSW these are country towns (especially those west of the divide and in the Riverine as indicated by figures previously published on the Department of Local Government (DLG) website (2001)), indigenous communities and housing commission areas. Consideration should also be given to animal hoarders who do not desex their animals.

c) Unowned and semi-owned cats and Trap Neuter Return programs

Work done in the US indicates that "semi-owned" or unowned cat populations are far more prolific in adding to the UCA problem than owned cats (Johnson, 1994). Recent research in Australia has confirmed the trend in this country (Marston et al, 2005). Ellen Jongman (2006) presented a literature review commissioned at the National Urban Animal Conference in Hobart in August, 2006. Questions were raised over work that has been presented in the past. The conclusion was that there are many potential hazards in running such programs and they may only be effective in a small number of highly confined situations where there is good management. It would appear that the most successful and sustainable programs are on university campuses in the USA. There may be difficulties in translating those situations to Australasia where university campuses are less discrete than they are in the US. At the same conference Carole Webb (2006) discussed almost a decade's experience of involvement with TNR programs. She indicated, that despite a strong desire that they would work, she had lost faith in them as unmanageable due to the unreliability of carers overseeing the programs, the numbers of cats that were being re-introduced to the colonies and the high cost of running them.

Barrows (2004) stated that "free-ranging and feral cat's populations place tremendous pressure on birds, mammals, and other animal populations they prey on." He presents the positive and negative aspects of TNR. These are listed below.

Pros:

- ✓ Strong Public support for alternatives to euthanasia.
- ✓ Adoptions and euthanasia programs have not solved the problem of cat overpopulation.
- ✓ Feral cats enhance the lives of their caretakers.
- ✓ Cats in managed colonies can live good lives.

Cons:

- ✓ May violate abandonment laws.
- ✓ High mortality rates and many trauma related deaths among free ranging cats.
- ✓ Depletion of birds and other species by cat predators.
- ✓ Public health risk caused by zoonoses

In addition to feral cats, owned domestic cats also kill large numbers of wildlife and impact wildlife populations. In a survey conducted by Liliith et al. (2006), over 70% of respondents agreed that the presence of cats in nature reserves is harmful to wildlife and that there is a need to regulate owned domestic cats. However, cat owners were less supportive of the statement "domestic cats killing wildlife in the suburbs are a serious problem" compared with non cat owners. In general, domestic cats attacking wildlife was considered more of a problem in nature reserves than in the suburbs. It was concluded that precautionary measures for fauna conservation are justified and should be greatest near reserves. Precautionary measures suggested include confinement, sterilization, registration, identification, controlling cat densities, banning cat ownership in sensitive areas and destroying cats found roaming in nature reserves. However, there were differences in the attitudes of owners and non owners, with owners being less inclined to accept some of these measures.

In particular, cat owners did not support the creation and enforcement of cat exclusion zones by local councils (Liliith et al. 2006).

5. Balance population to demand-Redistribution from areas of excess to "deficit"

In the USA and Australia the relocation of dogs and cats from areas of excess to shortage of supply is an emerging strategy. In the USA there is significant south to north eastern state transfer of puppies (Patronek, 2006). An example of a successful transfer program is the "sister shelter" arrangement between the Potter League for Animals in Rhode Island, which was suffering from a shortage of puppies and a surplus of adopters and the Mitchell County Animal Rescue Shelter in a rural area of North Carolina where puppies were plentiful but adoption almost impossible. The transfer of puppies from North Carolina to Rhode Island has resulted in the adoption of 250 puppies over the last 2 years. Most of these puppies would probably have been euthanized had they remained in North Carolina. The transfer program has led to the development of a "positive and respectful" relationship between the two shelters. Also, the influx of puppies to the Rhode Island shelter has increased activity within and visitors to the shelter, resulting in increased adoptions of adult dogs and cats (Smith, 2007).

In NSW RSPCA is increasingly bringing dogs and cats from country areas to the city. In the winter of 2006 RSPCA Queensland airfreighted kittens to RSPCA ACT for adoption.

Conclusion

It is our belief that the many efforts of a multitude of stakeholders has led to a gradual improvement in the problem of UCA in Australia over the last decade. This is more pronounced in dogs with a possible "J-curving up" occurring in the situation with cats. We question whether the feeding of semi-owned or unowned cats and inadequate cat management by some councils may be contributing to this.

It is our belief that the most important strategy is to gather comprehensive national statistics and conduct proper analysis and research using those statistics to measure the effect of work that is currently being done. It is clear that any program to deal with UCA must have a substantive educational component. It is our opinion that education is more cost effective than subsidised desexing. Targeted desexing programs, which have a means testing component, should be delivered to key problem areas (country towns, indigenous communities and housing commission areas). The ongoing rise in the standards of behavioural management of all dogs and especially of pound and shelter dogs for adoption is likely to have reduced euthanasia rates and will play a role in the continued reduction. More creative ways must be applied to the adoption of pound and shelter dogs and cats including the transportation of animals from areas of excess to those of increasing shortage. Continuing work in managing animal hoarders has the potential to reduce the numbers of unwanted (and often unadoptable) dogs and cats across NSW by the thousands.

Clearly no one strategy will solve the problem, there is no quick fix, but it is critical that measures are made of those which ones are most effective and use is made of these these. Clearly different strategies are required for different areas and jurisdictions.

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About the Author/s

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He has been involved in a number of important animal welfare issues including the "Link between violence to animals and People", "Animal Hoarders", "Unwanted Companion Animals" and the "Use of Animals in Research and Teaching. He was awarded Membership of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in Animal Welfare in 2004. He lives in Sydney with his wife and 6 children, 2 of whom are dogs.

Dr Magdoline Awad is the Deputy Chief Veterinarian with RSPCA NSW. She worked on the original Kelso Project assisting in its planning. She also has been involved from the outset in the planning of CAWS programs, there ongoing implementation and delivery. She has also planned and been responsible for the implementation of a number of programs on indigenous communities in conjunction with the Far West Area Health service and now Greater West Area Health service.

Appendix 1

Populate or Perish?

Australian Veterinary Association | Unwanted Companion Animal Task Force

“Failure to standardise and broaden data collection continues to hinder progress in strategically dealing with the issue (UCA)”-Clancy and Rowan, 2003

“Untargeted spay neuter wastes 75% of funds”- Marsh, 2003 Petsavers

Solving the problem of unwanted companion animals (UCA) – the five principles.

1. Understand the root causes of the problem

- a. Conduct good quality research and compile accurate meaningful statistics
- b. Identify where animals are coming from and why they have been surrendered to a shelter

Important considerations:

- There are regional differences – due to climate¹, location², human demographics³, legislation⁴, enforcement⁵, education⁶, surrender policy of shelter⁷, local veterinary capacity⁸, etc.
- Strong consideration must be given to not just the quantity (numbers) of animals involved, but an assessment and evaluation must be made about their suitability as a potential pet animal through adoption program. Analysis of this “quality” measure enables a deeper understanding of root cause⁹
- There are *multiple* causes for animals being surrendered to shelters – they need to be identified for each shelter / region.

2. Education in responsible pet ownership / guardianship

- c. Education is to be encouraged at all levels and through all channels

Important considerations:

- Education programs should be of high quality and be independently evaluated
- Education is a powerful adjunct to most other programs
- The provision of education must have both short and long term objectives.

3. Identification

- d. Encourage identification of owned animals in order to differentiate them from un-owned animals
- e. There are multiple methods of identification

Important considerations:

- Many animals (particularly cats) in the shelter population are not identified.

¹ eg: cat breeding season is longer in warmer climates than cooler climates

² A shelter located in a high profile position may attract a higher number of surrenders

³ Surrender rates have been known to vary in different human socio-economic areas

⁴ eg: a ‘cat curfew’ or legal trapping of roaming cats will increase the rate of cats entering a shelter

⁵ Well enforced legislation has a different effect on surrender rates than poorly enforced legislation

⁶ The introduction of a good quality education campaign may reduce the burden on shelters where no education was provided before

⁷ Shelters that have open, unrestricted surrender policies may see more surrenders than limited entry shelters

⁸ Regions with poor or zero access to veterinary services may have a greater animal welfare burden

⁹ eg if most dogs surrendered to a shelter are young adults with behavioural problems, then the problem is not one of numbers ‘born’, it is a problem of numbers ‘retained’ as pets

- Definitions of 'pet' and 'owned pet' will help to clarify much contention within the issues¹⁰.

4. Strategically target programs such as desexing

- 'Blanket' whole-population desexing campaigns are unlikely to achieve considerable further reduction in shelter admissions, due to the already high level of voluntary compliance with desexing practices¹¹.
- Targeted ('niche') desexing campaigns can be well managed, measured and evaluated in the short term, and can have a profound effect on the surrender rates

Important considerations:

- Accurate data enables identification of target animal populations (eg semi-owned cats); target demographic segments; or target geographic area.
- Accurate data further enables a decision as to whether a desexing program occurs in isolation, has adjuncts such as education, or is completely replaced by another initiative.

5. Balance population to demand

- Supply and demand mismatches are known to occur¹²
- Improved adoption processes can dramatically increase the adoption rate and reduce the return rate¹³

Important considerations:

- There are complex inter-relationships of cat subpopulations which confuse our understanding of supply and demand of cats into pet ownership.
- The kitten season phenomenon makes matching the demand for kittens a challenge.
- If a demand for pets by responsible pet owners is not filled by responsible sources, then irresponsible sources will fill this gap
- Balancing population to demand will require creative solutions¹⁴

¹⁰ It is recognised that not all 'pets' in welfare shelters have come from homes, which suggests that the meaning of 'pet' needs clarification. If they are not 'pets', then how should we refer to them? This is particularly true of the term 'pet overpopulation'.

¹¹ Annual surveys of the owned pet cat population find that desexing rates within this population exceed 91% for breeding age female cats.

¹² RSPCA ACT has recently received several hundred kittens flown from northern QLD to satisfy the demand in ACT. RSPCA Yagoona (Sydney) brings puppies and kittens in from rural centres to alleviate a supply – demand mismatch.

¹³ At least welfare shelter has increased adoption rates by 20% over 2 years through the use of an integrated temperament / matching / training program. Improved cat adoptions have occurred through increasing exposure of adoptable cats through responsible non-shelter outlets.

¹⁴ eg interstate relocation of puppies and kittens, a recent initiative by RSPCA QLD and ACT.