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1983

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Recommended Citation

Wilkins, D.B. (1983). Achieving a concensus on dog control strategies: A brief primer. *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*, 4(2), 93-94.

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Achieving a Concensus on Dog Control Strategies: A Brief Primer

D.B. Wilkins

The welfare arguments surrounding dog ownership may not stimulate the same passionate fervor as those relating to the use of animals in experiments, factory farming, or the hunting of live animals with hounds, but nevertheless, they are matters of real concern to most welfare organizations.

The most serious problems are caused through irresponsible ownership, which leads to overbreeding and the inevitable consequence of large numbers of stray and unwanted dogs.

The symptoms of the stray-dog problem vary from country to country and area to area. In many, disease is the most important aspect, with rabies predominating. But in many Mediterranean countries, echinococcosis has been causing considerable concern. The island of Cyprus is a case in point. There, the high incidence of this disease among dogs necessitated massive destruction of all unwanted animals. (The dog control scheme carried out in Cyprus is chronicled by K. Polydorou elsewhere in this issue.) In other parts of the world, particularly the large cities of Europe and North America, the antisocial issues involving strays are important. Examples include feces fouling of pedestrian areas and sports fields and the destruction of garbage containers. The one common factor among all these variables is that the stray dog is inevitably suffering, whether from injury, disease, food and water deprivation, neglect, or some combination of two or more of these hardships.

It is primarily for this reason that responsible welfare organizations should and do become involved in discussions over the introduction of dog control measures aimed essentially at punishing the incorrigible, irresponsible dog owner, breeder, or dealer. The difficulty to be

faced is the extent to which legislative measures should go to try and solve the stray-dog problem. All too often, there will be considerable differences of opinion among welfarists themselves on this issue, particularly when there is a risk that a certain proportion of the dog-owning public will vociferously accuse them of supporting the anti-dog lobby.

However, while advocating no action at all is an easy and comfortable option in these circumstances, this is a policy that helps no one, least of all the stray dogs themselves. Conversely, there is a very real risk of being drawn into supporting a legislative measure that is being introduced to alleviate the symptoms of a problem, without any provisions for attempting to unravel and solve their underlying causes. For example, a complete prohibition of dogs and their owners from all parks and other recreational areas in a large city might solve the fouling problem in these places, but will also result in real suffering for both dogs and their owners. Legislation can, therefore, become counterproductive if it goes too far and results in disadvantages that outweigh the potential advantages. On the other hand, there are some circumstances that may justify seemingly draconian measures on the basis that the long-term benefits to both the dogs and responsible owners are substantial and outweigh any possible short-term welfare complications.

In France, where rabies has been spreading slowly but surely across the whole country for some years, dog owners have accepted legislation that makes it obligatory in most parts of the country for those who own a dog to have it vaccinated against rabies and tattooed with a centrally registered identification number, a procedure that can be transiently

unpleasant to the dog. In the U.K., there is universal approval for a quarantine policy for all dogs being imported. The suffering that may be caused by the 6-month quarantine is more than justified by the fact that the U.K. is thus kept free of a disease which, if introduced, would lead to infinitely greater suffering.

It is vital, though, to pay proper attention to the role of education in solving the problems of irresponsible dog ownership. Much suffering is caused to dogs (and pets of all kinds) through the ignorance and neglect of certain fundamental principles of care and ownership. Most welfare and veterinary organizations are deeply involved in educational programs, but it is essential that governments, at either national or local levels, become involved as well. The way forward would appear to be through legislative control, properly enforced, which would complement and not contradict an educational program.

In addition, a third and important factor in any dog welfare/control program should be recognition of the necessity of harnessing the support of the majority of dog owners, although there will always be a minority who automatically oppose any forms of control, if only on the principle that they infringe upon individual rights, etc. As a first step, there-

fore, it is incumbent on governments to work with, and gain the support of, leading welfare, veterinary, and dog organizations.

In the U.K., all leading organizations involved in dog ownership have come together under an umbrella organization (non-governmental), which is entitled the Joint Advisory Committee on Pets in Society (JACOPI). Recently, this example has been followed in Australia, where it is already beginning to produce beneficial results. Proper consultation between government agencies and the other involved organizations should lead to controls that are properly thought out, responsibly administered, and compassionately enforced. Such controls should then produce positive beneficial results for both dogs and dog owners and will, therefore, be accepted by the vast majority of the general public. The risks from zoonotic diseases will be reduced, and the benefit to humans from owning a dog, greatly enhanced.

No responsible dog owner should fear controls that are introduced in this way, but it is necessary that influence be continued through various representative organizations, so that any future amendments can result from the same consultative pattern.

