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Special Report on Controlling America's Pet Population

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"The overpopulation of pets has been caused by an overpopulation of irresponsible pet owners who fail to exert responsible control of their animals."
Special Report on Controlling America's Pet Population

With an estimated 80 to 100 million cats and dogs in this country already, kittens and puppies are being born at the rate of 2,000 to 3,500 an hour. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) learned in a recent survey that 15 to 17 million cats and dogs were turned in to the nation's animal shelters in 1973. Of that number, a shocking 13.5 million were put to death! This means that only 13.5% of the dogs and 9% of the cats were adopted or redeemed.

The odds are even worse for the millions of animals that are abandoned on city streets and country roads. Most of them die from starvation, disease, freezing, or under the wheels of cars. In a study of free-roaming dogs in the city of Baltimore, sociologist Alan Beck found the life span of these animals was only 2½ years, considerably shorter than the life span of dogs that were cared for and controlled.

Abandoned and free-roaming animals also become the targets of intentional abuse. Every community has incidents of cats and dogs being set afire or wounded by BB guns, rifles, and other weapons. Animals are no match for humans in such situations.

The answer, HSUS believes, is more responsible pet ownership and a drastic reduction in the pet birth rate. "The overpopulation of pets has been caused by overpopulation of irresponsible owners who fail to exert responsible control of their animals," declared Dr. Lloyd C. Faulkner, chairman of the Department of Physiology and Biophysics at Colorado State University and one of the leading investigators of contraceptive methods for pets. "Owners who believe they are doing a kindness by giving their pets freedom to run loose or who deliberately mate pets to meet a market of largely irresponsible owners are inflicting cruelty on dogs, cats, livestock, wildlife, and humans."

The root of the problem is that many Americans buy or adopt pets without having thoroughly considered the responsibilities and limitations that pets impose on their lifestyle. While the rewards of having a pet are obvious to the prospective pet owner, the responsibilities that pet ownership demands are often unknown until the animal has been taken into the home. Exercise, feeding, and attention to other biological requirements must be attended to according to the animal's needs, not the owner's convenience. Too many people leave pets confined in apartments or houses for hours beyond feeding or exercise time. The result is not a compatible pet but a frustrated, lonely animal that is likely to many of them conduct such irresponsible adoption programs that animals are placed with people unfit to be pet owners.

One of man's original purposes for domesticating the cat and the dog was to assist in his work. The dog was used to hunt and to guard cattle, sheep, and the household. The cat protected commercial and household granaries from rats and mice. But industrialization brought an end to most of these needs, and the cat and the dog, no longer able to earn their keep in the household, are now subject to the same whims of affection and rejection that characterize human relationships.

Urbanization has created an even more serious problem for companion animals. As more and more people move into apartments and townhouses, more and more pets are left without homes. The mobility of Twentieth Century Americans creates even more problems as pets are left behind when owners move to new communities.

The pet problem is further complicated by early puberty, frequency of reproduction, and large litter size. A female dog is able to breed at 6 to 9 months and comes into heat twice a year. She may give birth to a litter of six puppies every 6 months. The female cat is even more prolific. She reaches sexual maturity at about 6 months of age and comes into heat every 4 months.
from February until late summer. One female cat may have as many as three or four litters a year, with as many as six kittens per litter. Theoretically, one female dog can be responsible for the birth of 4,372 dogs in 7 years, including all her descendants. Taking into account all the variables and practicalities of dog reproduction and survival, spay clinic advocate Ted Sarich has concluded that, at the very minimum, one uncontrolled female dog may be responsible for the birth of 580 dogs in 10 years. Even with that lower figure it is easy to understand how just one irresponsible pet owner adds to the already excessive pet population.

The enormous cost of animal control is only one of the negative effects that the surplus dog and cat population is having on Americans. The abundance of pets in urban areas has created serious sanitation and public health problems in many communities. Some 1.5 million dog bites are reported annually, and almost as many may go unreported. Many of the victims are young children and teenagers. Although rabies is no longer a serious health problem in this country, some 30,000 persons undergo a painful series of shots with rabies vaccine annually. Free-roaming cats and dogs also create a secondary problem by tearing open trash bags and knocking over garbage cans, providing a food supply for a growing rat population. In rural areas, dogs running in packs often harass cattle and wildlife. These packs are usually comprised of feral animals that have been joined by strays and uncontrolled pets.

No one is more aware of the conflict between pets and people in urban America than municipal officials. In a survey conducted by the National League of Cities last year, the nation’s mayors reported they receive more complaints about dog control and other pet problems than about anything else. Nevertheless, animal control seldom receives the attention necessary to make it effective. Too many municipal officials view it as an insoluble problem that will plague them regardless of how much expertise or money is put into it. Part of their reluctance to deal with it constructively is undoubtedly caused by the intense arguments that often arise between pet owners and non-pet owning citizens when the issue is aired publicly. Several cities have already passed ordinances requiring pet owners to remove their pets’ waste from public property. It is increasingly recognized that pet ownership in urban society is not a right but a privilege. Unless Americans are willing to exert the responsibility that pet ownership requires, they will hasten the day when Americans are asked to vote on proposals to ban animals from urban areas.

Unfortunately, many local humane societies fail to back the adoption of strict animal control ordinances. “I am always shocked to learn that a local animal welfare group is not supporting municipal animal control,” said HSUS Director of Animal Sheltering and Control Phyllis Wright. “Without a strong animal control program, all other attempts to solve the surplus pet problem are futile.”

Responsible animal control must include five integral parts: (1) a practical and enforceable ordinance; (2) a good animal shelter; (3) an ongoing program to inform and educate the public about the proper control of pets; (4) an efficient field program to cope with uncontrolled animals; (5) a sterilization program to reduce the unwanted pet population.

Responsibility for the overall program must be assumed by the local government because pet problems affect all residents of the community, not just animal owners. Communities that refuse to accept the responsibility end up spending more money in dealing with the problems that irresponsible pet owners cause than they would in the administration of a strong preventative program.

While local humane societies have historically assumed the responsibility for operating animal shelters, HSUS believes the entire community should share the responsibility. The most important role of a local humane society is not a right but a privilege. Unless Americans are willing to exert the responsibility that pet ownership requires, they will hasten the day when Americans are asked to vote on proposals to ban animals from urban areas.

Definitions

The surplus of cats and dogs is comprised of the following categories of animals:

**Unwanted** — animals that were once owned and have been abandoned or surrendered to a shelter.

**Uncontrolled** — owned animals allowed to run at large.

**Stray** — animals that have been rejected or lost.

**Free-roaming** — any animal roaming at large, whether owned or unowned.

**Feral** — animals that have reverted to the wild state.
society is to ensure that community programs are carried out humanely and efficiently and to enlist the cooperation of the public for municipal laws and programs.

"The humane movement has no illusions that it can rectify the current overpopulation problem alone, nor is it our responsibility alone," said HSUS President John A. Hoyt at the National Conference on the Ecology of the Surplus Dog and Cat Problem in May 1974. "It is a problem, the solution of which will require the intensive effort and cooperation of veterinarians, government officials, the pet industry, pet food manufacturers, and all of us in the humane movement."

The conference was sponsored by HSUS, the American Veterinary Medical Assn., the American Humane Assn., the American Kennel Club, and the Pet Food Institute. It was the first time these diverse organizations had met to discuss a problem for which they share responsibility. Participants, including representatives of several state and local animal welfare organizations, concluded that animal control programs are often ineffective for the following reasons: (a) ordinances are outdated, weak, or poorly enforced; (b) animal control personnel are unqualified or untrained; (c) animal control agencies are understaffed; and (d) use of inadequate equipment.

HSUS assists local communities in solving these problems by providing expertise, training, and counsel to both public and private organizations. At workshops conducted throughout the United States, HSUS staff members familiarize animal control officers, shelter personnel, and local humane society leaders with all aspects of animal control, from the adoption of an adequate ordinance to the operation of an efficient shelter. For many participants, the workshops provide the first professional direction for the performance of their duties. As a result of information exchanged during the 2-day sessions, HSUS representatives may visit communities with the most serious problems to provide more direct assistance in solving them. These visits provide additional benefit to individuals and groups working for better animal control because the arrival of a national animal welfare authority inevitably catapults the subject of animal control into local headlines.

HSUS frequently works in partnership with local organizations to bring about major reforms in animal control. In San Antonio, Texas, for instance, HSUS helped organize an ad hoc committee of concerned citizens to work for badly needed improvements at the city animal shelter. When the committee failed to obtain improvements during 5 months of meetings with city officials, it filed a lawsuit against the city administration in 1972 that eventually produced an agreement to meet the group's demands. To assist in improving one aspect of the shelter's problems, staff of the HSUS Gulf States Regional Office conducted on-the-job training sessions for animal control employees. The regional staff continues to maintain a close relationship with the city to provide ongoing evaluation and assistance.

At the request of the city of Sacramento, Calif., the HSUS Gulf States Regional Office conducted a visit and report.
the community animal control program in 1974 that uncovered several serious problems. HSUS made specific recommendations for the training of animal control employees and the improvement of animal control procedures and policies.

The first step toward providing adequate animal control must be the adoption of a strict animal control ordinance. The ordinance should include the following components: (a) control of the cat and dog population; (b) protection of animals from cruelty; (c) regulations that discourage the breeding of cats and dogs and encourage spaying and neutering; and (d) the use of a citation system for fining pet owners who violate the animal control ordinance, in order to penalize owners instead of animals. HSUS has distributed copies of its publication Responsible Animal Regulation, containing the text of a suggested ordinance, to 1,500 municipalities and local humane societies in the past year.

The inclusion of a citation system is especially important, HSUS believes, because control of animals is the responsibility of people. Too many animals have been confined in shelters and put to death because their owners failed to be responsible.

HSUS advocates the licensing of cats, as well as dogs, because the cat population is believed to be growing at an even faster rate than the dog population. Licensing also provides cats with the same identification system that helps in returning lost dogs to their owners. Unfortunately, cat owners have been successful in defeating this measure in many communities.

The best method for encouraging the spaying and neutering of pets, HSUS believes, is to set higher license fees for unaltered animals. This incentive can be effective only if licensing regulations are strictly enforced. HSUS advocates that local humane societies establish reduced-cost spay and neuter programs in cooperation with local veterinary associations or individual veterinarians whenever possible. Efforts to provide reduced-cost spay and neuter programs have been thwarted by opponents who argue that the cost to the community is the only certain method of preventing reproduction.

A spay and neuter program is a wasted effort unless operations for the pets of people who can afford standard veterinary rates have been opposed by most veterinary associations, who see such efforts as competitive with private practice. Nevertheless, HSUS believes such programs are valid when coupled with effective educational and enforcement programs.

Although several research companies are working on the development of a permanent immunological sterilant, Dr. Lloyd C. Faulkner, a leading investigator of this method, predicts it will be 5 to 10 years before a practical product is on the market. Temporary sterilants, including some that will be used as additives in commercially prepared pet food, are closer to the marketing stage. HSUS believes, however, that temporary sterilants leave too much room for owner irresponsibility to be effective in reducing the pet population. In the meantime, surgical alteration is the only certain method of preventing reproduction.

A program initiated in Los Angeles in 1971 has proved that a spay and neuter program can have a significant effect on reducing a community's surplus pet population. In 1974 the city's six animal shelters handled 17.7% fewer animals than it did in 1971. In the same period, the number of animals destroyed dropped by 20.3%. The city also reported that 37.7% of all dogs licensed by the city in 1974 had been altered, compared to 16% when the clinic opened.

Robert I. Rush, general manager of the city's Dept. of Animal Regulation, attributed the decrease in surplus animals to the combined effects of the spay and neuter clinics, stricter enforcement of the leash law, and a higher license fee for unaltered dogs ($7 versus $3.50 for altered ones).

In San Mateo County, Calif., the number of animals handled by the Peninsula Humane Society dropped by 39% from 1973 to 1974 after the county established a reduced-cost spay and neuter program.

A spay and neuter program is a wasted effort unless the animal shelter establishes a strict policy of prohibiting the adoption of any unaltered animal. Earlier this year one local humane society refused to support an ordinance that required the neutering of all animals placed for adoption from the city animal shelter when it was proposed by a city councilman. The ordinance was passed through the efforts of responsible pet owners and HSUS animal control expert Phyllis Wright, who testified in support of it. "It always amazes me to hear communities talking about spay and neuter programs when their own shelters are putting unaltered animals back on the streets," exclaimed Miss Wright. "If the shelter isn't willing to insist on altering its animals, how can it ask pet owners to alter theirs?"
Both the National League of Cities and the American Veterinary Medical Assn. have adopted official statements urging all communities to adhere to this policy.

When kittens and puppies are adopted, the shelter should require the payment of a fee high enough to ensure the new owner returns to have the animal altered when it reaches the appropriate age. HSUS believes a fee of at least $25 is required to ensure fulfillment of the agreement. If the operation costs less, the difference should be refunded upon completion of the operation.

HSUS continues to be strongly opposed to the selling of surplus animals to animal dealers or research facilities because of the inhumane treatment to which many laboratory animals are subjected. In addition, the fear that pets might end up in a laboratory may deter many people from taking animals to a shelter. Every shelter should have a written policy against such action and publicize it throughout the community.

At the conclusion of each of the HSUS workshops, Phyllis Wright tells representatives of local humane societies and animal control agencies their goal should be to close the doors of the shelter. “When you can notify me that an animal shelter is no longer needed in your community, I’ll know you have accomplished your two most important tasks—educating the community to be responsible pet owners and eliminating unnecessary breeding,” she states.

How soon will these goals be met in your community? It is up to you and other responsible citizens to make that determination.

Help Available from HSUS

HSUS has a variety of assistance available to citizens and community officials interested in improving their animal control programs, including the following:

1. A detailed description of the components of an adequate animal control program contained in Responsible Animal Regulation, available from HSUS headquarters for $0.50 each. The manual contains a copy of the HSUS suggested animal control ordinance.

2. Regional workshops designed to improve the skills of animal control officers, shelter operators, and local humane society leaders. For information on a workshop in your vicinity, write WORKSHOPS, in care of HSUS headquarters.

3. Technical literature for shelter operation. Write to HSUS headquarters for a free literature list.


5. Personalized direction and counsel from the HSUS Department of Animal Sheltering and Control.

6. For communities without a humane society, a manual on How To Establish a Humane Society, available at $1 each from HSUS headquarters.

7. Public service announcements for local radio stations, available free from HSUS headquarters.

8. Camera-ready newspaper ads, available for $1 per set from HSUS headquarters.

9. An Accreditation Program for local humane organizations and animal control agencies. By accrediting organizations that meet its standards, HSUS seeks to improve the treatment to animals and services to the entire community. For information, write: ACCREDITATION in care of HSUS headquarters.

You Can Help!

1. Collect signatures from fellow residents of your community requesting the city council to adopt an adequate animal control ordinance.

2. Send to HSUS headquarters for copies of its manual Responsible Animal Regulation ($0.50 each) and give them to your city council representative, the mayor, and the city manager. The manual contains a copy of HSUS’s suggested animal control ordinance and tips on how to implement it.

3. Use the poster on the reverse side of this report to educate fellow citizens of your community about this serious problem. Send for additional copies at $0.10 each and have them posted in animal shelters, municipal buildings, churches, schools, and stores.

4. Ask the local animal shelter staff what their policy is on the spaying and neutering of animals put out for adoption. If spaying and neutering are not required, write to shelter officials about the need for establishing such a policy.

5. Write letters to the editors of your local papers describing the animal control problems in your community. Suggest solutions contained in this report.

6. Urge local radio, TV, and newspaper reporters to develop news articles or programs on the community’s animal control problems. Give them copies of this report available from HSUS headquarters at $0.10 each.

7. Send a tax-exempt contribution to HSUS to enable us to continue our crusade to prevent cruelty and waste of life.