Homeless Pets, Public Health and Changing Public Perception

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Outline

- Definitions and debates
- History and perceptions
- Conflicts and problems
- What we know
- Where might we go
Definitions and Debates
The Homeless Pet Problem

- “Pet overpopulation”
- “Pet surplus”
- Euthanasia a key discussion point
- Animal shelters often involved as points of high volume euthanasia
- Some millions of dogs and cats (and other species) housed and euthanized in the US each year

“Pet Overpopulation”

- Too many dogs and cats born
- Breakdown of the human-pet bond
- Lack of formation of the bond
- Lack of redistribution of existing pets to homes that seek them
- A “right” to own pets rather than a privilege and responsibility
- Issue of supply vs demand
Definition of the Problem

- Healthy animals unable to live out their lives because there are too many or because of abandonment or relinquishment by owners (Olsen)
- "Pet surplus" is becoming more used
  - Implies there are homes that aren’t being accessed
- "Homeless pets" is an even broader term
  - Recognizes the importance of free-roaming animals that aren’t in animal shelters
Types of Shelters

- Municipal or government owned
  - Paid by taxes and user fees
  - Often animal control officers, cruelty
- Privately funded “shelters”
  - Non-profit, tax exempt organizations
  - May or may not have an actual building
  - May or may not accept all animals
- Combination of above

Public Health

- Bites from dogs and cats
- Rabies concerns
  - Cats most common domestic species
- Other zoonotic diseases
  - Potential for infection vs real risks
- Human health- emotional bond with animals
  - Disasters are a good example
- Financial costs to all!
Supply vs Demand for Dogs and Cats

- Tend to focus on supply
  - Sterilization
  - Puppy mills
  - Backyard breeders
  - Careless owners
- But demand recognized in the 1970’s and again recently as an important force
Supply vs Demand

- But, we know that demand is crucial
  - MA residents drive to VA for a mixed breed puppy
  - Designer mix breeds on line
  - If the shelter doesn’t have it or denies adoption, people WILL find a source
- Need to consider marketing for shelters
  - Some are very successful

Supply vs Demand

- Geographic redistribution of existing shelter animals
  - Particularly to the northeast, mid-west
  - PetSmart Charities Rescue Waggin’ with the ASPCA
    - Specific shelter partners
    - Strict health, transportation guidelines
  - Concerns about disease and management of programs
History and Changing Perceptions
Why the Focus on Homeless Pets?

- Human demographic shifts to cities
- Rising incomes and the ability to afford a pet
- Better health and nutrition for pets
- Control of fertility
- Increased numbers of cats as companions
- Rise of rabies in cats

Free-Roaming Dogs and Cats

- Related to pet overpopulation
- Owned and unowned dogs and cats at large
- Public health and nuisance concerns
- Animal welfare issues
- Compliance with veterinary health recommendations
- Human-animal bond
Free-roaming Pet Issues

- Owned pets allowed to roam may be injured, lost, killed, taken to shelter
- Behavior and inappropriate expectations → abandonment
- Intact pets and unowned animal reproduce, contributing to pet overpopulation
- Bites, rabies, other zoonoses
Change in perceptions

- Relationships between people and pets
  - Changes in lifestyle and pet ownership
  - From child to vermin
- The increase in animal welfare and animal rights organizations
- The “no-kill” movement
- Changes in language about “pets”
- Changes in laws about animals
The No-Kill Movement

- “is a revolution”
- “a declaration...a listing of rights and principles”
- Life for all treatable animals
- Use of trap, neuter and return for feral cats
- Address language used (put to sleep)
- Promote spay/neuter and adoption
- Accountability of shelters

Brief Recent History

- Papers on the need for data on pet overpopulation 1980’s (Rowan)
- Special section on pet overpopulation in key veterinary journal in 1991 (Olsen)
- Formation of the National Council for Pet Population Study and Policy in 1992
- Asilomar Accords
Asilomar Accords

- August 2004
- To building bridges across varying philosophies
- To develop relationships between groups
- To create goals focused on significantly reducing the euthanasia of healthy and treatable companion animals in the United States
- Guiding principles of interactions
- Definitions of healthy, treatable
- Recommendations for statistics to track
Conflicts and Issues

Current Issues
- Lack of comprehensive data or knowledge
- Need to get data back to constituents
- Lag in public policy and legislation relative to knowledge and perception
- Usefulness of spay/neuter programs
- No-kill movement and it’s role
- Trap, neuter and return of cats
Limited Comprehensive Data

- No reliable national list of shelters
- No reliable national data collection
  - Are some state level data
  - Vary in type of information and definition of “shelter”
- Many shelters keep poor records
- Many shelters not equipped to really analyze data and design interventions

Conflicting Mandates for Animal Control

- Old or no laws/ordinances to enforce
- Costs
- Accountability
- Need for protection of public
- Need to protect welfare of animals (cruelty)
- Limited resources and personnel
- Sometimes limited training
Legal Considerations

- Need for ordinances and laws?
  - Mandatory licensing or registration of cats
  - Trapping of feral cats for euthanasia or adoption
- Unenforceable/counter-productive laws?
  - Cat leash laws
  - Cat licensing
  - Limitations on numbers of pets
  - Feeding bans
  - Breed specific bans
Spay/Neuter

- Some question this as a cornerstone of pet surplus approach
- Hard to document regional or city wide efficacy
- Has to be a component of ending the problem

New Hampshire Spay/Neuter Program: 1994

- Funded by $2 surcharge on dog licenses
- For shelter adopters and low income
- Small co-pay
- Veterinarians provide some discount
- In 7 years performed 29,658 surgeries
  - Cost of $1.2 million
New Hampshire Spay/Neuter Program: Results

- In the first 6 years of the program:
  - Euthanasia of pets/1000 residents dropped from +10% to 2.4%
  - Overall euthanasia rate dropped by 75%
  - Shelters admitted 39,000 fewer pets
  - Net savings of over $2 million
Trap, Neuter and Return & the No-Kill Movement

- Non-lethal control method for cats
- Long term goal is fewer cats
- Ongoing caretaker will be most effective
- Includes adoption of tame cats in colonies and young kittens
- Must include vaccination for rabies
- Ear-tipping or notching identification

Trap, Neuter and Return

- Only as of 2005 has HSUS supported trap, neuter and return
- Still highly controversial in veterinary medicine
- Growing support by the public
- Very controversial with animal control and government
- It requires a change in philosophy and approach
What Do We Know?

National Council for Pet Population Study and Policy

- Gather and analyze reliable data on homeless dogs and cats in the US
- Promote responsible stewardship
- Based on data, recommend programs to reduce unwanted pets in the US
- 12 organizations
  - Veterinary and epidemiologic
  - Animal protection
  - Pet products
  - Cat fanciers
National Council for Pet Population Study and Policy

- Shelter statistics study
- Regional shelter relinquishment studies
- Just completed free-roaming cat population dynamics pilot and feasibility study
- Ongoing regional shelter population index study
  - To develop a longitudinal measure of how a community is doing on live release rates from shelters

Shelter Statistics Study

- 4.3 million animals (1997, 1008 shelters)
- 38% from animal control
- 30% relinquished by owners
- 15% other sources
- 17% unknown sources
- 24% adopted
- 16% dogs & 2% cats reclaimed
- 56% dogs & 71% cats euthanized
Shelter Relinquishment Study: Animals

- Dogs more likely to be relinquished if
  - Sexually intact
  - Obtained at little or no cost
  - Over 6 mo old when obtained
  - Were more work than expected

- Less likely to be relinquished if
  - Regular veterinary care
  - Participated in obedience classes
Shelter Relinquishment Study: Animals

- Cats more likely to be relinquished if
  - Sexually intact
  - Without veterinary care
  - Frequent house soilers
  - Were more work than expected
  - Did not fit family expectations

- Cats less likely to be relinquished if
  - Owner read a book about cat behavior
  - Cat had veterinary care

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Shelter Relinquishment Study: Reasons

- Moving
- Landlord not allowing pet
- Too many animals
- Cost
- Personal problems
- Inadequate facilities
- No homes for litter mates
Shelter Relinquishment Study: by Species

- **Dogs**
  - Not enough time
  - Pet illness
  - Biting

- **Cats**
  - Allergies in the family
  - House soiling
  - Incompatible with other pets
Shelter Relinquishment Study: Regional Differences

- Human health and personal issues
  - Allergies, no time, travel, divorce, death

- For dogs
  - Highest rates in NY/NJ: 37%
  - KY, TN, CO: about 29%
  - Lowest rates in CA: 18%

- For cats
  - Highest in NY/NJ: 45%
  - KY, TN, CO: about 36%
  - Lowest in CA: 23%

Owner Requested Euthanasia

- Animals that are brought to a shelter specifically for euthanasia service
- Often included in total euthanasia #s
- 24% of dogs and 17% of cats brought in for serious illness, old age and serious behavioral problems
  - Possible exception not using the litter box
- Use of shelter as an alternative to vet clinic
  - Implications for population dynamics & pet surplus
Implications

- Not puppies and kittens so sterilization may not be helpful
- Lack of knowledge and appropriate expectations by owners
  - How best to address this?
- How next to study the bond between people and companion animals?
  - Interdisciplinary and multiple disciplines
## Options for Feral Cat Control

- **Trap and remove**
  - For euthanasia
  - Into sanctuaries
  - Into new locations
- **Kill on location (usually poison)**
- **Trap, neuter and return (TNR)**
  - Including adoption!
  - May be done with volunteers, donations
  - AC agencies around the US use it

## TNR Benefits

- Sterilization decreases fighting, roaming, noise
- No breeding so no litters, less stress
- No unwanted kittens
- Overall improvement in health
  - Gain in weight after neutering
- Caretakers often report become more sociable, improved coat quality
Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society

- Tourist town with feral cat complaints
- Chamber of commerce, vets, public health
  - formal TTVARM program instituted
- Many tame cats/kittens with no local shelter
- Limited admission, cat only shelter
  - 8000 adoptions in 10 years
- Expanded programs, building, website
MRFRS
- About 4000 cats in TNR program in the region in past 10 years
- About 200 feral cats in town neutered originally
- About 20 feral cats in town as of 2003
  - All senior cats, most > 12 years
  - In some areas, there are no cats at all
- No kittens born on waterfront after 5 years

University of Central Florida
- 11 years, 155 cats total
- After 5 years 68 cats remained on campus
- In 2002 only 23 cats (15%) remaining
  - 7 year median duration of residency
- 47% of cats were adopted
- 15% disappeared
- 11% euthanized, 6% died
- 6% moved to nearby woods
Other Research

- Teramo region of Italy
  - Pet ownership
  - Free-roaming dogs and cats

- Small town Texas
  - Pet ownership
  - Free-roaming dogs and cats
  - Radio-tracking and cat abundance
Comparisons of Ownership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>US</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46% own pets</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33% own dogs</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15% own cats</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10% caring for cats</td>
<td>8-12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40% pure bred dogs</td>
<td>50%</td>
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</tbody>
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Italy Results: Predictors of Sterilization; Interpretation

- Indoor only cats 8 times more likely to be sterilized as outdoor cats
- Cats with vet visit 14 times more likely to be sterilized
- Each year a cat aged increased the likelihood of sterilization about 40%
- There were regional differences
Small Town Texas: Predictors of Sterilization; Interpretation

- Cats considered to be companions 2x more likely to be sterilized than mousers
- Cats with rabies vax 15 times more likely to be sterilized
- Cats 2-<4 years 4 times more likely to be sterilized than cats < 2 years
- Cats 4+ years 9 times more likely to be sterilized than cats < 2 years old
Where Might We Go?

Patterns of Pet Care

- Pattern of level of care
  - Sterilization, vet visits, collars, indoors, companions, vaccinated...
  - These don’t seem to be independent events
- Visiting the vet causes a higher level of care
- OR some commitment or belief causes a higher level of care including veterinary visits
Commonalities

- Certainly are some patterns between countries and locations within US
- Are some regional differences
- What are the common patterns for pet keeping in the US
- What population dynamics vary by geography, urbanization, other?

What do we still need to know?

- What is a “normal” bond between people and their companion animals?
- How do we get better data?
- How to be get the information back to the constituencies who need it?
- How do we better influence public policy/legislation with data and current perceptions?
Conclusions

☐ This is a complex, multifaceted problem
☐ There are many different agencies and organizations involved in the situation
☐ There are strong emotional responses
☐ It is a community problem, not just pet owners or shelters

Conclusions

☐ We are in the middle of a period of change
☐ We need find ways to change human behaviors, beliefs and actions
☐ We need to create consensus, not divisions
☐ Progress is occurring, we need to be creative in moving forward