

Animal Welfare in The Wider Caribbean in 2008, with emphasis on dogs

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Abstract

In general the Caribbean suffers from a pet overpopulation problem and this can have a negative impact on both residents and tourists. In order to get a better understanding of the issues involved, 45 participants from 22 territories in the wider Caribbean region participated in a survey to assess animal welfare issues, and in particular those relating to dogs. The most important issues facing animal welfare workers were the need for education and neutering programmes. These needs are reflected in a low neutering rate, estimated to be 19%, and animal welfare only being taught in schools of four territories.

Introduction

Animal welfare is dynamic. As people become more aware of animal welfare issues and societies respond with changes in the law concerning animal care, we can expect actions and attitudes towards animals to change.

Animal welfare is a Caribbean-wide issue which has yet to be fully addressed (Bryant, 1994). This study aims to get a picture of animal welfare in the wider Caribbean region so that the current state of animal welfare can be captured. A 2004 study on animal welfare in the Caribbean included eight territories (Fielding, 2004) and so provides a baseline for comparison as many respondents were also participants in a Caribbean animal welfare conference in 2004.

Method

Participants registered to attend the 2008 Caribbean Animal Welfare Conference, who were also residents of territories of the wider Caribbean region, were invited to participate in the survey.

Each potential participant was contacted several times by email. This method allowed data to be collected on a wide range of territories in which there are active animal welfare groups.

For some questions respondents were asked to select just one item. When more than one item was chosen, their votes divided evenly between each item, so each respondent was not double counted. In order to give a Caribbean-wide picture of animal welfare, responses were weighted to allow for the uneven number of responses from each territory. When responses were not reported for each territory, the number covered is stated.

Results

General

Forty-eight responses were received from 22 territories, Table 1. The average (mean) time that the respondents had been living in their territory was 22.6 years (Standard Deviation ,SD:14.3).

Table 1: Distribution of responses by territory

Territory	Frequency
Anguilla	1
Aruba	1
Belize	1
Bequia	1
Commonwealth of Dominica	1
Dominican Republic	13
Grand Cayman	2
Grand Turk	1
Grenada	1
Jamaica	2
Isla de Margarita	1
Martinique	1
New Providence	1
Puerto Rico	12
Saba	1
St. Croix	2
St. John	1
St. Thomas	1
St. Vincent	1
Suriname	1
Tobago	1
Vieques	1
Total	48

Respondents considered animal welfare to have improved in 17 territories during the past 10 years. The age of the legislation concerning animal welfare varied from 1918 to 2006.

Respondents from Bequia, Isla de Margarita, Saba, St. Vincent and Vieques indicated that there was not legislation which covered animal welfare. While dog fighting is outlawed in 18 territories, it still occurred in 16 where it was outlawed. In the last 12 months, convictions for animal abuse had occurred in four territories (21 responses). In nine territories, there was no legal means of removing a nuisance dogs as there was no animal control unit and the animal welfare group did not have the means to assist. An animal control unit was available in 10 territories.

Health issues

Dogs were generally accepted as a health hazard in five territories and rabies was present on five (of 20 territories). Respondents had conflicting knowledge of the number of dog related deaths in their territory, however, at least one fatal dog attack was reported in four territories during 1997-2007, (Anguilla, Jamaica, New Providence and Puerto Rico). Respondents in Jamaica and Puerto Rico reported that dogs had killed five people. In the past 10 years, dogs had been associated with at least one human death due to rabies in one territory. Respondents thought that it was uncommon for dogs to be taken to the vet every year (in two territories) and in three, the dogs were thought never to be taken to a veterinary clinic. Heart worm was not present in one territory, and where it was, most dogs in 19 (of 20 territories) were not considered to be protected.

Dog keeping practices

Around two-thirds of households were reported to keep dogs (64%, SD: 20.4) and a dog keeping household would have a mean of 2.2 dogs (SD:0.71). Dogs tend to be kept for protection rather than as companions (Table 2). The most commonly breeds of dog reported were pit bulls and Rottweilers (Table 3). While a mongrel dog was typically worthless (mean value \$8.33, SD:20.9), a pure-bred dogs cost \$473.13 (SD:299.14). Dogs were typically kept outside the home and allowed to roam rather than having a place inside the home (Table 4). Overall, about 19% (SD:15.1) of dogs were thought to be neutered (21 territories).

Table 2: Reasons why people keep dogs (A value of one would indicate that all respondents thought that item was most important).

Reason for keeping dogs	Mean	S.D.
Protection	0.81	0.37
Companion	0.12	0.31
No reason	0.07	0.25

Table 3: Most common breeds reported. (A value of one would indicate that all respondents thought that item was most important).

	Mean	S.D.
Pit bull	0.45	0.39
Rottweiler	0.30	0.36
Chihuahua	0.08	0.27
German Shepherd	0.04	0.12
Doberman	0.03	0.11
Shih Tzu	0.03	0.16
Poodle	0.03	0.11
Labrador	0.02	0.12
Bull mastiff	0.02	0.07

Table 4: Place were dogs are most often kept (A value of one would indicate that all respondents thought that item was most important).

	Mean	S.D.
Outside and unconfined	0.51	0.43
Confined without a fence	0.34	0.43
Fenced in yard	0.12	0.30
Inside home*	0.03	0.16

*21 territories.

Puppies were most likely to be given away, or abandoned ; relatively few were reported sold (Table 5).

Table 5: Most likely method of disposal of puppies (21 responses). (A value of one would indicate that all respondents thought that item was most important).

	Mean	S.D.
Give away	0.58	0.47
Abandon (leave in a "safe place")	0.21	0.38
Give to animal welfare group/shelter	0.13	0.31
Sell	0.06	0.23
Keep litter	0.04	0.17
Surrender to pound	0.02	0.09

General neglect was the most commonly reported cause of animal abuse and intentional abuse was rarely reported (Table 6).

Table 6: Most common types of neglect observed. (A value of one would indicate that all respondents thought that item was most important).

	Mean	S.D.
Neglect	0.66	0.39
Method of confinement	0.24	0.34
Intentional cruelty	0.09	0.24

“Stray dogs”

All the respondents from three territories reported that stray dogs were not a nuisance (Bequia, Saba and St. John). In all other territories, at least one participant thought that stray dogs were commonly considered a nuisance. Dogs were reported to be the most commonly seen roaming animal in 15 territories. At least one respondent in 21 territories had seen roaming dogs in their neighbourhood in the last week. Respondents estimated that 38% (SD:27.3) of kept dogs could roam on the street. In residential areas, it was agreed that in 17 territories that almost all the roaming dogs had caregivers. Only in nine territories was there a legal requirement to confine/control dogs. Stray dogs were generally accepted as a “problem” in 18 territories. The nature of the “problem” was exhibited by turning over garbage and barking at night (Table 7).

Table 7: Nature of the nuisance which make stray dogs a problem. (A value of one would indicate that all respondents thought that item was most important).

Nature of nuisance	Mean	S.D.
Turning over garbage	0.39	0.44
Barking at night	0.36	0.44
Attacking people	0.09	0.28
Other	0.16	0.36

The major causes of the stray dog population were equally attributed to abandonment and lack of neutering (Table 8).

Table 8: Causes of the stray dog population. (A value of one would indicate that all respondents thought that item was most important). (Responses from 21 territories).

Cause of the stray dog problem	Mean	S.D.
Abandonment	0.34	0.39
Lack of neutering	0.34	0.48
Lack of confinement	0.27	0.39
Other	0.03	0.08

In eight territories, respondents thought that residents felt sorry for roaming dogs, but in 14 many residents fed dogs they did not claim to own. In 13 territories most tourists complained about roaming dogs. Roaming dogs were reported in the press about 13 (SD: 24.9) weeks “ago” (prior to the respondent completing the survey, 18 territories).

Attitudes towards dogs

In 18 territories many residents were reported as thinking that dogs protect the home, and 83.0% (of 47 respondents) also thought this. Of the respondents, 19.1%, thought the dog would only protect the home if it was confined and/or was a pure-breed dog. The most common ideas that residents were reported to have to solve the stray dog problem were to kill the animals or put them in safe place (Table 9). In 13 territories, it was thought that society at large was really interested in addressing the “stray dog problem”. There appeared to be little consensus as to whether government or dog keepers were responsible for the “stray dog problem” (Table 10) with the results almost evenly split between apportioning blame to government and dog keepers.

Table 9: Solution that residents would like to see used to alleviate the stray dog problem. (A value of one would indicate that all respondents thought that item was most important). (21 territories responding)

Solution for the stray dog problem	Mean	S.D.
Kill the dogs in any way	0.44	0.51
Put in safe place	0.33	0.47
Neuter and release	0.13	0.33
Other	0.10	0.31

Table 10: Apportioning of responsibility for the stray dog problem between government and dog keepers.

		Dog keepers are responsible for the stray dog problem		Total
		Yes	No	
Number of territories where most residents would consider:				
Government is responsible for the stray dog problem	Yes	4	7	11
	No	6	3	9
Total		10	10	20

In four territories animal welfare was taught in the schools, but despite this respondents did consider school as being the “usual” source of information on animal welfare (Table 11).

Table 11: Usual sources of information on animal welfare (A value of one would indicate that all respondents thought that item was most important).

Usual source of information on animal welfare:	Mean	S.D.
Veterinary/ Animal Welfare Group	0.59	0.47
Parents	0.20	0.39
Friends	0.12	0.31
Grand parents	0.05	0.22
TV	0.05	0.21

Issues to be addressed to improve animal welfare

Respondents were allowed to nominate up to three issues that they felt should be addressed in order to improve animal welfare and of dogs in particular. Education and neutering were seen as the two most important issues in the region (Table 12). Other items not listed in Table 12, as they were not nominated enough to be of concern throughout a territory, included shelters, inspectors, training local veterinarians, resources, poverty, civic apathy, and compassion.

Table 12: Issues chosen by participants as being important in their territory for improving animal welfare.

Issue	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Total
Education	10	4	3	17
Neutering	4	10	2	16
Enforcement of laws	3		5	8
Laws	2	2	3	7
Responsible pet ownership	2	1		3
Animal control unit		2		2
Stop chaining	1			1
Animal welfare officer			1	1
Animal welfare group		1		1
Compassion			1	1
Complaints			1	1
Confinement			1	1
Heart worm		1		1
Licensing			1	1
Vet care		1		1
Not specified			4	4

Discussion

It should be noted that the responses represent the perceptions of the participants, rather than data based upon research within the territories. Relatively few territories have undertaken research on animal welfare issues (Barbados [unpublished data, 2007], The Bahamas [e.g.: Fielding, Mather & Isaacs, 2005], Commonwealth of Dominica [e.g.: Alie et al. 2007], Saba [unpublished data 2004], St. Maarten [Romney, 2006]) so some responses should be considered as estimates from practitioners in this area, many of whom have been living in their territory for decades.

Despite the negative publicity which Caribbean animal welfare has received (for example: Coto, 2007), animal welfare appears to have improved in many territories in the last decade. What have been the causes of this change cannot be answered here, but the presence of many animal welfare groups in the region (Irwin, 2003) can be expected to have played a part.

While the Caribbean is not rabies free, dogs are not seen to be a widespread health hazard. This is important as this fear can lead to dogs being mistreated and harmed if people consider them to be a danger. The pets themselves receive only limited health care from caregivers so it can be

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expected that their level of health care may give cause for concern and may harbour zoonotic diseases. Fatal dog attacks do occur. The circumstances of these attacks would be worthy of further investigation to determine how and why the attacks occurred.

The dog keeping practices reported here are similar to those reported in published studies from the Caribbean. In general dogs are kept unconfined, outside for protection and pit bulls are the most common “pure-breed” dog (a finding consistent with the 2004 conference survey).

Keeping dogs such as pit bulls and rottweilers is consistent with having working dogs and the belief that dogs protect the home. The unregulated breeding of dogs results in a surplus of puppies which are given away or abandoned, and so they can become recruits to the street population. The low neutering rate together with lack of confinement make it easy for uncontrolled breeding to occur.

Because of these dog keeping practices, many territories have a “stray dog problem”. It is clear that kept dogs are a major component of the street dog population and tipping-over garbage and barking are the key problems caused by these animals. Respondents considered abandonment, neutering and lack of confinement as being of almost equal importance as the cause of the “stray dog problem”.

Residents were reported as having an ambivalent attitude towards roaming dogs. On the one hand they wanted them removed, even if it means killing the animals, yet they also feed dogs they do not own, but the residents of relatively few territories were reported as feeling sorry for the dogs. There appeared to be little consensus as to whom residents held accountable for the “stray dog problem”, caregivers or government. The presence of roaming dogs is a concern to tourists in many territories.

The most pressing issue facing animal welfare in the region was thought to be the education of residents on animal welfare. This probably reflects the important role that veterinarian and animal welfare groups play in providing information on animal welfare and the fact that animal welfare is taught in school in only a few territories. In the 2004 study, education did not appear to have the same priority that it is given today by animal welfare workers. Other issues such as

the legal framework for animal welfare remain important in many territories, and this may reflect the slow legal progress in enacting laws or establishing legal methods or removing nuisance dogs (e.g.: establishment of dog pounds). The lack of appropriate legislation has not prevented animal cruelty related prosecutions, but relatively few cases are prosecuted. Neutering was seen as a key issue in controlling the dog population as it was in 2004.

Overall, the findings from this survey are consistent with the 2004 study, but it would appear that education has risen in the priorities of animal welfare workers. In The Bahamas, an animal welfare group has worked with the Ministry of Education to include animal welfare in the schools and provided customised information and lesson plans for teachers. Although education is a long-term undertaking, without it animal welfare in the region may remain a cause for concern.

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