

**Regional realities: Impact of stray dogs and cats on the community**  
**Impact on economy, including tourism**  
**Impact on livestock, wildlife and the environment**

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It is commonly understood that there are large numbers of feral and stray/homeless cats and dogs in most Caribbean islands. While this may be true in some cases, it has been my experience that in many of the islands, the problem is less that of true strays and more that of roaming dogs and cats.

Most statistics from animal control agencies in the Caribbean on the number of stray dogs rescued annually will show that initially there is a significant decline in numbers followed within a few years by a levelling off, after which, the numbers remain relatively constant. While this may be interpreted in many ways, I believe that a reason for this is because a very high percentage of “stray” dogs are actually owned animals that are allowed to roam. When they are captured / rescued and returned, adopted or euthanized, they are simply released again or replaced with another one which is then allowed to roam.

In addition to the obvious welfare concerns, the challenges presented by stray and roaming dogs and cats are more than one of welfare problem. Stray or roaming animals can have a significant detrimental impact, both directly and indirectly, on the country. This paper seeks to identify some of these impacts in the Caribbean context.

### **The impact of stray animals on the community**

Stray and roaming dogs and cats are usually poorly cared for and are often carriers of disease. Many diseases of animals, including dogs and cats, are **zoonotic diseases** (diseases that can be transmitted from animals to people). Some of these diseases, such as rabies and leptospirosis are well known, however others are not so commonly recognised. For example, the larvae of the common roundworm of dogs will burrow into the skin of unsuspecting beachcombers causing a painful skin rash known as cutaneous larval migrans. These are colloquially known as “beach worms”. In the tropics, ticks are a year-round scourge and most dog owners accept them as a way of life for their dogs. Some species of ticks however can cause severe illness in people. Those well known in temperate climates are Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, however it is less well understood that the tick borne parasite (*Ehrlichia sp*) that causes Tropical Canine Pancytopenia (tick fever) in the tropics, can

also infect humans. Other zoonotic diseases that stray or roaming dogs and cats often harbour include scabies, ringworm and toxoplasmosis.

Of course, stray animals also pose a threat to pets. Parasites and highly contagious diseases such as canine distemper, parvovirus enteritis and feline AIDS are readily spread across the community by these animals. Dog and cat fights and unwanted pregnancies further add to the equation.

There are also the nuisance problems. Worrying of walkers and joggers, scavenging of garbage cans, faecal pollution, urine spraying (cats), noise and especially in the case of roaming dogs and cats, neighbourhood friction.

### **The impact of stray animals on the economy**

It is well recognised that in most Caribbean countries, tourism accounts for a significant percentage of their Gross Domestic Product. A decline in the number of tourists visiting the country will have a major impact on the economies of these islands. It is also well recognised that the tourism industry is also a very fickle one and any negative publicity for an island can have serious economic consequences.

The presence of stray and roaming dogs at roadsides and on beaches projects the image of an uncaring society. While in the lesser developed islands this may be passed off as resulting from economic hardship, in those territories that have invested heavily in infrastructural development in order to support the tourist industry, the contrast is stark and the impact greater. Dog attacks on tourists and zoonotic infections (beach worms, ringworm, scabies) further add to the negative image.

The situation can also be dangerous. Stray dogs on airport runways are not unheard of and the potential for an aircraft accident is real.

Other considerations when calculating the cost of stray and roaming pets to countries include the actual costs of animal control (time, equipment, manpower) and the burden of illness (cost of health care) on society as a result of illness or injury caused by strays.

### **The impact of stray animals on the environment and wildlife**

The impact on the environment is more evident for stray, roaming and feral cats than for dogs. Cats are opportunistic predators which eat small birds, mammals and lizards. The impact of roaming and feral cats on the environment, both directly and indirectly has been studied with varying conclusions. The argument has been made that cats have the beneficial effect of assisting the wild bird population by controlling other natural predators (rabbits) or by killing only the weak and sick birds. The fact remains however that feral cats are an introduced species into any environment and therefore not a natural part of the ecological equation.

The ability of cats to multiply is well known. A pair of cats producing two litters a year can exponentially produce as many as 420,000 over a period of seven years. Feral cats can therefore by their sheer numbers compete with wildlife for space and for food reserves.

Given the small size of Caribbean islands, many of which have endangered indigenous bird populations, I must therefore question any arguments that seek to justify the existence of feral cat populations in the region.

### **The impact of stray animals on livestock**

Caribbean newspapers abound with stories of attacks by packs of roaming dogs on livestock. Domestic dogs do not normally kill for food and their attacks usually lead to indiscriminate mutilation of their prey.

Some individual dogs, including pets, have the instinctive ability to kill effectively, whether or not they feed and some become adept through repeated killing. Both domestic and feral dogs often range in packs and do extensive damage once they begin to attack livestock. Dog packs often harass livestock and persist in chasing injured animals, often for several hours.

Sheep and goats are especially vulnerable, since in the Caribbean they are often tied out to graze on pastures and cannot escape attacks. If they are free to run, they may drown in streams or reservoirs while trying to escape, or they may "pile up" and suffocate in fence corners, gullies and sheds. A pack of dogs can go through an entire herd rapidly, killing or mutilating every animal.

Other small livestock such as poultry and rabbits may also suffer from predation. Even when in enclosed pens, roaming dogs will scare the birds which then trample and suffocate each other while trying to escape.

### **Conclusions**

The welfare concerns surrounding stray and roaming dogs and cats are well understood, however the impact that these animals have on Caribbean societies is often not fully appreciated, nor as far as I know, have the economic losses been quantified. Losses in terms of the cost of health care and veterinary care, losses to the agriculture industry, indirect losses to the tourist industry and of course the environmental costs. It is important that when designing animal control and animal welfare programmes for Caribbean Islands, the unique circumstances (social, cultural, environmental and economic) that exist in each territory be taken into account.