



**AW7000**

# **ANIMALS AND SOCIETY**

ASSIGNMENT ONE: FORMATIVE ESSAY

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TITLE: Discuss the issue of excess numbers of domestic dogs in the UK.



In the UK today, there are about nine million domestic dogs, which exceeds the number of homes available for them to live in. The extent of the problem will be summarised in qualitative and quantitative terms- what this excess population comprises of, and how many there are, including the difficulties in getting an accurate figure. The origin of these excess numbers, made up primarily of destroyed dogs and shelter dogs, will be discussed, followed by consideration of the ethical issues surrounding the canine overpopulation. This latter section also considers whether the overproduction of dogs *is* a problem requiring action, arguing that it is, and why. Possible strategies for improving the situation are then suggested, including areas for further research.

The homeless dogs present in the UK on any given day will be made up of strays, dogs living in shelters and dogs scheduled for destruction that day. Despite 80% of the global population being strays (World Animal Net, 2014), there are very few, if any, 'street dogs' in the UK. Most strays in the UK are abandoned or lost, and are removed from the streets quickly. It used to be commonplace decades ago to see many owned dogs freely roaming (Bradshaw, 2011), but nowadays these would be picked up by the dog warden or the public.

Of those dogs which end up in the care of council pounds, 47,596 were unclaimed by their owners in a 12 month period 2014-2015 (Dogs Trust, 2015). 10.8% of these were humanely destroyed, and the rest transferred to re-homing charities. These figures are extrapolated from councils who provided figures, but with a high response rate they can be assumed to be accurate. The term 'humane destruction' is preferred to 'euthanasia', with its implications of an end to suffering and pain which is not the case for unwanted dogs.

So essentially, excess dogs are divided into dead dogs and shelter dogs. Unfortunately, these figures only represent a proportion of the dogs which can be considered surplus. A large, but difficult to quantify, number of healthy dogs will be destroyed privately by veterinary professionals at the request of an owner unable or unwilling to keep them. The figures also do not include dogs frequently passed from one home to another, or belonging to homeless people; these are not statistically surplus to humankind's capacity to keep them. Also, greyhounds within the racing industry will not be considered here: they are a special case- a high proportion are unwanted but not subject to the same socio-economic forces as pet dogs.

The Dogs Trust receives 120 calls per day about surrendering an unwanted dog (Dogs Trust 2015). These are surplus to human requirements and become part of the 'dogs with no home' numbers, even if the same home later becomes available to another pet. Some of these healthy dogs will be presently privately for euthanasia, depending on the owner's willingness to take this path. As summarised by Morris (2012, p9):

“pet owners have widely disparate views on the moral status of animals... some owners request euthanasia for their healthy animals because of loud barking, damage to furniture or property... [or] because their owners move to an apartment with lease restrictions”.

Veterinary surgeons are not obliged to put to sleep a healthy dog, but refusal is not an adequate solution (Legood, 2000). Owners may take actions which are worse for welfare than euthanasia, including trying to end the dog's life inhumanely. They may abandon the dog or continue keeping it in poor welfare conditions.

Some may argue that as long as excess dogs are destroyed humanely, it doesn't constitute a welfare or ethical problem. Destruction of dogs in some countries is inhumane, but in the UK, mostly, the direct suffering from killing itself is minimal. In other species, such as cattle or poultry, the destruction of excess numbers is often seen as an unfortunate but necessary by-product of the farming industry- by many stakeholders, if not by animal advocates or ethicists. Generally speaking, there is no significant difference between dogs and cattle in sentience, even if people find the idea more unpalatable in companion animals.

There are several reasons why this is a welfare and ethical issue. Death is an end to negative welfare, but there is a loss of future positive welfare gained by enjoyment of life. Those dogs that avoid death may spend a long time in suboptimal conditions in shelters. Even the best shelters cannot provide welfare as high as a good home with a human family, and taking into account that no qualifications are required to set up a 'dog rescue', the welfare of some dogs in these circumstances can be seriously diminished.



In addition to the welfare stress on the dogs themselves, having to destroy healthy dogs carries a moral stress to those who work in or for shelters. The stress of ending the life of a healthy animal has been shown to be qualitatively and quantitatively different than for sick ones, and affects mental health and career longevity (Reeve, 2004 and Whiting et al 2011). Many ethicists and philosophers have made compelling arguments for why moral consideration should spread beyond the species barrier from humans. Midgley (1983) argues for social concern to be dictated by sentience not species, without it having to produce a conflict of interests between human and animal needs.

No strategies to reduce surplus dog numbers are going to be viable without understanding the factors which lead to the problem. In simple mathematical terms there must be an overproduction of puppies in the UK for this situation to occur. It existed long before the introduction of the Pet Travel Scheme- although importation is increasing, including the import of strays for re-homing from mainland Europe. From a purely economic perspective, there must be market forces at work for overproduction of puppies to occur- if there wasn't a demand, supply would dry up. The popularity of purchasing puppies seems perennial, and if all the puppies purchased had a home for their normal lifespan, the problem would not exist. It is the subsequent surrender and abandonment that creates the surplus.

There is no one single reason why dogs become unwanted. In some cases, the reason may be owner death or other catastrophic change. However, most cases do not fall into this category. It has been widely reported that prospective dog owners have a poor understanding of the needs of a dog, including over 90% significantly underestimating cost (PDSA, 2015). This can be accompanied by an unwillingness to meet the dog's needs, even if understood (Sandoe and Christiansen, 2008). Only 4% seek professional advice before getting a dog and may get an incompatible dog for their lifestyle (PDSA, 2015). These owner factors are exacerbated by a general trend in UK society for decreased tolerance of dogs, a lack of open space, and a misunderstanding of normal canine behaviour. Aggression is a very common reason for relinquishing a dog, and widely misunderstood: as Donaldson (2013, p53) says: "*Biting is natural, normal dog behaviour. This is why it is so prevalent*".

As well as the above factors, there is a perception that adopting a dog will mean acquiring a dog with behaviour problems. Although many dogs are relinquished for behaviour issues, a substantial but unidentifiable proportion will have been kept in an environment where their needs have not been met, rather than having an unresolvable condition. Insufficient adoption of shelter dogs increases the number of dogs whose lives have to end because there is nowhere for them to go. Underlying the movement of all these dogs is still the mainstream paradigm that animals in general, including dogs as companions, are for human use, rather than under human protection (Sandoe and Christiansen, 2008).

Dogs are relatively well protected by UK law, but not as a population. Individual acts of neglect or cruelty may be prosecuted, but the everyday failure to meet canine needs is too widespread. Neutering programmes are moderately effective in countries where street dogs can breed indiscriminately, but this is likely to be far less effective in a country where breeding dogs can be highly incentivised by the market value of puppies. In some other countries of northern Europe there are no strays and no shelters necessary. One of these is Norway, even though neutering is prohibited as a surgical interference for human convenience (ScienceNordic, 2011). Perhaps this reflects a different cultural attitude to social responsibilities. In Holland a threefold approach of sterilisation, education and identification has eliminated the problem of abandoned dogs (Stray Dogs Campaign, 2012). A long term solution must involve education, about individual *and* population welfare. Veterinary ethics might dictate that animal welfare trumps clients interests (Yeates, 2012), but in this context individual welfare is the focus. It is difficult for a veterinary professional to tell a client to return a puppy to the breeder on welfare grounds, but only when demand decreases will the overproduction of dogs decrease to match.

In summary, the overproduction of puppies and abandonment of adult dogs is a significant problem in the UK. This is because of the number of dogs affected, and because of the welfare implications to dogs and to



humans. Destruction of healthy dogs is both a welfare and an ethical issue, and should be preventable in many cases by meeting the dogs needs in the first instance. Re-homing and shelters are arguably better than death, but still carry significant welfare and moral stresses. Education of the public about normal canine and behaviour and needs, as well as the implications of overproduction, would seem to be a positive way to reduce the abandonment rate and decrease the market for new puppies. Cultural change may be likely to help, but slowly, and this could be improved by both legislative measures and the responsibility for public education being taken on more vigorously by professionals as well as charities.

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