

Pet Underpopulation: The Pet Shortage in the US by Loretta Baughan

Last month, I had the opportunity to be a guest on a talk radio program discussing recent pet legislation efforts in Wisconsin spearheaded by a small group of animal rights extremists. Some callers to the program realized the threat to pet owners and breeders such legislation poses and expressed concern. Many callers, however, were frantic about the "pet overpopulation" problem and thought laws were needed to stop breeders.

Listen up! The notion that there is a "pet overpopulation" problem is nothing more than a figment of the imagination of the anti-pet, anti-pet owner, anti-pet breeder animal rights fanatics.

Yes, you read that correctly. There is definitely NOT an overpopulation of dogs or cats, at least not in the United States. There may have been a problem 25-30 years ago, but due to heavy promotion of spay and neuter, it is estimated that over 75% of dogs and more than 87% of cats have been surgically sterilized (1). The pendulum has swung so far in the opposite direction that now, we are actually facing a shortage of pets... a pet underpopulation.

"In truth, there is no pet overpopulation problem. The Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy has collected data about pet population that are striking:

Changes in Animal Population	1973	1982	1990
US total dogs & cats (millions)	65	91	110
dogs & cats euthanized (millions)	13	10	5
% of animals euthanized	20%	11%	4.5%"

-- *Animalscam: The Beastly Abuse of Human Rights* by Kathleen Marquardt, Herbert M. Levine, Mark LaRochelle, published in 1993

Many in the animal rights crowd know this dirty little secret, but are unwilling to be honest about it since they would lose credibility - not to mention a very effective "tool" to leverage the public for donations, influence politicians to pass unnecessary legislation and the media to propagate their lies. Animal rights extremists have advanced their agenda by erroneously placing the blame for "pet overpopulation" on pet breeders. They have been successful at using this falsehood to convince pet owners that the "responsible" thing to do is to subject their pets to surgical sterilization in order to combat "pet overpopulation". Sadly, they have even hoodwinked many purebred breeders into thinking they must pressure their buyers to spay or neuter their puppies and kittens - to the detriment of many purebred gene pools. As a result, with fewer individual dogs being used in breeding programs, health problems are increasing as diversity is decreasing.

What are the facts?

According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association's (APPMA) 2007-2008 National Pet Owners Survey (1), 63% of U.S. households own pets - up from 56% in 1988, which was the first year this study was conducted. With national population figures having increased from approximately 244,500,000 people in 1988 to 303,200,000 at the end of 2007 (2), the number of pet homes is ever increasing and at a greater rate than the human population. This is a trend that shows no sign of slowing down. The latest APPMA figures show that Americans own 74.8 million dogs and a whopping 88.3 million cats. We are a nation that loves pets and consider them part of the family. We open our hearts, our homes and our wallets to care for our pets. We spend a lot of money on our pets. In less than 20 years, this figure has nearly doubled - from \$23 billion in 1988 to a projected \$40.8 billion last year.

A shortage of homes for pets is not the problem. So, then, why are there so many dogs and cats in animal shelters?

In a nutshell, the answer to that question is poor management of shelters coupled with a resistance to adopt methods that work. Many of the smaller shelters are operated by people who love animals and desperately want to help, but are lacking in animal husbandry experience and management skills.

One shelter manager I spoke with blamed breeders for the dogs coming through their doors, then in an emotional rant, claimed that breeders are forcing their females to have three or four litters a year - keeping them pregnant all of the time. I interrupted her and said that was physically impossible since dogs typically only come into season twice a year. She then admitted she didn't know that and said, "Well, I'm not a breeder, myself."

The woman's heart is in the right place, but without an understanding gained from hands on experience raising dogs or cats, how can we expect our shelters to succeed? Like it or not, an animal shelter is a business - and it has to be operated as such.

"Shelters and pounds reported to HSUS that by the 1980s, the number of animals they handled had decreased dramatically (Rowan and Williams 1997, 110-111). In addition, the animals handled by pounds and shelters seem to have changed demographically from unwanted litters to young, untrained dogs and cats (Patronek 1996, 1)." -- Bridging the Bond: The Cultural Construction of the Shelter Pet by Tami L. Harbolt

Most of the dogs entering shelters are surrendered by their owners due to behavior issues. Often, it boils down to a simple lack of training. Animal shelters that offer obedience classes can help curb the influx of this type of dog into their shelter - while doing the dog, the owner and the community a service.

Other dogs are brought to shelters because they are sick or old and their owners cannot afford to pay - or do not want to pay - for vet care or euthanasia.

In some shelters, cats may outnumber dogs by about a two-to-one ratio. Many of these cats are feral and are owned by no one. Most are classified as "unadoptable" - yet they are included in the shelter statistics. Programs that catch feral cats, sterilize them and release them are demonstrating success in reducing their numbers.

Animal shelters are importing dogs by the thousands!

Meanwhile, well run animal shelters have become victims of their own success. In order to keep their doors open and justify new million-dollar facilities and salaries, some animal shelters have found a "new" source of dogs... and have been importing them by the thousands.

Here, in Wisconsin, animal shelters in Green Bay and Milwaukee have a pet underpopulation problem and have been importing thousands of puppies into the state for the past several years. Through the PetSmart Charities Rescue Waggin', they have brought in puppies from Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee and Kentucky - as many as 50 at a time. The *Green Bay Press-Gazette* reported in December that the 32 dogs arriving Thursday evening (Dec 6, 2007) were expected to be "adopted out by this weekend" (3).

H.O.P.E. Safehouse, out of Racine, is more of a rescue organization than an animal shelter as they do not have a facility of their own, but rely on volunteers to care for the dogs they import, mainly from the south. A Milwaukee Public Radio online news article reports that this group recently brought in a shipment of 100 puppies from Kentucky, many of which were sick. The same article (Jan 11, 2008) goes on to say that the Wisconsin Humane Society in Milwaukee has imported 9,000 dogs with more animals arriving there via the Rescue Waggin' "a few times a week" - and that they have "hundreds of families looking for animals to adopt" (4).

Other shelters within our state have available dogs, so rather than bring in animals from other states, why not first assist the smaller Wisconsin shelters by placing their surplus dogs? Could it be that by emptying shelters around the state, it would be difficult - if not impossible - to continue the illusion that a "pet overpopulation" problem exists?

This program is not exclusive to Wisconsin. Shelters in many other areas of the country are participating. The Rescue Waggin' transports puppies from shelters struggling to find homes to areas where the demand for dogs is higher than the supply. That's a win-win situation for all, especially the dogs. However, to continue the charade of claiming a "pet overpopulation" problem exists is dishonest. Another concern is that the thousands of animals being transferred from one shelter to another are being tallied twice, creating an impression that there are far more homeless pets than actually exist.

"Animal shelters in the USA are casting a wide net - from Puerto Rico to as far as Taiwan - to fill kennels. Critics say many shelters have solved the stray problem in their own area - but rather than shut down, they become *de facto* pet stores. Some charge more than \$200 per adoption for imported dogs," reports *USA Today* (5). More than 14,000 strays have been shipped in from Puerto Rico, and many thousands more are being imported from Mexico, India and the Bahamas each year. Another *USA Today* article warns, "Agencies in Southern California created the Border Puppy Task Force after they saw a surprising number of very young dogs being brought across the border from Mexico. The task force estimated that during a one-year span, 10,000 puppies entered San Diego County." (6)

There are legitimate concerns that animal shelters importing stray dogs from foreign countries may be importing disease, as well. Besides health issues, these street dogs lack proper socialization and may have poor temperaments. Is it ethical for animal shelters to expose the public to these unknowns, while condemning anyone who breeds a litter in our country? I don't think so.

The National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy (NCPSP) was formed in the early 1990s. Member groups include the American Humane Association (AHA), the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMA), American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), Cat Fanciers Association (CFA), the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and others. Between 1994-1997 they sent questionnaires to animal shelters around the country seeking to compile statistics for the numbers of intake animals, animals reclaimed by owners, those who found new homes and euthanasia. But due to a low number of shelters willing to respond, the study was discontinued a decade ago.

Without insisting on reliable statistics and factual evidence to back up their claims, we have allowed the fox to patrol the hen house. We can no longer blindly accept the pie-in-the-sky guesstimates groups such as the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and other similar agenda-driven animal extremists put forth. Follow the money. These are organizations whose very existence are dependant upon the amount of money they can raise from misguided animal lovers who think their donation is actually helping puppies, kittens or their local animal shelter. The reality is that these animal rights fanatics seek to impose their vegan lifestyle and utopian dream for humans to have zero contact with animals.

*"But as the surplus of cats and dogs (artificially engineered by centuries of forced breeding) declined, eventually companion animals would be phased out, and we would return to a more symbiotic relationship enjoyment at a distance." -- Ingrid Newkirk, PETA co-founder and president, quoted in *The Harper's Forum Book*, Jack Hitt, ed., 1989, p.223.*

Is that the kind of future the majority of U.S. citizens envision? I don't think so. The lunatic animal rights movement does not represent mainstream American views or values.

So how do we solve the problem?

"The key is to get raw data. How many animals are coming in and how many are going home alive? And, is that improving every single year? Because, if it is not, there is a serious problem with leadership and the mechanisms going on within that shelter." -- Nathan J. Winograd, director of the national No Kill Advocacy Center, former director of operations San Francisco SPCA, executive director of the Tompkins County SPCA and author of *Redemption: The Myth of Pet Overpopulation and the No Kill Revolution in America* (7), interview with Animal Wise Radio, aired Feb 4, 2007

Mr. Winograd is spot on. A handful of states are waking up to this realization and are requiring animal shelter accountability - through record keeping and the reporting of statistics. Virginia is one such state. Since People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' (PETA) headquarters is located within that state, they are required by law to file:

"Not counting animals PETA held only temporarily in its spay-neuter program, the organization took in 3,061 "companion animals" in 2006, of which it killed 2,981 (8). According to Virginia's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), the average euthanasia rate for humane societies in the state was just 34.7 percent in 2006. PETA killed 97.4 percent of the animals it took in. The organization filed its 2006 report this month, nine months after the VDACS deadline of March 31, 2007 (9)," reveals The Center for Consumer Freedom.

In other states where shelters are required to report their statistics, euthanasia rates are alarming. Michigan reports approximately 45% of dogs and 75% of cats that enter their animal shelters are killed. Between 2001-2006 North Carolina shelters killed about 77% of their dogs and cats.

As dog owners, I think we are all deeply disturbed over the plight of animals in shelters and the high rate of euthanasia. There is a solution. Nathan Winograd has proven his "No Kill Revolution" method works - in both large and small shelters. As dog breeders and trainers, *we are the experts*, so it is up to us to step forward and assist our local shelters in overcoming their problems. The first step is to stop blaming pet breeders and lay to rest, once and for all, the myth of "pet overpopulation". It's time to embrace the fact that we have a pet underpopulation situation... and so, the solution to our local animal shelter problems is within our grasp.

Sources:

- (1) - [2007-2008 National Pet Owners Survey](#), American Pet Products Manufacturers Association Inc. (APPMA)
- (2) - U.S. Census Bureau, [U.S. POP Clock Projection](#) and [Historical National Population Estimates](#)
- (3) - [Humane Society's Puppy Population Boom Expected to be Short-Lived: 32 dogs sent to shelter likely to be adopted quickly](#) by Paul Srubas, Green Bay Press-Gazette, December 7, 2007
- (4) - [Interstate Efforts to Save Shelter Dogs](#) by Ann-Elise Henzl, WUWM Milwaukee Public Radio news, January 11, 2008
- (5) - [More Cities Importing Pound Puppies](#) by Tom Vanden Brook, USA Today
- (6) - [Dog Imports Raise Fears of a Resurgence of Disease](#) by Alan Gomez, USA Today
- (7) - *Redemption: The Myth of Pet Overpopulation and the No Kill Revolution in America* by Nathan J. Winograd, copies available through the [Spaniel Journal Bookstore](#)
- (8) - Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals](#) 2006 animal report
- (9) - [PETA Killed 97 Percent of "Companion Animals" in 2006: Death Toll Up To 17,400; Report Describes PETA's Deadliest Year Ever](#), January 10, 2008 press release from The Center for Consumer Freedom, courtesy of David Martosko, CCF Director of Research

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