

Observations on animal welfare in eight Caribbean territories, focusing on dogs

Abstract

A survey of 32 animal welfare workers from eight territories participating in the Caribbean Animal Welfare Conference, on St Croix in 2004, was made to investigate animal welfare, with specific reference to dogs, in the Caribbean. Roaming dogs were considered to pose an economic or health threat in most islands, and dog related deaths were reported in three islands. Animal welfare groups claim to work in an inadequate legal framework and lack government participation in their activities. Few spay/neuter initiatives receive government support. It appears that animal welfare groups would benefit from institutional strengthening so that they can monitor and evaluate their progress to meeting their goals. It is suggested that the groups may be giving insufficient emphasis to education on animal welfare.

Introduction

The subject of animal welfare is being regarded as increasingly important in many Caribbean territories. This is partly due to the importance of tourism to the Region and the poor impression that roaming dogs make on tourists. While some territories have had animal welfare groups since Victorian times (e.g.: The Bahamas), others have had to wait until the late twentieth century for animal welfare groups to be established (e.g.: Turks & Caicos Islands). Typically, animal welfare has been advocated by expatriate residents, but this is changing as effects of colonialism fade. For example: The Bahamas Humane Society was founded by expatriates but is now staffed by Bahamians.

Since 1997, the Pegasus Foundation has been assisting animal welfare in the Caribbean and in 2002 it launched its Caribbean Animal Welfare Initiative. In 2004, it co-sponsored a conference on Caribbean Animal Welfare in St. Croix. This brought together members of animal welfare groups from eight, mainly Leeward Island, territories scattered across

12 islands. This gathering provided the opportunity to survey members of Caribbean animal welfare organisations about animal welfare matters.

Purpose of the study

For clarity, the study focused on dogs. It attempted to find out what issues Caribbean territories faced with respect to dog welfare, and also to obtain information about the animal welfare groups themselves. Thus, data were obtained at three levels, territory, island and welfare group. It should be noted that different animal welfare requirements may exist between islands of the same territory and not all facilities may be available on every island. Differences in responses at the territory level may represent ignorance of national facts by animal welfare workers. Divergence in responses at the island level could represent lack of local knowledge or reflect differences in island requirements.

Although different groups, particularly on the same island, may have different goals, it might be reasonable to expect that animal welfare workers should be aware of national animal issues. A lack of this knowledge may mean that the ability of these people to educate dog guardians will be limited. Some welfare groups were represented by more than one person, and so it was possible to also assess diversity within a group by comparing answers within the same organisation.

Methodology

A one page questionnaire was distributed on the second day of the conference. All the questions were chosen so that it should have been possible for them to be answered by an informed animal welfare worker without reference to any “records”. Responses were grouped by territory, island and organisation as appropriate.

Results

No attempt has been made to verify the results. It is assumed that the replies accurately reflect the views of the participants or the facts about the territories in which respondents reside. However, for territories which were represented by more than one participant there were differences in answers to the factual questions, so indicating that respondents were not fully informed on territorial animal welfare matters. When differences existed, the most common response for that territory or island or group was taken to be “correct”.

Thirty-two participants from eight territories on 12 islands, representing 15 animal welfare groups completed forms. The territories (and islands) were: Anguilla, Antigua, The Bahamas (Grand Bahama, New Providence), Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico, Vieques, Dutch St. Maarten, St. Lucia, US Virgin Islands (St. Croix, St. John, St. Thomas), The Turks and Caicos (Providenciales).

Legal aspects of animal welfare

Only one territory did not have legislation on animal welfare (Dutch St. Maarten). In four territories, people may have been prosecuted for animal cruelty in the previous 12 months¹. Only in four territories had legislation been revised since 1995, and six territories had new legislation waiting to be passed by government. Three territories had a dog license law and this law had been enforced in two of them in the previous 12 months. Four of the territories had “breed” specific legislation which related to “fighting” dogs and pit bulls. The three major defects most commonly reported in current legislation were considered to include: lack of enforcement/dog license law (four territories), outdated legislation (two territories) and considering animals as property (two territories).

Dog care issues

All respondents reported that roaming dogs were regarded as a “problem”. The four most commonly reported aspects of this were: dogs attacking livestock (five islands), tipping over garbage and health matters (five islands), detrimental effects on tourists/attacks on tourists (four islands) and overpopulation (three islands).

¹ There was considerable disagreement in answers between respondents within the same territory.

Mixed breed dogs were the most common type of dog on all but one of the islands, where Chihuahuas were most common. The most common “breed” seen on the islands was pit bulls (eight islands). Dogs had killed humans on three islands since 1995, and all the deaths (seven in total) were attributed to pit bulls and rottweilers.

Dog pounds existed on six islands and were government funded on three. Free (or very low cost) spay/neuter services were available on ten islands, but on only three did they receive government support. The cost of a spay varied from US\$15-US\$125 and a neuter from US\$15 to US\$100. All the islands had veterinary clinics, and only one had a single clinic.

There were “accepted” estimates of the owned dog population in three islands, and one island had an accepted estimate of the unowned dog population.

The most commonly reported methods by which owners disposed of unwanted animals were: abandonment/starvation (seven islands), surrendering/euthanasia (three islands). Twenty-three respondents, from ten islands said that the most common reason for keeping dogs was for “protection”, as opposed to eight, from four islands, who thought “companionship” was the reason.

Animal welfare groups

Six islands only had one animal welfare group, but all the others had multiple groups.

Seven groups were represented by more than one respondent. Of these seven, the respondents of only three groups were in agreement as to the major difficulty faced by their group. The three most common difficulties facing animal welfare groups mentioned by respondents were funding (nine), manpower (four) and lack of laws or their enforcement (four). Respondents from only one animal welfare group agreed upon the group’s goal for 2004. The most common goal mentioned by respondents concerned a

reduction in the dog population, usually through neutering (eight groups²), education was seen to be the major goal by respondents of three groups² and research by one group.

The single most common action which governments could undertake to help the work of the animal welfare groups concerned law enforcement or enactment of new laws (14 participants from nine islands), and 15 participants (from nine islands) wanted government funding or “participation” in the work of animal welfare.

Discussion

The participants in this study cannot be considered as representative of the inhabitants of the islands on which they reside, but they can be considered to represent an interested, active and therefore, “informed” group of animal welfare workers. It would therefore seem reasonable to expect that this group should know about laws and other matters as they related to animal welfare issues. The fact that not all those participating in the study could complete each question, or complete it correctly, highlights the need for animal welfare workers to better acquaint themselves with animal welfare matters. This is important if they are to reliably educate animal carers on animal welfare.

Further, the lack of agreement between members of the same group as to the major 2004 goal of their group suggests that the organisation could benefit from institutional strengthening which should make the organisation more effective. This weakness was also evident when respondents were asked about the difficulties faced by their groups and what government could do to help them. The 2004 goals stated by many participants confused a goal with the method being employed to reach it, e.g.: neutering. The lack of estimates for the dog populations on most islands makes goal setting difficult, and highlights the need for groups to monitor and evaluate their activities. Only four respondents indicated that “education” or “research” was the major objective for 2004. This may suggest that insufficient emphasis is being placed on the longer-term solution of improving animal welfare.

² Where there were multiple responses for the same group, respondents usually disagreed on the nature of the major goal for 2004.

It is clear that the efforts of animal welfare groups are hampered by working in a weak legal framework and with governments which typically do not enforce current animal welfare laws or appreciate animal welfare issues. This was highlighted by most territories waiting for governments to pass new animal welfare legislation. Despite the fact that dogs were seen as a widespread problem and a threat to the health and economy of islands, governments rarely participate in spay/neuter programmes, and so force such programmes to depend upon private donors. Most territorial governments did not fund a pound, a deficiency which may make legal or humane removal of nuisance dogs difficult and so could encourage cruelty to animals.

Conclusions

Dog welfare in the Caribbean would be improved by increasing the effectiveness of animal welfare groups. This could be achieved by;

- (1) governments providing an appropriate legal framework and enforcing legislation,
- (2) governments more actively supporting the work of animal welfare groups,
- (3) animal welfare groups strengthening their institutional framework,
- (4) animal welfare groups placing more emphasis on animal welfare education
- (4) animal welfare workers being better informed about animal welfare matters.

Until these conditions are met, animal welfare, and ultimately the welfare of societies in the Caribbean will continue to be a cause for concern.

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