

Making Sustainable Improvements in Animal Welfare

‘A strategic approach to Animal Welfare improvement in remote Indigenous communities’.

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Introduction

Improving animal welfare in the Indigenous paradigm of remote NT communities differs vastly from approaches undertaken in the urban western paradigm context, primarily due to differing world views and a history littered with failed approaches. In Aboriginal communities in particular, animal health, welfare and control tactics dictated by external forces using non negotiated methodologies have been, and continue to be, uniformly unsuccessful and unsustainable. Positive change brought about through implementation of community developed control programs, appropriate veterinary methods, locally trained employees and education programs offers ways to navigate this historically difficult area.

These are the first steps on the way forward. Sustainable animal health and welfare improvement in the Indigenous context is possible, is already happening and holds promise and hope for the future if current obstacles are bravely acknowledged and addressed. This requires an intentional government commitment to provide education and awareness program funding, local and indigenous staff training and employment, and community development staff to assist communities to implement long term strategies. The approach must not be more of the same that has been imposed on communities for too many years. Quick fix solutions, so often seen to urgently address immediate problems of animal health and welfare, population numbers, public nuisance and disease result in community fatigue or disinterest.

The issues

Longstanding animal health and welfare management issues exist in most Australian Aboriginal communities with little to no resources, education or professional help to address the situation. Veterinary service provision to communities has, on the whole, been nonexistent or inadequate due to budgetary constraints. Where veterinary service is provided, there has often been an inappropriate use of mass culling as an animal control measure, with or without informed consent from animal owners. Often such programs contain little if any inbuilt education or capacity building strategies adjunct to veterinary service delivery, achieving little toward sustainable change. Within a year to eighteen months the most likely scenario is that the situation would return to the pre-cull state.

Most common problems relate to animal welfare and public nuisance. They include overpopulation from uncontrolled dog breeding; visibly diseased, malnourished and dying animals (mainly dogs); public health considerations related to external and internal parasites; constant noise and nuisance from fighting and pack behaviour; spreading of rubbish while scavenging for food and public safety concerns with dog bite injuries - to children in particular - from aggressive animals (Donelan 2006). Larger breed 'pig dogs' brought into communities by non-indigenous community staff add to the problem if there is no responsible pet ownership (AMRRIC 2007).

Dogs remain integral to the fabric of remote Indigenous communities' culture. The health and treatment of dogs is intrinsically linked to community health and well-being. Recognition and acceptance of these facts will facilitate the establishment of culturally appropriate programs. Communities often indicate that they are overwhelmed by free breeding dogs and cats, have no access to desexing programs and population control. They feel disempowered by non-indigenous decision makers and struggle to access resources such as normal veterinary services, medications, information or education to improve the situation resulting in the overall poor state of animal welfare in many remote Australian Indigenous communities.

The world from another social and cultural perspective

As a consequence of settlement, institutionalization and disempowerment of people, a reliance on missionaries and councils to make the decisions, look after the dogs etc has evolved. The relinquishment of responsibility has underpinned a general perception that Indigenous people do not care about their dogs. One only has to be willing to sit and spend time listening and sharing with Indigenous people to ascertain the fact that they do care about the health and welfare of their companion animals. Dr Sophie Constable's research confirms this fact. Almost all dog owners interviewed (94.7%) stated that when they were away from their pets they missed them. (89.5%) felt that people should try to minimize animal suffering and 75% people stated that they cared about dogs in the community on the whole, with comments such as : *"People love dogs round here", "Dogs are important", "There's a lot of dog lovers around here", "My pet's part of my family", "dogs are like family", "Dogs have really strong love for people", and "Dog is man's best friend", "When a dog dies, people get sick (pointing at her own heart), and when dogs get sick, same."* (Constable et al 2008).

Ongoing cultural significance and traditional law relating to dogs in Aboriginal communities cannot be overlooked when considering compliance and appropriateness of any animal welfare plan. "Dog Dreaming" is a very real and important feature of dog ownership and treatment within many Aboriginal communities. To overlook or dismiss this issue at a community level is firstly disrespectful and ignorant and secondly, results in significant non compliance with by laws or imposed plans in many communities.

For most indigenous people English is their third or fourth language and English literacy rates are poor (Donelan 2006). We must bear this in mind when communicating messages

from our world perspective. On a recent community trip a poster was observed stating: *'Section 75A (2) SUMMARY OFFENCES ACT, The owner of a cheeky dog that-Bites, chases or scares another person or animal is guilty of an offence. Penalty: \$5,000'* and *'Section 6 ANIMAL WELFARE ACT- Any dog at your house must be fed and well looked after. Your dog must be healthy with hair and no sores. You must not hurt your dog. Penalty: Up to \$11,000 fine or 12 months imprisonment'*. Given that many people in the community could not read the sign, have limited fencing to prevent any dog from coming and going from their house, have limited access to veterinary services or funds to pay such fines, the poster quickly became a joke and an insult to the local people, as expressed to the author. World view, as so often seen, becomes the single most important factor in accounting for communication breakdown (Australian Volunteers International 2004).

Whilst it is clear that many Aboriginal people love and value their dogs and often share their distress about their condition, they do not necessarily share our cultural attitudes to animal welfare and individual responsibility to care for their animals (Donelan 2006). Very often we hear 'let him die natural way', a challenging situation for any non-indigenous person working in a community. Cultural attitudes and beliefs seem to underlie this attitude. This wish must be considered should the vet wish to continue to build a trusting relationship that allows further work to be undertaken to improve animal welfare in that community.

A brief History

In contrast to dominant Euro-Australian tradition Indigenous Australian societies have a different cultural tradition of living with their companion animals. Traditionally dingoes were their companions, joining Indigenous family groups freely (Corbett 2001). Dingoes were self reliant, hunted and often contributed their hunt to their companion Indigenous family. Their breeding was self regulatory; not breeding at the alarming rate of our western dogs (capable of replacing 70% of their numbers every year) (Matter and Daniels 2000) and almost completely dependent on human carers for food and water (Boitani et al 1995). Canine companions had, and do still have, important roles as spiritual and physical protectors and companions (Hunt 2006).

Indigenous people will commonly share their concerns that health status of their dogs (in particular) impacts on human health and welfare. Zoonotic diseases and mental health and wellbeing concerns such as embarrassment or 'shame' about the state of their companion animals' health are common concerns. They express fear of attacks from free roaming dogs which cause injury and concern about themselves and other dogs.

Indigenous people keep pets for the same reasons as non-indigenous people. Companionship is the key reason for people to keep dogs, cats or pigs and interactions between them and their owners are often affectionate or sometimes cruel as in any developed society. Dogs are seen as 'protectors and guardians, both of property in a territorial sense and also to ward off evil spirits...they also serve a practical purpose by assisting in hunting, though not all town dogs go "out bush" (Donelan 2006). Many elders

and community members have shared with the author stories of the spiritual and cultural significance of dogs in their lives.

One size does not fit all

No one community shares exactly the same concerns or problems as another. The spectrum of situations is considerably more diverse than any generalization may encompass. Customs, education, culture, ceremony, languages, country, relationship to dog dreaming, different experiences and impacts of colonization and integration with Euro-Australian culture all directly impact upon the dog health and welfare situation today (Constable et al 2008) (Howe 1993). Whilst the underlying principles or 'plan' developed for each community program may appear to be the same, individual programs will need to respond to their particular context, culture, demographics, resources and community attitudes. One size does not fit all.

A vision

AMRRIC shares a vision with many, that is, communities that are healthy and safe for people and their companion animals.

In very practical terms this means having fewer animals, healthier and better behaved animals, and owners who take responsibility for the health, welfare and behaviour of their animal companions. It means community based management and control of the animal populations and delivery of animal health programs are best undertaken in conjunction with veterinary professionals (AMRRIC Principles 2008).

Apart from resource provision and community capacity building, achievement of this vision requires substantial responsible pet ownership and attitudinal change by many community members and stakeholders, particularly in relation to acceptable standards of animal health, welfare and behaviour. Realization of desired change will emerge as a result of genuine effort and contributed resources from external stakeholders and community residents operating collaboratively (AMRRIC 2007). Working respectfully in partnership, transferring and exchanging knowledge, can enable Indigenous communities to seek and implement sustainable solutions.

Key Components of Sustainable Animal Welfare outcomes

Primarily the aim is to improve community companion animal health and welfare. In doing so we contribute to improved human health, reduced transmission of disease from animals to people, education about parasites and disease in companion animals, and consequently expand peoples' concepts regarding their own health and disease prevention. Through the provision of adequate veterinary services we deliver desexing program expertise providing a means of managing large, relatively uncontrolled dog populations. Euthanasia is not a first resort.

Respect, Collaboration, Consultation and Planning

Many Aboriginal people possess authority or custodianship over dog matters within the existing systems of traditional governance. For lasting and beneficial companion animal control change to occur it is essential that those with authority to speak contribute to planning a control program (Phelan 2006). Consulting extensively within the community to facilitate the development of a strategic animal health and management plan guided by community needs and circumstances is crucial. It is vital we '*join with people so we can work with rather than for them*' (Phelan 2006). Imposing a pre-determined program, developed through non-indigenous eyes generally means little to no sustained compliance with the approaches undertaken. Without extensive consultation the vet may even arrive in the community to undertake the pre-decided program to find that the community, in fear of what is being imposed based on previous history, have evacuated their dogs to a 'safer' place.

Respecting the cultural traditions of each community and the right of the community to manage their animals and animal programs is paramount. Where observance of cultural law and traditions would result in contravention of conventional laws and regulations, extensive consultation and negotiation is essential. Local helpers assist vets to 'understand and navigate sensitive cultural issues like ceremony business, dog dreaming and sorry business' (Donelan AMRRIC 2006).

Acting with integrity to build respect and trust with community stakeholders and community engagement in the program is a must to improving the welfare of animals (Donelan 2006). In a climate of mistrust, resulting from inappropriate culling programs or treatments and surgical procedures undertaken without owner permission, nothing can be achieved. Everything we do relies on the process of relationship building and respect.

Stakeholders are essential in achieving sustainable and successful programs and can play a crucial role. Collaboration through purposefully building partnerships with stakeholders such as local councils and shires, public health bodies, community agencies, elders and traditional owners (Phelan 2006) enables a more holistic approach to be undertaken. Planning is crucial to developing a long term approach to working together. Planning enables a community to 'own' their program and to stay focused on priorities to more efficiently use the resources at hand, or to gain the needed resources. 'Planning' at this stage in the NT is primarily undertaken by governing bodies and tends to be more of the the 'top down' approach which has failed in the past.

Education

Education is an essential component of companion animal health, welfare and control and should not be omitted from the sustainable package. Sadly this is often the first component of a program to be disregarded due to budgetary constraints, lack of trained Indigenous staff and the will of government. Education needs to be "two way" to bridge knowledge gaps from both European and Indigenous cultures. Imposition of welfare and control

measures, in the absence of adequate capacity building results in unnecessary ongoing expenditure on pure service delivery, both veterinary and law enforcement. The provision of knowledge, training and resources to enable the community to take responsibility for and manage animal welfare, and related issues such as responsible pet ownership is a key component of moving forward. Through education and advocacy, and two way knowledge transfer we are able to provide the community with the resources required to establish a plan to achieve animal health and welfare standards comparable to those acceptable in the wider Australian community.

Critical to the success of all animal management programs are effective education advisory services and targeted training programs. The provision of appropriate advice, education and training needs to occur in a variety of forms aimed at a range of community stakeholders and program participants. Successful programs foster easy learning environments where taking advantage of informal training situations is equally as important as offering effective structured education and training program delivery.

Targeted education and training programs enable Aboriginal people to appreciate what programs are about and why the government is implementing animal management programs in their communities. Developing an understanding of relevant legislative requirements through targeted education and training programs will enhance the capacity of communities to benefit from the implementation of programs. Enabling communities to understand the process fosters effective and appropriate long term change and compliance. Alternative targeted education and training programs enable non-Aboriginal stakeholders to appreciate the kinds of barriers that impede immediate term change in essential areas of animal welfare and management.

School based education should focus on supporting community involvement in their children's education, likewise tailoring their needs to the needs and values present in the wider community, such as general aspects of caring for pets etc... zoonotic diseases, hygiene and dog bite prevention. Specific Aboriginal education resources are extremely limited in this area, but effective resources are currently being developed. They include school programs on an individual basis to some broader initiatives such as the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy. Pet care education including humane education and dog bite prevention has been undertaken on a very small scale ad hoc basis, such as AMRRIC school programs in communities that we have worked in. A broader strategic approach is needed across Australian Indigenous community schools as a crucial component of multi-targeted strategies addressing contemporary issues such as animal welfare and interrelated community health. Research such as The Australian Research Council (ARC) Grant, with whom AMRRIC is a partner, is dedicated in part to Indigenous animal health and welfare education initiatives directed at school aged children including the development of locally relevant and culturally appropriate pet care education programs.

Resources, Employment and Training

Dog health programs provide a way to proactively support and encourage community employment opportunities. Indigenous community members provide essential assistance with communications and animal handling, and should be trained to further assist veterinarians and deliver treatments between veterinary visits. They should be integral members of the animal health team. Involvement in the program helps to build the knowledge and resource base necessary to ultimately enable communities to conduct their own future dog health programs.

In any community companion animal welfare and control can be viewed as either a “top down” approach i.e. where control is related to law enforcement and euthanasia of excess population or a “bottom up” approach where there is a direction of funding toward education and population control i.e. large scale sterilisation programs. Given the enormous and ongoing cost of the top down approach many communities worldwide are including large subsidised sterilisation of companion animals as an arm of companion animal control (AMRRIC 2006).

Each community requires a paid position (or parts thereof) dedicated to animal management. Given the culturally complex nature of dog welfare and control it is important that a community representative(s) take management responsibility for their own program. To bring workers from another area/ language/clan group will likely create mistrust in the program. Historically Aboriginal communities across the NT have been subjected to a wide variety of often brutal forms of companion animal management with routine shooting, or more recently, large scale euthanasia campaigns forming the mainstay of companion animal control. To increase compliance with animal control the climate of mistrust must be minimized.

Building awareness of animal health and management problems and ownership of the effective management of these issues within the community is critical. With ownership comes engagement and responsibility. Ideally an appropriate community working group should be developed to help with ongoing program planning and delivery. Sustainability is only possible with strong community support, engagement and ownership. Agreement means compliance is possible.

Ongoing key personnel and program support/mentoring and maintenance is a vital consideration for sustainable animal welfare improvement options. Sustainability is only possible with strong community support and ownership. Programs need to aspire to continuous function with decreasing reliance on external resources. This can only be achieved through the support and training of community members to confidently maintain elements of the dog program in between veterinary visits.

Conclusion

Given limited capacity to implement legislative requirements to improve animal welfare in many communities, a large degree of support and resources is required to ensure that effective animal health, welfare and control initiatives are being conducted in a coordinated

fashion. NT Animal Welfare and Control funding, under the new shire arrangements is limited. Tendering for Veterinary services with inadequate budgets creates enormous barriers to successful and sustainable animal welfare programs. One shire CEO stated: "education has to go, so does training.... we only have funds to employ vets". Veterinarians will be unrealistically expected to provide enormous outcomes on very limited funds, and will not have the time or funds to train vital local Animal Management officers or to engage in provide crucial education programs. The difficulty in providing 'real jobs' and supporting Environmental Health trained staff in communities is challenging. All of these issues impact greatly on sustainable outcomes.

Broad based Community education, advisory programs and opportunities should not be ignored. In fact they should be seen as the most important aspect of improving the health and welfare of animals and their owners. This allows animal health and welfare legislation to be shared with communities to highlight their own obligations and responsibilities as companion animal owners.

We must honestly examine our past attempts to address the issues of animal welfare in Indigenous communities and based on that wisdom and experience turn to a model that works. A model that includes only veterinary services promotes ongoing dependence on non-indigenous expertise to address these complex issues. Governments and stakeholders must work together to ensure that adequate resources are injected into holistic models to empower communities to develop and implement their own animal health and welfare improvement programs that will work. Nothing changes when nothing changes.

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