

Animal Sheltering in the United States: From Impound to Humane Community

Today, many plan a visit to their local animal shelter much as they would a visit to a museum. They come to see the animals, spend time with them, learn about them, to stroll down interpretive trails, to take classes—both with and without their pets—send their children to summer camp there, and so much more. That's because many modern shelters are bright cheery places located both physically and figuratively at the heart of the community. Yet one may still find areas where the prevailing sentiment about the local "pound" is not nearly so warm and positive. There remain pockets where people typically give little thought to their shelter unless they lose a pet. Then, a trip past the garbage facility will bring them to the pound where they will walk by rows of spartan cages or runs looking for their animal. At the other end of the spectrum are the few but slowly increasing animal loving communities that don't have a stray animal housing facility per se, but do have an active network of people who assist local animals in need.

The Pound's Origins

The concept of the pound in the U.S. derives from colonial times when animal impoundment areas were used to contain wandering livestock. These facilities also housed dogs found at large, creating a nuisance or posing a threat to public safety. People would go to the impound or "pound" to reclaim their wayward animals who had been picked up by the "poundmaster."

Over the centuries, as more communities became less agriculturally based, the pound's principal focus shifted from livestock to dogs, and eventually to cats as well. Livestock, being a valuable commodity, was typically reclaimed, while dogs and cats were often not. Poundmasters generally did not receive a salary but depended on redemption fees paid by owners reclaiming their animals as well as on income derived from the sale of unclaimed livestock.

Since resources were at a premium, unclaimed dogs and cats were often killed in the most economical way, usually by clubbing or drowning. With increasing urbanization dogs became the most common animal impounded and illegal money making enterprises sprang up, particularly in cities where pet dogs were relatively easy to catch and likely to be reclaimed. In some urban areas, a criminal racket developed to kidnap pets and take them to the pound for a bounty. Distressed owners, relieved to learn that their dogs had been found safe and sound, would claim their dogs and pay the redemption fees.

Mad Dogs and (Former) Englishmen

Rabies is one of the world's first recognized diseases and it was long suspected that it was transferred to other animals and to humans through the saliva of an infected animal. Nearly always fatal, rabies was the primary risk that animals at large posed to society and the development of pounds was in great part an effort to minimize the spread of this disease. For centuries, any animal even suspected of having rabies was killed immediately.

By 1812 Massachusetts' Revolutionary War surgeon James Thacher published Observations on Hydrophobia in which he advised that all animals that bite other

animals or people should be held under observation rather than be killed. He also recommended that healthy dogs receive inoculation with saliva from a rabid animal.ⁱ

72 years later in 1884, Louis Pasteur created the first canine rabies vaccine. In 1921 the vaccine was adapted for use in domesticated dogs as part of a rabies control program in Japan. Mass vaccination of dogs, and later cats, was finally instituted in the United States in the 1940's. The vaccine use has had a profound effect. Before 1960 the majority of rabies cases reported to the U.S. Center for Disease Control were in domestic animals, now more than 90% of reported incidents are in wildlife.

From Helpmate to Companion

The role of dogs and cats in society gradually shifted along with the nation's demographic shift from rural to urban and finally suburban. In the rural era, dogs were utilitarian herders, watchdogs, and guarders—keeping the fox out of the henhouse, for example. Cats have always been prized as ratters and for keeping down populations of other rodents and snakes in barns, granaries and ships. Colonial church pews were designed with room for parishioners' dogs to help keep their feet warm during long winter sermons. In the late 1800's, working men who could not afford a horse relied on dogs to turn treadmills and pull small carts.

"Pet ownership as we know it today is a post-World War II phenomenon," notes Andrew Rowan, Ph. D., director of Tufts University Medical School's Center for Animals and Public Policy.ⁱⁱ At the same time, there is a long tradition of wealthy men raising dogs for hunting jaunts and enjoying their companionship. Elegant ladies have ever cradled a small, cherished dog, or more rarely a cat, as their constant companion. These gentry so valued their pets that they would often be painted with them. However, this relationship where the animal's main purpose and value to humans was his companionship, was a pleasure that was restricted to the upper class until the 20th century. With rise of the middle class and its move to suburban tract homes, the creation of pre-packaged pet food, the widespread use of the rabies vaccine, and the invention of kitty litter in 1947, ownership of dogs and cats solely as pets, or companions, increased tremendously.

License to Run

While it is now taken for granted as part of dog ownership, the concept of purchasing a permit from the local municipality for the right to house a dog did not come into existence until 1866 in Cleveland, Ohio. The practice spread and became further refined when the first dog license tags were issued in Dodge City, Kansas in 1877. This advancement meant that any dog running free was immediately identifiable as belonging to someone, thereby increasing the chances that a wayward dog would be reunited with his family. In many areas, license fees eventually became the primary source of funding for pounds.

Humane Seeds

The nineteenth century was a time of tremendous social exploration, turmoil and growth. Increasingly, science answered questions that were once solely the dominion of religion. Age-old assumptions were challenged. There were numerous experiments in utopian communities, outspoken women started demanding greater rights, and after protracted struggle, slavery was abolished.

This urge to social progress led some to expand their consideration beyond the well being of oppressed people to even nature and her beasts. As industry and technology altered nature irrevocably, the seeds of the environmental conservation movement were sown. This source of altruism also led some to consider the suffering of animals. Indeed, perhaps it has always been that those who are touched by one struggle tend to be sympathetic to others. Women, for example, were prominently involved in many of the earliest societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals (SPCA's) and animal humane societies (some early "humane societies" concerned themselves with both animals and people).

In 1866 the ASPCA in New York City, modeled after England's Royal SPCA, was founded. The next year the Erie County SPCA in Buffalo, New York opened. Soon Boston, Philadelphia and San Francisco organized SPCA's in 1868. Like pounds, they developed as a local response to animals in their respective cities. Indeed, many of them took issue with the treatment of animals in their local pounds. They also rallied for more humane ways of killing the animals that were not reclaimed by owners or placed into new homes.

Private Entities Emerge

Though founded for similar purposes, humane societies and SPCAs maintained--and continue to maintain to this day--highly individualized and localized approaches to the needs of their communities. The Philadelphia SPCA (later renamed the Women's Humane Society) built the first known private animal shelter as an alternative to the deplored city "pound". The SPCA provided strays with more humane care and medical treatment, and placed animals into new homes. When that was not possible, they sought to provide animals a quick and painless death. A steel chamber was developed into which a gas was introduced to asphyxiate the animals.

In the meantime in New York, Henry Bergh, founder of the ASPCA, urged the city to make humane reforms at the pound while steadfastly refusing to let the ASPCA run it. He believed that operating the city's pound could conflict with the society's role as an advocate for animals and place undue financial strain on the organization. Bergh's foresight was remarkably accurate; more than a century later many humane organizations are divesting themselves from animal control responsibilities for some of the same reasons cited by Bergh in the 1800s.ⁱⁱⁱ

Numbers That Count

At the outset, it made good sense for pounds, shelters and humane groups to form in response to the needs in their own communities. The independent, locally focused nature of these organizations in the United States is a legacy that endures to the present with varying degrees of success. Even Henry Bergh's nationally named ASPCA, in its early years, focused its efforts primarily on the care and humane treatment of animals at its doorstep in New York City.

While individuality and local focus may well have enhanced responsiveness to local needs, the approach also had a substantial and unintended consequence-- animal sheltering is a largely unregulated endeavor in this country.

The federal government has few regulations and even less oversight of animal shelters. There is no national agency required to oversee animal shelter operations.

There has been no standard method for keeping animal shelter statistics and indeed, no federal requirement that such statistics be kept. While pet ownership trends could be tracked with relative ease through the U.S. Census, there must first be enough public pressure to demand that that legal imperative be added.

Despite the absence of government mandate, animal shelters are beginning to recognize the importance of keeping accurate data on what they do. Only by keeping statistics on each animal that passes through their facilities can humane organizations track prevailing and changing trends, identify their needs and measure their success. Animal sheltering reached a new level of professionalism in 1993 with the formation of the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy (NCPSP) who took on the task of scientifically compiling and analyzing data on pets and animal shelters. The NCPSP conducted a four-year study of over 5,000 animal shelters that in the aggregate handled more than two million animals each year. It continues to gather research on pet ownership and assist shelters in compiling their own data. The Council's studies can be viewed at www.petpopulation.org.

The process of gathering and understanding animal sheltering data continues to gain prominence. In 2004, representatives of national and local animal welfare organizations from across the country met in Asilomar, California to "work together to save the lives of all healthy and treatable dogs and cats." The agreement they reached, known as the "Asilomar Accords" embodies two main imperatives: the development of universal definitions, and the creation of guidelines and tables to allow the keeping of meaningful statistics and records. These can be viewed at www.asilomaraccords.org.

Climbing the Spiral of Life

The close of the nineteenth century saw the rise of humane societies and SPCA's that opened private shelters to care for strays in a more humane manner than the municipal pounds. The efforts of these private enterprises influenced many pounds to adopt more humane standards themselves.

The end of the twentieth century witnessed a flourishing crop of grassroots organizations seeking an alternative to the humane death that so many animals still faced in shelters simply because there were not enough new homes to be found. This new "no kill" movement challenged traditional shelters to call this aspect of their work frankly, "the killing" of animals, rather than the softer, euphemistic, "euthanasia." In a way, it was progress in an upward spiral. While the touchstone issue remained death, the focus had largely moved beyond *how* animals are killed—a swift, gentle, painless death by lethal injection was (and remains) widely preferred—to the necessity of death at all.

Traditional shelters countered that a swift, painless death without fear was indeed an act of mercy when compared to the alternative: a lifelong sentence in a cage or endless suffering from disease. Moreover, if they served a municipality they had a responsibility to keep the public safe from dangerous animals and they had to have a place to put them. To effectively optimize limited resources, shelters had to focus their efforts on supporting the animals most likely to succeed in a new home.

Still, many "traditionalists" recognized that even the term "no kill" had immediate appeal for the public at large. The dynamic tension between these two views led many shelters to re-evaluate long held presumptions and practices.

Today, the “no-kill,” organization at its best strives to place every homeless pet in a new home so that no animal will ever be killed to make space available for incoming animals. Some organizations have now moved well beyond the grassroots stage and operate large facilities or national programs themselves.

Navigating this uncharted territory is often challenging for people striving to be humane. In this changing environment even the terms and labels that each organization chooses can be fraught with discord. An “open-admission” or “open access” shelter that accepts all animals may be denigrated as a “kill” shelter, while a “no-kill” shelter may feel demeaned by the label “closed door” or “limited access” shelter.

However, in a growing number of communities, these very different kinds of organizations are learning to work together, to understand each other, to respect and learn from each other, to maintain open communication and dialogue, and to stay focused on their shared goals. The results are impressive--rehomeing and spay/neuter of many more animals resulting in an unprecedented reduction in euthanasia.

The Humane Community of the Future

Let us imagine what the humane community of the future will look like. What characteristics would wealthy and poor humane communities have in common? In a truly humane community people would respect all sentient beings, including their fellow humans. What specific evidence would indicate respect for companion animals? Some envision a place where dogs are with their families, not tied outside or left alone and unattended in a fenced yard. Some see a place where feral cats would be a vestige of the past, their populations nearly eradicated through effective spay/neuter programs.

Stray pets would be equally rare and it would be obvious whom to contact in the unlikely event someone encountered one. Affordable veterinary care for anyone who needed assistance would be widely available. Pet ownership and behavioral enrichment training would be broadly accessible to all. Sociable, well-mannered pets would be welcome in many, if not all, public places. They would be desired tenants in all the forms of housing in the community. Devoting time and effort to helping animals would be considered an important and well-respected community activity. Animal neglect and abuse would be rare and held in check by strong laws and effective enforcement, as well as universal societal scorn.

And what will become of companion animal services and facilities in this brave new humane world? When dog and cat reproduction levels have stabilized, will shelters seek out new sources of animals to adopt when the public doesn't bring in enough? Certainly, many visitors do come to the shelter to see the animals. Will the shelter still need to draw people in to get its message out? Without a large influx of animals as people keep their animals for as long as they live, will traditional shelters still need to exist, albeit in a reduced role as a “safety net” for housing unwanted animals in the community? Or might an effective network of foster homes that provide emergency housing to animals in need make them obsolete? Will animal shelters become less about housing homeless animals and more about providing affordable training, medical care, grooming, day care, and other support for pets living in the community? Perhaps there will come a day when even this will not be needed

because services for animals will be so well integrated into the activities of other organizations in the community that a facility is no longer necessary.

While we continue to help individual animals in our care today, we must at the same time, consider our ultimate goal--a humane community--where animals and humans live together in harmony, kindness and good health without fear, or hunger, or needless pain and suffering. Working together, not only to help the animals we can today, but also to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of those efforts so that we can best chart our course for the future, will help us achieve this. As Einstein once challenged society, "Our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

i *Kaplan, MM and Meslin, FX. A brief history of rabies, in Microbe Hunters—Then and Now, Bloomington, IL, Medi-Ed Press, 1996 pp. 45-55.*

ii *from Spring 1996 issue of ASPCA Animal Watch® by Pune Dracker*

iii *Adapted from "The Evolving Animal Shelter" by Stephen Zawistowski, PhD, and Julie Morris in Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff, Blackwell Publishing, 2004*