

CHAPTER 8

Some Lives Are Cheap: The Tragedy of Animal Overpopulation

Recollect that the Almighty, who gave the dog to be the companion of our pleasures and our toils, hath invested him with a nature noble and incapable of deceit.

—Sir Walter Scott

One day some years ago, I was told of a mother dog and her puppies, homeless, camped out in a park in Washington, D.C. Clearly, the pregnant dog had been abandoned by a callous owner to bear her pups on her own.

When I was told about this dog, I knew I had to hurry to save her, because the animal warden in Washington at that time, a Mr. King, would undoubtedly soon be on the scene.

If Mr. King got her first, she and her puppies would go to the dog pound. Then, within a few days, they would almost certainly meet their death.

I went as quickly as I could to the park, where I found the mother and her pups under a big sycamore tree. As I neared her, the mother snarled and growled at me, protecting her puppies. I put out my humane trap and prepared to wait, quietly talking to the dog all the while.

Sure enough, Mr. King soon made his entrance. Rather than wait patiently for the animal to make her way into the trap, Mr. King went after her. Naturally, she took off running; any mother dog would have done that, to divert attention away from her pups. I hurriedly put the puppies in the dog trap as bait, feeling certain the mother would run into the trap to protect them. Fortunately for me, she did.

“Got her now!” exclaimed Mr. King triumphantly.

“I beg your pardon,” I said pleasantly, “but that’s *my* trap—that’s *my* dog.”

Mr. King sighed. “I guess you’ve got me there,” he said.

I took the mother and her pups to Peace Plantation. After three days of loving care and feeding, the mother dog understood that we only wanted to help her and her little ones. Eventually, she was spayed, and she and her pups were given away to excellent adoptive homes.

My friendly rivalry with Mr. King continued for years. For, though I knew this good man had the best of intentions, I also knew that any homeless animal who fell into his hands would almost certainly be euthanized in his shelter.

This is still true today. In fact, the situation is only getting worse. For lack of homes, 10 million healthy dogs and cats are destroyed by animal shelters and pounds each year. [Today, the estimate is closer to 5 million. Although this figure represents progress, it is hardly a comfortable statistic for a society that wishes to consider itself humane.] Countless millions of others, abandoned by unfeeling owners, roam streets and alleyways until they are killed or die of disease, starvation, or extremes of temperature.

The root of all this suffering and wasted life? Animal overpopulation. The principal reason for this tragic destruction of animals is society’s permissiveness toward the breeding of its pets and its unwillingness to accept long-term responsibility for pets’ lives. No animal shelter likes the job of killing the vast numbers of unwanted animals.

Animal overpopulation did not become a problem until well into the 20th century. Before then, people had fewer pets. Pets were not overbred. And those who died were replaced by adopting others.

As house pets became popular, procreation quickly outstripped demand. The situation was made worse by the unwillingness of owners to care for their pets over their full lifetimes, or to find suitable homes for them when they could no longer keep them.

The huge numbers of abandoned and unwanted cats and dogs have inundated America's animal shelters. Although they have done their best to encourage adoptions, shelters have been able to place fewer than three out of ten shelter animals in suitable homes since the 1960s. The only solution for the remaining 70 percent? Euthanasia. After a few days in the shelter, animals are destroyed so that others who come after them can be handled as humanely as possible.

If ever there was a treadmill to disaster for dogs and cats, surely it is our shelter system. Of course, The National Humane Education Society (NHES) has created an exception to this terrible rule. At Peace Plantation, an animal will not be euthanized unless he or she is terribly ill, in pain, and without any hope of recovery.

Ours is a standard most shelters cannot meet. The shelters have been criticized for using euthanasia. But the fault really lies with the public—for overbreeding, for not having pets spayed or neutered, and for not accepting responsibility for the pet's lifelong care.

Humane officials have had to accept euthanasia as a short-term solution to the overpopulation of pets brought to the shelters. At the same time, they are actively seeking a much better long-term solution.

Pound seizure is another sad fate that awaits many of the abandoned and unwanted animals brought to shelters. This terrible practice involves selling or releasing dogs and cats to laboratories for biomedical experiments. Animal rights activists, including my late husband, have fought pound seizure for almost 50 years.

The first state law mandating the practice of pound seizure was passed in Minnesota in 1948. Only twelve states have laws forbidding this practice: Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Maryland, Delaware, Hawaii, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Although many of the remaining states do not require pound seizure, they allow it. [West Virginia has since been added to the list of those who have banned pound seizure.]

As I mentioned in this book's chapter on vivisection, after World War II, biomedical research with live animals increased tremendously. More money was made available for this research. More people were attending universities and going into research. Today's highly profitable industries that breed animals for laboratory use did not yet exist, so the growing research community needed to find animals from other sources, i.e., dog pounds.

At the same time, the population began shifting to urban areas. Pets came to the cities with their owners. The shelters had been built when most animals didn't stray far from the farm. Now, cities were overburdened with this increase of animals. Pound seizure proponents rationalized that animals in the shelter were going to die anyway. Why not use them for research? That would be taking only one animal's life, not two, and it would save money.

Humane organizations argue that animals chosen for the laboratory are the ones most likely to be adopted—young, one to three years of age, healthy, friendly, and of medium size. Those who are rejected are the animals least likely to find adoptive homes.

NHES and other animal rights groups are trying to educate owners to be responsible and fight pet overpopulation. We want to make people aware that pets are not disposable items—to be discarded when one is tired of them or they're too much trouble. By allowing pound seizure, we're placing a cheap price on animal life—allowing shelters to serve as discount warehouse suppliers for biomedical research laboratories.

Animals endure incalculable pain and suffering, and many lose their lives, all because their owners won't accept lifelong responsibility for pets—and because pet owners refuse to have their pets spayed or neutered.

People cite two popular myths to explain why they are unwilling to take their pets to veterinarians for spaying and neutering. The first myth is that it is inhumane to sterilize animals and deprive them of their sex lives. The second is that animals who are sterilized get fat and lazy and lose interest in playing and responding to loving care.

Neither of these assumptions is correct.

Spaying (removing the uterus, tubes, and ovaries of a female animal) and neutering (a term used for the altering of both sexes, including the removal of testicles in the male) are routine operations. They are done under general anesthesia. The operation does not significantly change the personality of the pet. For females, it actually lessens their irritability at certain times of the year and it reduces breast cancer in later life. Unaltered males often get kidney problems and sometimes prostate cancer.

Nor does neutering make the pets fat, lazy, or aloof. This idea arose because animals are neutered around the time they emerge from puppyhood and kittenhood, a time in life when they will put on weight if they are overfed and under-exercised. In that respect, they are just like their owners.

There is no tragedy in preventing a pet from reproducing. The sex life of a pet is governed by glandular discharges of hormones and is free of the social forces that surround human sexuality. If they are sterilized before they mate, the pets don't know about sex and don't miss it.

Sometimes owners don't have the pets neutered because of cost. The operation for cats costs less than that for dogs and it costs less for males than for females. The cost for proper care of a pet is something that should be considered before deciding to become a pet owner. For those who truly can't afford the expense of the operation, there are agencies that offer financial assistance. For example, the Friends of Animals headquartered in Neptune, New Jersey, recently helped to finance 70,000 dog and cat spaying and neutering operations through a network of some 800 participating veterinarians in 46 cities. [The Asheville, North Carolina based, Humane Alliance has altered more than 180,000 cats and dogs since opening in 1994. The Alliance offers spay/neuter clinic training programs and has helped 40 independent clinics open nationwide which, over the years, have altered more than 200,000 cats and dogs.]

An interesting note is that a recent study done by CEN/SHARE, the University of Minnesota's Center for Study Human-Animal Relations, found that female dogs are much more likely to be spayed than male dogs to be neutered. "These results may reflect human societal norms, which assign contraceptive decisions and fertility control to the female," explained Dr. M. Geraldine Gage, a professor in Family Social Science who co-authored the study with Dr. Robert K. Anderson, associate director of CEN/SHARE.

As a pet owner, you must realize and accept the responsibility that you have for this animal. Of the 3,500 shelters in the United States, only about a dozen rule out euthanasia as a matter of policy. [Today, there is an estimated 4,000 to 6,000 animal sheltering agencies/organizations in the United States. Of these, hundreds now share NHES's philosophy that all animals have intrinsic value and, therefore, also rule out euthanasia as a matter of policy.]

That's how few shelters today share the policy of our Peace Plantation. In peaceful, home-like surroundings, healthy animals are able to live out their lives naturally at Peace Plantation unless they are placed for adoption in other good homes.

NHES is opposed to euthanasia as a means of population control for any animal. None of the dogs and cats at Peace Plantation is ever put to sleep simply to make room for another. This upbeat philosophy of setting a high value on animal life has a down side, however: It places a limit on the number of strays the shelters can accept. At its current operating capacity, for example, Peace Plantation can care for some 600 cats and 50 dogs, the shelter's present population. [Currently, there are 429 cats and a small number of resident dogs and farm animals. In 2001, NHES constructed and began operating The Briggs Animal Adoption Center, which provides care for approximately 125 cats and 80 dogs on any given day.]

In recent years, shelters have spent much of their resources educating the public, particularly young people, about the lifetime commitment pet owners should be willing to make, and about the need to control the pet population. NHES has spread this humane message through its publications and our mass mailings. Still, much more needs to be done.

The problem of overpopulation must be conquered and this treadmill to destruction must be stopped. Whatever the reason—getting tired of the pet; lack of proper training when the animal has bad habits such as chewing, soiling the house, etc.; deciding the care of the pet is too expensive; not having the pet neutered—when you decide to take a pet to the dog pound, you can be almost certain that the pet will have to be put to sleep or, worse still, that he or she will become a victim of pound seizure. Think before you become a pet owner. Become a pet owner for life, not just for the holidays.

In addition to education, other measures advocated by humane organizations like NHES include the following:

- * Local governments should provide financial assistance for spaying and neutering programs where needed. Monies allocated for this purpose will eventually come back to the community many times over, as fewer resources are required to care for a reduced stray population. For example, the Humane Society of Charlotte, North Carolina, experienced a 30 percent reduction in stray, owner-relinquished, and abandoned cats and dogs, following a spay/neuter program that sterilized 10,000 animals in a four-year period.

- * Animals adopted from shelters should be sterilized to prevent further breeding. This is done as a matter of course at Peace Plantation. No pet is permitted to be adopted unless he or she has first been neutered. Adopted pets should not be adding their own litters to the unwanted population.

- * Local governments should require all cats and dogs to be licensed and tagged. Tags help officials locate owners of lost pets which otherwise might end up in shelters. Computerization has added to the efficiency of locating pets with tags.

- * Adoption programs should be strengthened so more animals from shelters can be given homes. Of course, this alone won't empty shelters, but it will at least cut down on the number of animals that have to be destroyed for lack of room.

- * The public should be encouraged to donate time and money to help local shelters and organizations expand their educational programs. Local governments are burdened with so many budget requests and problems that there is a limited amount they can do. This underscores the importance of the voluntary, not-for-profit organizations such as NHES. These organizations can add a great deal of support to local government animal control programs. An example of organizations working together with government is a group of 19 voluntary organizations in Ohio who pooled their educational resources to meet a state goal of reducing by half the number of homeless, unwanted, and abandoned dogs and cats

The nation needs more cooperation between the public and private sectors. We need more men and women who will join in the crusade to put an end to this national disgrace—the needless destruction of millions of healthy, loving animals every year.

The challenge to work to this end was expressed very well by Carol Moulton of the American Humane Association, writing in *Animals Agenda*:

There are those who feel that dog and cat overpopulation—like the poor—will always be with us. They accept the need for euthanasia as a fact of life, not as a temporary necessity. They do not believe it will ever be possible to reduce the number of unwanted animals to the point where mass killing is not a daily task at most animal shelters. Though it is likely that there always will be some human-caused animal suffering, dog and cat overpopulation is a finite problem. It had a beginning, it had identifiable causes, and now it is starting to have identifiable solutions. The challenge is to recognize the solutions, refine and improve them, and put them to work all over the country.

—Carol Moulton, “Animal Overpopulation: A Treadmill to Disaster,” *Animals Agenda*, May 1988.

The Puppy Mill Scandal

Most people are attracted to puppies and kittens. “How Much Is that Doggie in the Window?” has become one of the classic songs at Christmas time. Walking by a pet shop and seeing cute, playful little puppies or kittens makes it hard to resist becoming a pet owner. Every year, as many as 500,000 puppies are sold in pet stores. [Today, puppy mills sell between two and four million puppies to individuals as well as to pet stores.] There is no doubt that puppies and kittens are appealing. It takes a strong will to put aside that appeal for a moment and to think through the decision to acquire a pet, weighing the responsibilities that come with that pet carefully.

If you decide to purchase or adopt a pet, ask yourself questions like these: If the pet is for a child, is the child old enough to care for a puppy? Will my home offer long-term care for this animal? Is there a chance my child or I will tire of the pet? Will the pet be abandoned with the tree and tinsel and end up in the dog pound to be “put to sleep” because no one wants him or her any longer?

It is heart-breaking to think what will happen to the puppy or kitten if no one cares. It is even more sobering to think of what happens in many commercial kennels and pet stores because the kennel and store owners look at the pets only from the viewpoint of a profit.

All too often, “puppy mills” have no feeling for the well being of the precious lives they helped to create. Only outright, callous contempt for life can explain the grotesque conditions into which many of them breed and keep these helpless animals.

A few years ago, Robert Baker, an inspector of The Humane Society of the United States, conducted a survey of puppy mills in the U.S. More than half of them failed miserably to meet approved standards for housing, feeding, and sanitation.

The violations he found would make you sick. The owners had piled fecal material in two-foot-high piles in the dog runs. Puppies’ feet were painfully stuck in the wire-mesh floors of their cages. The puppies were fed the dead carcasses of other dogs.

Despite the public outcry and reforms that Mr. Baker’s report precipitated, conditions in many puppy mills remain atrocious. In 1987, Mr. Baker made a spot inspection of 25 puppy

mills at random and found them to be as bad, and in many cases worse, than what he had found in 1981.

Often puppy mill kennels consist of small wood and wire-mesh cages or empty crates outdoors. In many situations, female dogs are bred continuously without any rest between heat cycles. When the continued breeding takes its toll on females, they are killed. It is common to find the mothers and their litters suffering from malnutrition, exposure, and lack of proper veterinary care.

The bad conditions don't end here. Inhumane treatment is often encountered in the shipping of the animals to pet stores and in the care the animals receive once they are on the retail market.

Because of the inhumane conditions under which animals are bred and shipped, Congress passed the Animal Welfare Act of 1966. The Animal Welfare Act is regulated by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The law requires breeders to be licensed and authorizes APHIS to conduct inspections regularly and to follow up on complaints of inhumane conditions. Violators are given deadlines to correct their bad practices. A reinspection is made within 30 days to see if the recommendations have been carried out. If not, legal action is brought. Fines and penalties, including loss of license, may be applied.

While the law and inspections have helped conditions somewhat, there are still violations. Many humane groups challenge the USDA estimate of the number of substandard breeding kennels and think the inspectors may sometimes overlook bad practices. Due to government budget restrictions, there are not enough inspectors to do the job properly. The USDA admits that it needs the help of the states and of the public at large to help eliminate the needless suffering that many animals now endure.

Humane groups and pet industry associations can help by educating and motivating breeders to follow proper operating procedures as well. But even if this humane protection network were working flawlessly, one big hole exists: Pet stores are not under the jurisdiction of APHIS regulation and inspection. Subject only to local laws, rarely inspected, pet shops can and do get away with murder.

Horror stories have been told of owners buying pets who are sick. Often, the price will be reduced to get rid of a sick animal, or one the pet store has had for a long time. There are laws in some jurisdictions now that force the pet store to refund the purchaser's money if the animal is sick. Officials hope this policy will encourage pet store owners to provide better care.

If they won't do it out of a sense of humane ethics, we can only try to force them to be kind by threatening their profits.

Transportation is another area where animals encounter abuse. Puppies and kittens may be shipped hundreds of miles from the pet breeders to the pet stores. The animals are shipped in pickup trucks, tractor trailers, and planes, often without adequate food, water, ventilation, or shelter.

It is the position of The National Humane Education Society that the breeding, transportation, and sale of pets be done only under humane conditions to prevent needless suffering. This means requiring pet wholesalers, shipping companies, and pet shop retailers to maintain standards that will guarantee the well-being of the animals in their care.

NHES agrees with those who hold that inhumane conditions in the pet industry continue to be widespread and scandalous. We are convinced that education will help to redress these wrongs. We are also convinced that strict enforcement of Federal and local regulations is

essential. We think that more inspections are called for, particularly in the transportation and retail sale of pets. The pet industry has already proven that it cannot be trusted to regulate itself.

NHES believes that humane individuals and groups have a major role to play in preventing animal abuse:

1. We can report to the authorities operators found to be abusive of the pets in their care.
2. We can help establish and promulgate humane standards for the pet industry.
3. We can encourage people who want pets to adopt them from shelters, rather than buy them from pet stores or breeding kennels. We believe that it is unwise to breed many more hundreds of thousands of pets each year while the nation's shelters are overcrowded with unwanted and unclaimed pets destined for euthanasia or pound seizure.

“Buy me that doggie in the window?”

If you're sure the animal you purchase will get the care he or she deserves, say “Yes.” Or better still, why not say “Yes” to the one in the window of Peace Plantation or other animal shelters? I can certainly guarantee you that you'll get just as much love and pleasure from one of our “orphans” as you would from a pet-shop animal.

They've got a lot of love to give, those animals who are being put to death each year. It breaks my heart to think about the tragic waste of their precious little lives.