

In the 1970's in the UK, as the dog population exceeded 7 million, irresponsible dog ownership also became a problem. Community pressure led many local authorities to appoint dog wardens to pick up stray dogs from the streets. Sue Bell is Chairman of the UK National Dog Warden's Association which was formed in 1988. Here are some notes taken from her speech at the International Animal Welfare Conference held in Budapest last October.

part 3

What is a stray dog ? Promoting responsible dog ownership

Any dog wandering unattended and unsupervised in a public place can be termed a stray. There are however different kinds of strays.

A lost dog.

A dog which has owner who will look for it as soon as he or she realizes it is missing. This dog may have run away for some reason or got out from its home.

A stolen dog.

A dog which was stolen from its owner and subsequently abandoned by the thief, either because it was not suitable for the purpose for which it was stolen or because it has served its purpose. (some dogs are stolen for breeding or for illegal dog fighting)

An abandoned dog.

This dog is abandoned by its owner for various reasons. It may be a breeding bitch too old for breeding, or an old dog abandoned by relatives after the death of its elderly owner or a young dog brought as a cute puppy and now an unruly adolescent with temperament problems.

The latchkey dog.

One type of latchkey dog roams the streets day and night but occasionally return home for food or shelter if the weather is bad. The other kind is let out morning and evening unsupervised to get exercise and relieve itself.

In the past two centuries the dog has changed from being a practical working animal to being a companion animal. But do all people benefit from owning a dog ?

Many simply exercise their right to own what they want regardless of the consequences. In their ignorance they fail to provide the proper care or proper control for the dog they own.



The result is the stray dog.

At present the legal role of the dog warden lies somewhere between the police (who retain responsibility for stray dogs under the 1906 Dog Act) and the Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) inspectors who have similar powers to the police in that they can bring prosecutions against a person suspected of cruelty or neglect of an animal.

Dog wardens have to deal with public complaints about stray dogs: noise, fouling, general nuisance. They must also try to alleviate the problems by talking to irresponsible dog owners. Through education

programmes they aim to promote responsible dog ownership.

Before 1992, there was no status in law for dog wardens. In that year the Environment Protection Act came into force and all local authorities were requested to appoint dog wardens to collect stray dogs in their area, to keep them for seven days and after that if the owner hadn't claimed them, to arrange for their disposal. Generally animal welfare organizations like the RSPCA have contracts with and are paid by the local authorities to care for the dogs during the seven day-period. After that, the dog may be put up for adoption or euthanized according to the policy and situation of that shelter.

The average statistics for three years 1993/94/95 of stray dogs taken in by wardens, show about 20% dogs were returned to their owner directly, about 30% were later claimed by their owner at the shelter, about 35 % were rehomed to new owners and the rest were put to sleep.

Although some might attempt to draw a parallel between the role of the dog wardens in the UK and the hokensho dog catchers of Japan, the attitudes are very different. The above statistics show that every effort is made to reunite dogs with their owners and failing that, to rehome them rather than dispose of them like garbage. The fact too that the local authorities, the police and the animal welfare societies co-operate in this work is impressive. Irresponsible dog ownership exists in both countries. However this problem should be tackled through education on proper care and control together with penalties for owners who refuse to obey this code of conduct rather than making the dog pay the ultimate price — death.