

STRAY AND UNWANTED DOGS

Towards the end of July this year came an official announcement from the Secretary of State for the Environment that must have made most members of the Society gasp in sheer disbelief: the Government intends to do away completely with the dog licensing system. Full stop. Nothing is to be done either to update or replace it.

THIS IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH! STRONG DOG-CONTROL LEGISLATION IS DESPERATELY NEEDED

That the present system of licensing is totally unsatisfactory cannot be denied. Of the 6 million dogs in Britain, less than one half are licensed as the law requires. The majority remain unlicensed simply because this particular law is so widely disregarded, by the authorities and the public alike. As a dog licence costs a mere 37p, it is seen as a trifling matter. The police have neither the time nor the inclination to seek out offending owners. At the same time, however, the task of ensuring that dogs are licensed has not been delegated to anybody else.

The pointlessness of the system as it stands is underlined by the well-known fact that the cost to the Government of collecting such licence fees as are paid is far greater than the resulting revenue.

The abolition of dog licences may very conveniently make these anomalies, clearly a source of some embarrassment to the Government, 'go away'. It will not, however, do anything at all towards solving the problems posed by the country's stray and unwanted dogs. In fact, to the RSPCA and other concerned bodies, it seems inevitable that these problems, already desperate, will be greatly aggravated.

THE SIZE OF THE PROBLEM

Because it is so easy to obtain a dog from any pet shop, breeder or dealer, a great number of dogs are acquired casually, the purchasers having little or no knowledge of, nor regard for, the responsibilities that come with pet ownership. More than 200,000 of these dogs become strays each year, while at least a further 200,000 dogs turn out to be unwanted — and are brought to the RSPCA, other animal welfare organisations, breed rescue societies and the veterinary profession. Then there are the unwanted animals, in unknown numbers, cruelly and illegally killed by callous owners and surreptitiously disposed of: litters of puppies buried on wasteland... thrown into rivers in sacks...

STRAY DOGS

Every year about a quarter of a million stray dogs are officially registered at police stations throughout the country. Some have become stray through genuine oversight, but the majority are the victims of habitual neglect on the part of their owners. They are dogs left to their own devices and allowed to roam at will, possibly for days on end.

A problem that won't just 'go away'

The Dangers

1) Stray dogs are the cause of numerous accidents on the roads, resulting not only in their own injury or death but sometimes also in human injuries and fatalities.

2) In rural areas, stray dogs attack, maim and cause the deaths of thousands of sheep and other livestock each year.

In urban areas, the dogs may form packs. Through hunger they may become unpredictable and savage, and they have been known to attack vulnerable humans such as children and the elderly. There may also be attacks on pets kept outside.

3) Many stray dogs have been neglected, suffer from malnutrition and are emaciated. Few of them have been vaccinated and they are therefore not only vulnerable to infection themselves but also liable to contribute to the spread in the canine population of serious diseases such as distemper and parvovirus.

4) The mating instinct of male strays naturally leads them to pester bitches in season, whether other strays or the inadequately guarded pets of otherwise blameless owners. The inevitable outcome is unplanned pregnancies and a further increase in the numbers of unwanted dogs.

5) Further considerations are the amount of physical damage done to property — and the general public nuisance which is caused, including considerable hazard to hygiene and health. Garden fences are broken, garbage bags are opened and the contents strewn around. Everywhere, streets, parks, sports pitches and children's playgrounds are fouled with faeces.

The RSPCA is adamant that no dog should be allowed outside the owner's home or properly fenced garden unless it is on a lead or under someone's direct control. *Only sensible — and enforceable — dog-control legislation is ever likely to persuade the more irresponsible owners that their dogs must never be allowed to stray.*

UNWANTED DOGS

Making up a proportion of the stray dog population there are of course a number of animals which have not actually 'strayed' from their owners. They are pets which have for one reason or another become unwanted and have in fact been deliberately and callously turned out into the streets, or dumped in the countryside far from home.

But over and above these abandoned animals there are the unwanted dogs which in their thousands and thousands are handed over by their owners into the Society's care every year. Many are pets which, having been acquired casually by those owners, are just as casually rejected. The cost and effort of keeping and feeding them has turned out to be more than expected... the owners had not had the forethought to realise that there might be

sizeable veterinary fees to find... The dog has developed 'bad habits' or become too destructive... Large numbers of dogs are brought to the RSPCA at holiday times because their owners, without the least regard or concern for the animals' future, will not pay the cost of boarding their pets in kennels.

The sad truth is that a great number of these unwanted animals (many young and perfectly healthy) will have to be humanely destroyed. It is impossible to find a new home for each one. Forever building vaster and yet vaster kennels to accommodate them is out of the question — and, of course, limitless funds to cover food and care for the rest of their lives simply do not exist. The RSPCA greatly deplores the necessity of this forced course of action, which runs contrary to its avowed aims of preserving and protecting the quality of animals' lives. It is also grossly unfair to the caring and dedicated RSPCA staff obliged to carry out the repugnant task.

IS THERE AN ANSWER?

YES. The RSPCA is optimistic that, given that the Government takes appropriate legislative measures, the serious situation can be retrieved. For over a decade the Society, joining forces with other concerned organisations and public bodies, has analysed the problem in depth.

In 1974, representatives of the RSPCA, the British Veterinary Association, the Kennel Club, the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals, the National Canine Defence League, the National Dog Rescue Co-ordinating Committee, the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association and the Association of Metropolitan Authorities participated in a symposium devoted specifically to this topic, organised by the British Small Animals Veterinary Association. As a result of the meeting, and with the RSPCA as a founder member, the Joint Advisory Committee on Pets in Society (JACOPIS) was formed, which in 1985 published a comprehensive report.

The JACOPIS report contained a number of clearly-stated proposals to help solve the stray dog problem. With a few subsequent amendments, they stand today, forming the basis of RSPCA policy in this desperately important area. They are straightforward, positive, considered proposals expressing the consensus of a wide range of concerned authorities.

These proposals cannot and must not be lightly dismissed.

RSPCA PROPOSALS

1) Dog Wardens

A Dog Warden service should be set up on a national basis. The RSPCA believes that the case for such a service, to be paid for by means of an increased dog licence