

Letting Sleeping Dogs Lie

With any luck by the time you read this, our incarceration in the prefab will have come to an end. About time too. The dogs were on our side in meting out a warmish winter otherwise we might have frozen to death in that insulation-less plywood box. I say warmish despite some bitter days when the sink resembled an ice-floe each morning, the tap having had to be kept running all night and when the only warm spot was the inside of the refrigerator. Miraculously too it's the first winter I haven't gone down with a cold, although everyone around seemed to be dropping like ninepins with some particularly nasty bug. Not much appeal for viruses in a frozen prefab, they much prefer a centrally heated office with people sneezing all over one another.

I owe a great deal for my survival this winter to doggie warmth. This is a huge untapped energy source which people largely ignore. Some people favour cats but others actually find the idea of sleeping with a dog (or dogs) or any animal abhorrent. Maybe they have an image of dogs as smelly and flea-ridden. If your dog is that way something is wrong. My dogs groom themselves meticulously like cats first thing after waking up in the morning, or if they've been out on a muddy walk. They only get bathed by me in a dire situation, such as when they've come upon a lovely rotting pile of manure in a field and had an inexplicable urge to roll in it (something to do with camouflaging their natural smell from enemy dogs or what, I don't know). No, except in this case their only smells are pleasant ones. There's a bit of competition (among 5 dogs) for the best place in bed so I've limited the number to three, otherwise I'd be cooked and squashed out of existence. Sem, the white Kishu, doesn't put a foot on the bed (except when I'm not there) but sleeps on one side. Too

Wee, the smallest, bolts her supper and makes a beeline for bed. She gets quite narked when dislodged from her prime central spot but grudgingly settles on my feet. But Junket is my substitute electric blanket. She tunnels inside and lies obligingly alongside whichever part one wants warmed. When I found her as a little stray pup she was living in a pipe under a main road so maybe she feels safe in dark confined places. How she breathes under mounds of futon is a mystery.

“What about all their fleas?” I hear you cry. All dogs get fleas and mine are no exception. Fleas, however, emerge as the weather gets warmer and they much prefer burrowing through warm, doggy hair than facing the rigours of exposed human flesh. It’s not the dogs’ fault they have fleas. It’s the fault of their human owners who don’t clean their environment properly. Carpets, sofas and cushions harbour fleas and of course dog beds, if they are not regularly cleaned and sired. So one way to counteract fleas is to keep everything spotless. If this is too much effort and your animal is scratching itself into a frenzy, how to cope?

I’m dead against flea powders and sprays. These are lethal insecticides which, if you read the instructions on the outside, warn of the dangers of contact with your skin – what about the animals? With cats they are especially dangerous and just a tiny dusting can send a cat (particularly kittens) into convulsions, sometimes resulting in death. Some cats are more sensitive than others but it’s not worth losing your pet to test it. Insecticide-laced shampoos can be equally lethal. If I use any shampoo it’s baby shampoo (companies mindful of lawsuits test things for human babies very thoroughly before marketing them). What about flea collars? I confess I sometimes use one if a dog is driven mad by fleas but I’m not happy about them. Their effect is fairly short-lived anyway.

If one has a short-haired dog, a systematic run-through with a fine-toothed flea comb is the best. Squash the fleas as they appear or dunk them in a bowl of water. Other non chemical flea deterrents include

garlic, citrus oil, nicotine and derris root powder. Feeding a dog garlic is good in other ways too for a dog's health. It eliminates worms as well as fleas. Citrus oil can be obtained by pulverising orange or lemon skin, diluting it (concentrated oil burns) and wiping it over the dog's body. Tobacco can be soaked and used in the same way. I don't know how derris powder is used but I would think in a similarly diluted form. One anti-flea food supplement now on the market is "Pet Con", produce in Spokane, USA by Apollo Products; it contains yeast, garlic powder and soya bean oil as well as various vitamins and minerals. Added to food daily it's supposed to keep fleas at bay.

The Japanese have a saying, "*Dani-no you-na hito*" – he's like a tick or, as we say "he's a leech." Our move into the mountains has meant more ticks, even in mid-winter. Dogs don't seem unduly bothered by them but as they carry a whole armoury of diseases they should be got rid of. Catching them when they are the size of a pin-head needs a good eye, usually one notices them when they've swollen to revolting proportions on the blood they've been sucking. It becomes second nature to run a hand over one's dog, especially head and neck, to check for ticks. They are quite easy to pick off but make sure you get the whole tick including the head. If this is left in the skin, it can cause infection. Squashing them is a messy process but make sure they're obliterated some way. Like fleas, ticks very rarely swap their allegiance from dogs to humans, it's just that people are squeamish about the thought that they might. You run far more risk boarding a germ-infested commuter train than sleeping with your dog.



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