



ASPCA AnimalLessons™

Teacher Newsletter of The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Pet Population: Behind the Numbers

Puppies and kittens are undeniably cute. Their small round bodies and little faces bring smiles to just about everyone. Psychological research suggests that this magnetism is no accident. We are "hard wired" to like babies, both the human and non-human kind. Advertisers take advantage of our attraction to baby animals to sell everything from shoes to computers. Regrettably, this natural appeal has tragic consequences, contributing to the death of millions of dogs and cats each year.

The tremendous affection that Americans have for puppies and kittens helps fuel the acquisition of pets. Various estimates put the number of pet dogs at about 56-58 million and the number of pet cats around 63-65 million. Millions of people acquire companion animals each year, and most of these animals and people form long lasting, loving bonds that enhance the lives of people and pets. Unfortunately, far too many pets leave their homes each year, relinquished to animal shelters, given away to friends, relatives, neighbors and strangers, or simply set free as strays. Some of these are puppies and kittens that are the result of accidental or unplanned breeding, and others are young adults that were acquired during their "young and cute" stage then discarded as the novelty and attraction waned. A number of these animals will be rehomed with new families where they will live out their lives as valued companions. Others will die of sickness and injury as strays. Still others may end up in animal shelters where they have a chance at new life or where the final kind act they experience may be a gentle hand ending their life. Presently there are no national reporting agencies for animal shelters though projections would put the numbers in the range of 5-8 million dogs and cats entering shelters annually and the number euthanized estimated at 3-6 million.

Several factors, both biological and social, combine to cause the reality of homeless pets and the conse-

quences they face. As domesticated species, dogs and cats differ from their wild ancestors in several key characteristics. First and foremost, they have been selected to socialize with people. In addition, like other domestic animals, they were bred to have higher reproductive rates. Dogs and cats become sexually mature at an earlier age than their wild counterparts, are able to mate more often and typically have larger litters of young. Cats for example can reproduce as young as 5-6 months of age, are capable of breeding twice per year and may average 6 young per litter. As a result a single pair of cats can give rise to a population as high as 2,048 in two and half years, assuming litters are equally divided between male and female kittens. A pair of African wildcats, the likely ancestor of the domestic cat, would produce a population of about 18 in the same time period given their



later age for sexual maturity, breeding frequency of once a year and smaller litter size of about 4 kittens. Similar differences would be seen between the reproduction of dogs and their ancestor, the wolf. While these numbers are projections, it does point out the vast difference in reproductive potential between wild animals and domestic animals as a result of the domestication process. It also argues strongly in favor of intervention. Humans created this high level of reproductive potential and it is therefore incumbent upon us to provide some means of population control for our companion animals.

Neutering or gonadectomy is the general term for rendering an individual, male or female, incapable of sexual reproduction. Males are castrated and females are spayed. Castration is the removal of the male's testicles. Spaying is the removal of a female's ovaries and uterus. However, because the term castration can be discomfoting to some, it is more common to refer to males being neutered hence the phrase "spay/neuter". Neutering of companion animals is currently a surgical procedure performed by licensed veterinarians, but the neutering of animals probably dates to the very earliest stages of animal domestication. Male livestock were frequently castrated to control their behavior. By the beginning of the 20th century surgical sterilization of companion animals was practiced to control both breeding and behavior. In the early 1900s, female dogs were spayed between 3-6 months of age and males were castrated before 2 months old. By the middle of the century, it was more common to neuter dogs and cats after they reached sexual maturity or 6 months of age. Develop-

ments in anesthesia and surgical techniques over the past 15 years have made early age spay/neuter safe and effective.

In addition to preventing unwanted litters of dogs and cats, neutering also provides behavioral and medical benefits. Neutered male dogs and cats are less likely to have aggression problems, roam from home and mark their territories with urine. They are also protected against cancer of the testes and certain diseases of the prostate gland. The chances of developing ovarian and uterine cancers is eliminated by spaying females and the incidence of breast cancer is also greatly reduced.

Until the 1960s, neutering of dogs and cats to control unwanted behaviors and breeding was performed primarily for the convenience of pet owners. By the mid-1960s, however, greater attention to the widespread euthanasia of homeless and unwanted dogs and cats prompted many animal shelters to begin requiring the neutering of dogs and cats when they were adopted. Animal welfare groups also began extensive education programs for the general public to encourage the neutering of pets and help reduce the numbers of unwanted companion animals.

These efforts have helped to lower the number of dogs and cats entering animal shelters in quite a few American cities. For example, in the 1920s ASPCA shelters in New York City took in nearly 300 thousand dogs and cats each year. By the mid-1990s that number was down to 50-60 thousand animals. Continued education and intervention will be needed to encourage the neutering of companion animals and the careful decision-making by families of the lifetime commitment required for the care of a companion animal. Additional resources to help pet owners who wish to keep their pets, but are having trouble dealing with a variety of pet behavior problems or personal crises will also be needed. Information technology is already being used to help pets. The Internet provides a wide range of information on pets, including health care and behavior. It is also possible to look for just the right dog or cat to join your family by visiting on-line "cyber-shelters" where dogs, cats and other animals available for adoption at animal shelters and rescue groups across the country are listed.

The domestication of dogs and cats has provided humans with great benefits over the past centuries. They have entered our families and homes and help to enrich our lives as we enrich theirs. Responsible education and action are needed to ensure that our animal companions do not become victims of too much of a good thing.

