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PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY



PACCOM054130

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

The dangers of over-population of domestic animals
for the health and hygiene of man and
means of limiting such dangers

Draft Report

presented by Mr. Bizet, Rapporteur

I. DRAFT RECOMMENDATION

The Assembly,

1. Aware that overpopulation of domestic animals, particularly dogs and cats, constitutes a problem in several member countries, contributing, for example, to the pollution of the urban environment;
2. Concerned particularly at the health risk for human beings resulting from the existence of a large number of stray animals, which can act as carriers for dangerous infectious diseases including rabies;

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3. Recalling the continuous activity of the Council of Europe in favour of humane treatment of domesticated animals, and particularly the drawing up of a European Convention for the Protection of Animals during International Transport (1968) and for the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes (1976);
4. Conscious of the need to attack the human ignorance which is the root cause of animal overpopulation, through school education and information campaigns, in the mass media, stressing the needs of animals and also the risks of disease;
5. Recommends that the Committee of Ministers instruct the appropriate intergovernmental expert committee to draw up a European Convention which should aim, in particular,
 - (i) to control the trade in animals
 - imposing strict standards of hygiene and welfare for animal rearing and sale;
 - by imposing a ban on the import of exotic animals ill-suited to European climatic conditions;
 - by encouraging the trade to organise itself into national or international associations, with a view to drawing up an enforceable code of conduct;
 - (ii) to control animal populations
 - by making registration and marking of dogs compulsory and imposing a special tax on all dog-owners living in built-up areas, exempting pensioners, the blind and watchdogs;
 - by introducing free or subsidised sterilisation of dogs and cats;
 - by ensuring that when it is necessary for reasons of public health and hygiene to destroy stray animals, that the operation is carried out by qualified personnel using humane and up-to-date scientific methods.

II. EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

Scope of the report

1. It was clearly necessary at the outset to delimit the expression "certain animal species" contained in the original motion (Doc. 3679) referred to the Committee. This was to some extent facilitated by application of the traditional division of tasks between the Committee on Agriculture and the Committee on Regional Planning and Local Authorities (responsible for the environment), which leaves problems of wild animals to the latter, while making the former responsible for domesticated animals. Several members of the Committee considered that a separate report would be necessary for such species as pigeons and seagulls, whose control is becoming a matter of some urgency, particularly in the urban context. Where the rural environment is concerned, species such as deer have become a problem in some regions, but the whole complex of hunting laws would need to be examined in this connection.

2. It is, therefore, with our most common domestic animals, dogs and cats, that this report is primarily concerned, but I have also touched upon the relatively new problem raised by the fashion in several of our member countries for exotic pets. I should like to express my gratitude at the outset to Sir Frederic Bennett, whose task of Rapporteur I inherited ~~when he left~~ the Committee. He did much useful groundwork on this report, and the experience of the United Kingdom, notoriously a country of animal-lovers, is particularly relevant in view of the recent (1976) and wide-ranging recommendation of the Working Party on Dogs set up by the Department of the Environment.

Introduction

3. The practice of keeping domestic pets is certainly not one that deserves to be penalised, though it carries its own responsibilities. Pets provide companionship, particularly precious to the old and those living alone. They provide enjoyment while being of great educational value in family life, and in modern urban life this satisfies a psychological need for a link with the animal world and an earlier rural existence. Dogs also give security in an age where criminality and vandalism are widespread.

4. Modern society, however, with more and more built-up areas, requires more and more regulations for its own comportment. Animals and in particular pets have started creating problems in towns and cities where either their overpopulation or their tendency to stray and the accompanying nuisances have become intolerable from the hygienic just as much as from the human point of view. The result is that in virtually all the member states of the Council of Europe the populations of certain animal species are being radically reduced if not decimated, either systematically or sporadically. These control measures are carried out for various reasons. First of all, animal species are being reduced in numbers because of overpopulation with the ensuing dangers to health and adverse effects on the environment.

5. Secondly, populations are being cut down in numbers for the purpose of direct control of epidemics or pest control. However, in many instances the animals are not killed in a humane manner, ie without causing them pain or suffering; indeed, the ways in which many of them are killed are far from being acceptable. Taking into account the need to safeguard public health combined with the need to observe fundamental biological principles in dealing with living creatures, makes it necessary to harmonise and in particular humanise the means of controlling overpopulations of animals within Council of Europe member states.

6. I shall be dealing below with these problems in three chapters, concerning respectively (1) overpopulation (including the new phenomenon of exotic pets); (2) pollution and disease and (3) humane control.

I. OVERPOPULATION

a) the extent of the problem

i) Dogs

7. The principal manifestation of overpopulation and the most immediately pressing problem is the number of stray animals on the streets of our cities (although the very high absolute numbers of pets, with or without owners, also causes widespread pollution, with its attendant risk of disease (a subject dealt with in Chapter II below).

"The increasing mobility of people, the rapidly rising expense of keeping dogs, the fact that houses are now often left empty all day together with a tendency to disown lovable puppies once they have become somewhat unmanageable dogs are some of the factors that are causing the current rapid rise in the stray dog population."(1)

8. France is the country with the highest number of dogs in Europe with approximately 7 million, of which approximately 200,000 are strays. The dog population is expected to rise to 15 million by the year 2000. For the United Kingdom the above-mentioned report of the Working Party on Dogs(2) estimates a population of 6 million of which "more than 400,000 are strays". In the Federal Republic of Germany 80,000 dogs are abandoned each holiday season, while in The Netherlands 4-6000 dogs end up in various pounds. (This figure therefore excludes those killed on the roads, wild strays etc.). In Austria, out of a total of 7000 dogs in the capital, Vienna, 3000 are picked up by the Animal Protection Society, for the most part abandoned during the holiday season. This problem is, however, virtually non-existent in Luxembourg, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

ii) Cats

9. For cats, too, the problem of overpopulation exists in most countries. In the Federal Republic of Germany 40-50,000 cats are taken into pounds every year, while the figure for strays in France is impossible to evaluate. In Norway, where stray dogs are very rare, stray cats are increasing in number.

iii) Exotic pets

10. The fashion for exotic pets is causing concern in several member countries, and this for a number of reasons :

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(1) Living without cruelty (A British Labour Party policy background paper) London, July 1978.

(2) HMSO, 1976.

- i) a multi-million pound international trade, involving considerable suffering and cruelty to the animals concerned has developed. A British Labour Party policy background paper(1) quotes the example of the 250,000 tortoises imported annually into the United Kingdom of which "it is estimated that 90 per cent are dead within the first year of their arrival, unable to cope with our climatic conditions";
- ii) animals thus imported (many of which are much rarer than tortoises) "can be a serious risk to the people who own them and to the country to which they are imported. Many animals captured in the wild carry diseases which can be transmitted to humans and which can often be fatal. Pets that escape into the wild can be a serious threat to nature flora and fauna".

It will readily be admitted that in Council of Europe member countries even a small number of tropical snakes, leopards, crocodiles and other exotic beasts could be said to constitute "overpopulation".

b) Remedies

11. It will be seen from the above that it is human ignorance, carelessness and greed which are the root causes of overpopulation. Leaving aside the problems of pollution and disease (treated in the next chapter) it follows that the two most important aims should be (i) to deter those unsuitable for dog ownership, primarily, through education including information campaigns in the mass media (but also backed up by appropriate legislation) and strict regulation of trade in animals to discourage abuses.

i) Education

12. In school education, instruction on the needs of animals, and especially household pets, but also on the risk of disease, should not be neglected. It goes without saying that those most in need of such education are those who have not been lucky enough to have been brought up in a home with pets. Today, television is equally or more important than school as a vehicle for education, and excellent programmes, often instigated by national Animal Protection Societies, have been shown in a number of our member countries. Awareness of the needs of animals, inculcated early in life should deter the shameful practice, unfortunately large-scale today, as we have seen above, of abandoning pets when the family depart on holiday.

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(1) Living without cruelty, op.cit.

ii) Control of commerce

13. Legislation in this field is essential. It exists or is in preparation in some member countries including the United Kingdom and The Netherlands. The Vice-Chairman of the Committee, Mr. Hardy was himself partly responsible for the initiatives which led to the U.K. legislation which became the Endangered Species (Import and Export) Act of 1976, requiring that licences be obtained for the import and export of certain species.

14. According to certain statistics 30 per cent of dogs bought in France in non-specialised shops die within the first year after their sale, although this sad statistic cannot necessarily be blamed on the trade. There would, however, appear to be a need for a code of conduct for pet-shops, which will most appropriately be drawn up and enforced by national (or better international) associations of pet-shop owners.

15. The report of the U.K. Working Party on Dogs has drawn attention to the fact that the provisions of the 1973 Breeding of Dogs Act, (designed to enable the authorities to check on conditions in which dogs are being bred by their owners,) are being avoided by taking pregnant bitches to "puppy farms" who will rear the litter and sell it.

16. The recent rapid growth in the trade in exotic pets often unsuited to our climate is mainly characterised by the infliction of great cruelty on animals (whether 'endangered species' or not), for commercial profit and would justify urgent measures to secure an international ban, as proposed by the U.K. Labour Party in its above-quoted policy paper "Living without cruelty".

iii) Other measures

17. Other measures particularly favoured by the Committee, both applying particularly to dogs, were legislation on registration, marking and taxation (licensing) would seem the first priority. The obligation exists in a number of countries (not including France) but is only partially complied with. In Sweden for example it is estimated that the dog population is about 720,000, although only 440,000 are registered. Registration and marking would be expected to act as a deterrent to abandoning dogs, whose owners could face well-deserved accusation of cruelty if they failed to report the "loss". Lack of registration means that it is almost impossible to make an even approximate count.

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18. Taxation provoked more discussion. Overpopulation would not seem to be a greater problem in those countries which do not have it (like France) than in those countries which do (like the United Kingdom), although it is one of the principal recommendations of the Working Party on Dogs that the present licence fee, unchanged since 1878, should be increased fifteen-fold). The Committee finally favoured the introducing of taxation on condition that it should not discriminate against low-earning families and old people (and would naturally not apply to blind dogs and working dogs). Urban "infrastructures" (see "pollution" below) clearly require an important injection of additional finance, and it seemed unreasonable to dispense dog-owners from making a contribution, where car-owners, for example, are not. It would also seem reasonable to charge urban dog-owners a higher fee than country dog-owners. In the capital of Iceland, Reykjavik, dogs are banned altogether.

II. POLLUTION AND DISEASE

a) Pollution

19. It is estimated that between four and six tons of animal excrement are deposited daily in the streets of Paris, 8% of whose municipal budget is devoted to street cleaning. It should also be said, to give a sense of proportion, that cars are far worse polluters, as were horses in the days before the invention of the internal combustion engine.

20. It would however seem reasonable to face dog-owners with their responsibilities by holding them responsible for fouling public footpaths. The often heavy fines for which owners are liable in many countries do not seem to be enforced strictly enough to act as a deterrent.

21. According to the London Times diarist, Michael Leapman(1), New York, generally held up as the epitome of the maladministered laissez-faire city, is ahead of European cities in this respect. Dog-owners are liable to fines of \$100, and a new law requiring them to clean up, and to carry special equipment for the purpose, seem to have had considerable effect and, more important, to have changed the climate of opinion: "It is no longer respectable to admit to letting your dog do what he pleases where he pleases."

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(1) The Times, 20 November 1978

22. Alternatively the municipal authorities can improve facilities, for example "canine toilets" (or "vespachiennes") which have been introduced experimentally in some towns in France and elsewhere. Such "infrastructures", as well as street cleaning cost money, and this could be raised through introducing adequate (though not punitive) license fees. One of the principal recommendations of the U.K. Working Party on Dogs was for the increased fees to finance the creation of specialised personnel ("dog wardens") to advise and help the public in all matters relating to dogs, and also be empowered to ask for the name and address of any owner of a dog which was causing any offence.

b) Disease

23. The principal, though not the only, concern is with rabies since both dogs and cats are carriers which can transmit the disease to man. This naturally led to discussion of the draconian British measures, principally the imposition of a 6-month period of quarantine for importing animals, combined with £400 fines for attempts to circumvent these laws by smuggling. Although a British colleague described his compatriots' attitude as "slightly hysterical", it must be said that continental Europeans do not by any means regard the seemingly irreversible spread of rabies with complacent resignation. Indeed the Assembly should not hesitate to express support for the British measures, which have been maintained for many years and have been tightened recently to ensure internal security and good practice. Their aim would seem amply to justify the inconveniencing of a few individuals.

24. A valuable service could be performed by furnishing the public, too often misled by sensational newspaper articles, with scientific but readily comprehensible information on diseases which they might acquire from their pets(1), and on the measures that are necessary to keep their pets and themselves healthy. Groundless fears could for example be allayed if the public were, for example, informed of the possibility of vaccinating dogs and cats against rabies. Indeed such vaccination should not only be possible but compulsory in the growing area of the European mainland where disease is endemic.

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(1) See Appendix I.

III. HUMANE CONTROL

a) Sterilisation

25. On humanitarian grounds, sterilisation is much to be preferred to destroying animals, as a means of controlling populations. Given the scale of the problem however this presupposes an adequate number of veterinary clinics where the operation can be carried out at low cost or free of charge.

26. Until recently it could be said of some countries that the climate of public opinion was opposed to large scale sterilisation, but this would appear to be less and less true. In the Netherlands, for example, the national Animal Protection Society launched a campaign in favour of sterilisation of dogs and cats, and members of the Committee learned when meeting in that country that 10,000 cats had been sterilised in Rotterdam alone over the past four years.

b) Destroying

27. It is not contested by the World Federation for the Protection of Animals that in today's conditions of such overpopulation, and particularly in view of the large number of strays with their potential for carrying disease, that it is still necessary to destroy a considerable number of animals.

28. It is, however, essential to insist that this is carried out in accordance with humane principles, backed up by up-to-date scientific knowledge, by qualified persons: veterinary surgeons, huntsmen, policemen.

29. The following killing methods are not acceptable and should be prohibited: beating to death, strangulation, drowning, hanging, suffocation of animals and also electrocution. The use of poison or gas for destroying animals should likewise be prohibited. Acceptable killing methods will have to be specified; for example, pets should be put down with injections of barbiturates or narcotics only. In exceptional instances a shot in the right place could also be accepted. Here again up-to-date knowledge must be applied in each instance.

IV. CONCLUSION

30. In the past the Council of Europe has distinguished itself by drawing up international conventions guaranteeing the humane treatment of animals. In particular, the European Convention for the Protection of Animals during International Transport (1968) and the European Convention for the Protection of Animals kept for farming purposes (1976) have entered into force.

31. The Assembly, which took the initiative on these matters, should once again recommend that the Committee of Ministers instruct the appropriate intergovernmental Committee to draw up a new convention inspired by the principles I have outlined above and stressing the need to attack the root causes of animal overpopulation through education and information programmes.

A P P E N D I X I

DOGS AND CATS

are the carriers of many Zoonoses, that is, diseases and infections which are naturally transmitted from vertebrates to man and vice versa.

Some of the major zoonoses are the following :
(in decreasing order of importance)

- RABIES (neurotropic virus), dog and cat.
- TUBERCULOSIS dog (mycobacterium tuberculosis)
cat (mycobacterium bovis)

The problem of tuberculosis is serious, as veterinary surgeons (in France) are not allowed to treat affected animals.

- TOXOPLASMOSIS dog-cat (toxoplasma-gandii)

The means of direct animal-man transmission has not yet been clearly demonstrated but certainly exists.

- TETANUS dog-cat (clostridium tetani or Nicolaier's bacillus).
- HYDATIDOSIS dog (presence of sheep necessary).

In addition to the above major zoonoses, the following may also be mentioned:

- RICKETTSIOSES, diseases caused by different types of Rickettsii, including:
R. conori ==> Olmer's disease, prevalent along the Mediterranean coast.
- LYMPHOCYTIC CHORIOMENINGITIS: ARN virus.
- LEPTOSPIROSIS L. ictero-hemorrhagiae
L. canicola
mainly dogs, occasionally cats.
- PSEUDO-TUBERCULOSIS Malattez and Vigual bacilli
especially cats.

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- CONTAGIOUS NASAL-TONSILLITIS, dog
- TULAREMIA rather rare
mainly dogs
Francisella tularensis
- CAT CLAW DISEASE Cat
Virus.
- RINGWORM mainly cats
highly contagious microsporia
among dogs: far rarer and less contagious.