

# **Abandoned animals in Australia - Not just dumped doggies and cast away kittens**

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Abandonment of animals in the care of humans is a world-wide phenomenon. The World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) regards the failure of proper management of dogs and cats to be the major animal welfare issue which involves all countries of the world.

Australia is a huge island continent with a climate that differs from tropical in the north to temperate in the south. This permits animals to be kept outdoors year round and gives rise to the entrenched belief that cats, horses, sheep, cattle, goats et al and even captive bred wildlife can fend for themselves by living off the land. Apart from contributing in the past to Australia's large feral animal populations, abandoned horses and farm animals are difficult to deal with as capture and rendering aid must be done in the field with often few physical facilities, such as yards and loading race.

The majority of Australians live in large coastal cities or major provincial towns and it is in these urban areas and their environs that companion animal abandonment (including horses) is at its worst.

It is a criminal offence in all Australian States and Territories to abandon an animal of a species usually kept in a state of confinement or for a domestic purpose. Abandonment of an animal is usually a combination of an attitude where animal ownership is seen as short-term, rather than for the life of an animal, and changes to the owner's life circumstances (see Tables 1 and 2 below for examples).

Dumping is often the result of unwanted litters due to lack of desexing, especially cats, or impulse buying of animals.

Surrendering of an animal is distinguished from abandonment or dumping because the owner of an animal which is no longer wanted takes the animal to an animal shelter or municipal pound and legally surrenders all further claim to ownership of the animal.

For the purposes of this paper, the term “abandonment” will be used to cover all the previous definitions. There are many reasons for abandonment and these reasons vary with the species and personal circumstances and across state boundaries.

Australians rank domestic animals in hierarchical fashion depending on their regard for the particular species. Dogs are at the top of the list with horses a close second. The majority of Australian males claim to detest cats, so the position of cats on the scale is heavily influenced by that factor. Livestock is lead by cattle with sheep second last followed by poultry. It is therefore no surprise that dogs are the animals most often reported to authorities as abandoned. Uncared for horses are noticed frequently in peri-urban areas, but usually go unreported until their condition becomes dire. Cats are assumed to fend for themselves and are only reported if they become a local nuisance. Birds in cages and all classes of poultry are regularly abandoned but because of lack of human empathy go unreported. Abandoned sheep, goats and cattle go largely unnoticed because they are normally held on isolated properties of poor quality out of view of neighbouring farming families.

The vast majority of cases of abandonment involve a single animal, particularly companion animals. In the case of livestock or wildlife, small groups are usually abandoned. However, in the case of animal hoarding great numbers of animals are abandoned, often involving over one hundred animals of mixed type. The discovery of hoarders is usually by accident, either the owner is struck down with a medical emergency, or municipal or amenity supply inspectors call unexpectedly at the property, discover what is going on and report it.

The following are common reasons for animals being surrendered to the RSPCA:

*Companion Animals – Table 1*

Owner	Economics	Behaviour
Moving house	No longer afford	Destructive
Rental problem	Needs surgery	Barking
Travelling	Chronic disease management	Digging
Yard too small		Fence jumping
Relationship split		Escapes

No time		Anxious animal fearful animal
Impulse buy		Dislikes children
Unwanted gift		Dislikes men
Unwanted litter		Dislikes women
Too many cats		Inappropriate toileting
Too many dogs		Attacking/killing livestock
Owner health		Killing wildlife

In 2007 in the Queensland and Victorian large shelters where statistics are kept, on average 72% of surrendered companion animals was for owner reasons, 12% for economic reasons and 15% for behavioural reasons. It is not unreasonable to suggest that these same statistics drive the abandoned companion animal figures.

*Other Non-Companion Animals – Table 2*

Owner	Economics
Romance of hobby farming not realized	Failed to understand costs involved
Lost interest in animal/animals	No longer afford
Husbandry needs too onerous	
No time	
Relationship split	
Substance abuse	
Owner health	

Recently, research has been performed on data from three Victorian shelters by a team from Monash University (Marston et al 2004 and 2006). They investigated the reasons for abandonment or surrender of dogs in one study (Marston et al 2004) and cats in another study (Marston et al 2006). The main reasons they found for abandonment of dogs were owner-related factors (31.92% of total relinquishments) and behavioural problems (in 11% of cases). For cats the main reasons found for abandonment were that there were “too many cats” and a “new child in the family” (Fawcett, 2008).

It is impossible to quote the numbers of animals abandoned each year unless they actually enter an animal shelter or a municipal pound. Even companion animal

numbers are often unreliable as there is no uniform recording of the reasons for animals entering pounds or shelters. In 2006-2007 the national RSPCA shelter network took into care 144,421 animals of which 46.9% were dogs, 40.5% cats and 12.6% other animals. Given the number of municipal pounds and animal shelters outside of the RSPCA network a figure of 500,000 animals being taken into care per annum in Australia is not unreasonable. That a human population of only 21 million generates this number of unwanted animals per annum, plus those that go unrecorded because they die of disease or accident before being impounded is simply shameful.

Attempts have been made to reduce the number of animals abandoned in Australia. These include legislation by state and local government and actions by animal welfare organisations. For example in Victoria the following measures have been introduced: compulsory registration of both cats and dogs at three months of age; compulsory microchipping of pets when registered for the first time; differential registration fees for those animals that are desexed, or microchipped or been trained at an accredited training school; and the compulsory requirement for all local governments to have a three-year domestic animal management plan. As part of this plan some local governments in Victoria are introducing mandatory desexing for all companion animals kept as pets. Campaigns by welfare organisations include the National Desexing Network which is urging the desexing of dogs and cats and the Victorian Cat Crisis Coalition is focussing on the desexing of cats.

### **Development of animal welfare law regarding abandonment in Australia**

The antecedent of the modern Animal Welfare Acts in the Australian States and Territories was borrowed from that of the United Kingdom in the mid- nineteenth century. By the end of that century abandoning an animal, as defined, became a criminal offence. Also borrowed from the end of the nineteenth century was the antecedent of the modern Dog Acts or Companion Animal Acts.

At first the Dog Acts were simple pieces of legislation which regulated the management of dog ownership in the community but the various clauses were not based on a consideration of what was in the best interest of the welfare of the dog. By the mid-1970s there was general community disquiet about the poor quality of the legislation and its largely defective enforcement by municipal authorities. In several States the process to redraft the Dog Act into a Companion Animal Act which would regulate the acquisition, ownership and disposal of dogs, and in some cases cats, based on animal welfare and practical principles, was begun.

Most of the modern Acts have now been in place 15 years. They have been subject to amendment in the light of experience, but only to make enforcement easier.

Despite these actions, in the case of dogs the number of animals entering shelters and pounds has largely plateaued, but all efforts to reduce numbers further have not been successful. In the case of cats little has been achieved. There is an enormous reluctance for municipal Local laws officers to enforce the law regarding cats despite regular training programs organised by State government. There is also the massive community problem where entire cats are regularly fed without the feeder taking responsibility for the cat e.g. desexing, vaccination and general care, thus keeping them in first class reproductive health with constant production of kittens due to Australia's climatic conditions. Currently, three out of every four unowned kittens delivered to a shelter or pound are euthanased as they cannot be adopted out.

Clearly changes need to be made to reduce the number of animals abandoned and the changes need to involve the whole community: government, education sector and animal welfare organisations.

## **Future strategies for reducing abandonment**

### *Legislation*

It is now clear that good legislation alone will not solve the companion animal abandonment/surrender problem. Nonetheless legislation that regulates the acquisition, ownership and disposal of companion animals is both important and necessary. The fundamental principles of the legislation must be uniform across the States and Territories and in turn must be uniformly enforced. This is what the objective of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy is for animal welfare law.

### *Some new legislative principles worthy of consideration are*

- Uniform regulation of all sources of companion animals.
- Behavioural modification for menacing dogs before they become dangerous.
- Seizure of abandoned animals made easier.
- Government encouragement of partnerships or collaboration between all stakeholders in the companion animal area.
- Annual mandatory reporting of animals admitted to a pound or shelter.

### *Education*

The traditional classroom/teacher approach to animal welfare education has only limited success in the modern teaching environment. Broad community education programs present better value particularly if government co-ordinated and delivered by community based animal welfare organisations. All those who acquire a companion animal, regardless of source, should be encouraged to attend a local education program.

By engaging the community and raising their awareness of their role in the care and protection of animals, there is the potential to reduce abandonment of livestock, companion animals and wildlife.

Animal welfare organisations such as the RSPCA engage the community in education programs designed to teach pet owners about responsible pet ownership, choosing a dog and animal behaviour seminars. Furthermore, adoption officers match owners with animals at RSPCA shelters to reduce the number of returned animals.

### *Shelters and Pounds*

Shelters and Pounds are still regarded by the community as thoroughly depressing places. Some even allege that they are little better than killing fields. While shelters are improving and adoption centres are being built, only by regulations of these places can standards be raised and they become admired centres for the community to obtain their next companion animal.

A well run shelter or pound will offer can help reduce further abandonment by providing the following:

- Counselling for all potential surrender owners to solve the reason for the animal being unwanted.
- Effective behavioural assessment and modification programs for all animals available for adoption.
- A quality adoption centre with well trained helpful staff.
- Mobile adoption centre to increase community exposure.
- Effective programs guaranteed to raise adoption rates.
- A much greater investment in easily accessible desexing programs.

These are seen as potential mechanisms to reduce and head off abandonment of domestic animals. Education, campaigns and legislation have the potential to deal with “abandonment” issues in livestock and wildlife. It is a community effort.

## **References**

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