

Is dog aggression a problem in Aboriginal communities?

Jenny Wells and Stephen Cutter

INTRODUCTION

Dr Stephen Cutter, Steven Isaacs and Dr Jenny Wells are the principals of University Avenue Veterinary Hospital in Palmerston, near Darwin, Northern Territory.

Stephen Cutter and Jenny Wells have, and continue to, conduct dog health and education programs in Aboriginal communities across the Territory since 1997.

Steven Isaacs has been involved directly with many of the programs on visits up North from Melbourne, as a veterinary nurse, technician and adviser.

As part of the 'Big Lick' committee, Drs Cutter and Wells helped organise the *Better Dogs Life* conference held in Darwin in August 2000.

'Big Lick' is a collective of private practitioners, university staff, indigenous environmental health workers and government public health staff.

Its aim is to examine dog program history, the present situation and future programs direction to encourage sustainability and cost-effectiveness.

It is dedicated to improving the health of companion animals in rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Current participants are: Phil Donohoe, Tony English, Rick Speare, Jack Shield, Katherine Wilks, Derek Spielman, Rod Salter, Jenny Wells, Stephen Cutter, Jenny Youl and Anne Quain.

WHY TALK ABOUT DOG AGGRESSION?

1. In many communities there are a lot more dogs than in non-Aboriginal communities, or there are perceived to be, as there are very few fenced yards, giving the impression of larger dog numbers. So dogs are more visible.
2. There are now dog health programs (DHP) on some communities, and those dogs are obviously healthier, so there is a question now being raised as to if DHPs increase or decrease aggression.
3. We feel this topic is perhaps a starting point for explaining to people the issues surrounding companion animals in indigenous communities.

BACKGROUND

Dog ecology

Dingoes arrived on the Australian mainland 4,000 years ago, most likely brought here by Indonesian traders. Since that time they have become an integral part of indigenous people's daily life with important roles in companionship, traditional law, guarding against natural and supernatural threats, and hunting for food. With white invasion, domestic dogs rapidly assumed the dingo's position.

Dogs are descended originally from wolves. Some primitive dogs, such as dingoes, retain many similar characteristics to them.

There are, however, substantial differences in behaviour between these dingoes and true domestic dogs. Hybrids between dingoes and true domestic dogs tend to resemble domestic dogs in behaviour although they can look a lot like dingoes in appearance.

The dogs in indigenous communities have a mutualistic relationship with humans. Whilst the dogs all have an owner they are allowed to roam free and interact with other humans or dogs. Often they are able to be in their owner's company all day. Overall the dogs live a very free live style and live with their particular owner out of choice.

Dogs are considered as being important to most indigenous people in the communities we visit.

DOG HEALTH AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The aims of these programs are:

- to improve the health and welfare of the dogs;
- to control dog numbers by desexing, contraceptives and selective euthanasia;
- to reduce environmental health problems caused by the dogs (primarily the reduction of zoonotic diseases and nuisance problems);
- to create discussion and educational opportunities to ensure people are able to make informed choices on dog issues; and
- to provide an opportunity for community people to become involved in the programs.

Overall we aim to help improve the quality of life for both the dogs and the people of the communities by reducing dog problems and increasing the positive aspects of dog and human interaction.

DISCUSSION

What do we mean by dog aggression?

Bailliere's Veterinary Dictionary defines aggression as behaviour that is angry or destructive, and is intended to be injurious, physically or emotionally, and aimed at the domination of one animal over another. It may be manifested by overt attacking and destructive behaviour or by covert attitudes of hostility or obstructionism. The two questions we would like to discuss in this paper are:

1. Is dog aggression a problem in indigenous communities, and if so, is it the same or different to non-indigenous communities?
2. Do dog health programs affect the level of aggression, and if so, negatively or positively?

We will deal with these two questions separately. To answer the first question, any place that dogs live closely with people will have some issues with dog aggression. It is not clear as to whether it is the same or different in non-indigenous communities, as there is quite a bit of data about dog aggression in mainstream communities, but almost none in indigenous communities. So at this point we have only subjective data based on our own and other experiences. The factors that we know are important contributors to dog aggression from mainstream data are:

1. dog factors;
2. owner factors; and
3. victim factors.

Dog factors

Dog factors include presence of packs, breed, temperament, size and sex of dog.

In the indigenous communities we go to, as mentioned earlier, dogs live a mostly free-ranging life style. Dogs are social animals and naturally form packs. Packs are a social structure often independent of human control, with dominant and submissive behaviour. The overall behaviour of the pack is greatly influenced by the dominant dogs. These are the main aggressors towards other dogs and humans.

Obviously there are exceptions, there are always a number of dogs who are 'fringe dwellers', outside the pack structure, who can be aggressive. These are often unhealthy or old, have little contact with other dogs or people. Aggression in these dogs is often due to fear.

Most dogs in the communities are medium-sized dingo cross breeds. The dingo body shape is dominant now, but the dogs are essentially domestic breeds. There is an ever-present migration of different domestic dog genes into these communities. However, there is now a worrying increase in large aggressive breed types coming in from surrounding areas. In urban communities, there is a strong association between certain breeds and severe attacks. Pitbulls, Rottweilers, German Shepherds, Dobermans and to a lesser extent Blue Heelers are on the list of breeds that cause severe attacks.

In terms of dog gender, we have found that females tend to be more aggressive when they are protecting their young, and that male dogs are less aggressive once desexed.

Owner factors

Owner factors include reasons for having dogs, dog husbandry/care, and owner attitude.

Reasons indigenous people own dogs, as mentioned above, are companionship, traditional law, hunting for food or protection.

In mainstream communities, dog aggression has been reported to be most likely to be seen in the home, against a family member. A significant factor is that these dogs are used for reasons of security or protection and so are very dominant or dangerous personalities. In indigenous communities, while there is limited data, this doesn't seem to be the case. It seems that most people are bitten at or near someone else's home as a result of intruding into a dog's territory.

The care of dogs in indigenous communities is often seen to be different to that of mainstream societies. We believe that there is a different basis to ownership, based on listening to a large number of dog owners.

One way of explaining it is to look at the Western concept of ownership. Under law, the dog is the total responsibility of the owner. It is usually a work tool, a dependent family member or a combination of both.

In contrast, it seems that to the indigenous people, the dog is more often considered to be a friend or an independent family member, not owned, and essentially responsible for their own actions.

In urban society, people who don't control their dogs, who let them roam, don't think their dogs should comply with the dog by-laws and often don't register them, are seen as irresponsible. Owners are liable, and prosecutable.

In indigenous communities, dogs are on the whole responsible for their own actions, although dogs are definitely owned by individuals, who do have ultimate responsibility.

Within each community, we find that there is just as broad a range of attitudes and beliefs about dogs as there is in mainstream society. To some people, they are an extremely important part of their life, to others, they are a nuisance and of little value. Most people's attitudes fall somewhere in between these two.

Victim factors

Victim factors include behaviour, age and cultural group.

At this point, it's worthwhile looking at why dogs are aggressive. Territoriality, dominance, fear, and hunting and eating habits are all causes of aggression.

People are bitten or harassed because they are in a dog's territory, stimulating fear, dominance or territorial habits. It should be mentioned that there is a direct correlation between severity of the attack, the size of the dog, and size of the victim. This means that a big dog attacking a small child will result in worse injuries. There are a larger proportion of children in these communities, so bites can be more severe, and size and breed of dog is therefore likely to be more significant.

In terms of cultural groups, as a general observation in the communities we visit, we have noted that non-indigenous dogs are more likely to attack indigenous people, and vice versa. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with this in detail, but dogs smell, see, hear and feel differences between people, and often react aggressively to what they are not used to.

Why do people behave differently? It's what people are used to — community people are used to dogs roaming, urban people are used to dogs behind fences, restrained and usually solitary.

DO DOG HEALTH PROGRAMS AFFECT DOG AGGRESSION?

The second question — Do the Dog Health Programs (DHPs) increase or decrease the level of aggression on indigenous communities? Again is not easy to answer due to a lack of data. The health of the dogs definitely improves greatly, but there are mixed reports as to the subsequent level of aggression.

Aggression may be increased because the dogs are healthier so have more energy to behave aggressively.

Aggression may be decreased because of:

- less breeding so less maternal aggression;
- fewer entire male dogs, which affects their attitudes to people and other dogs;
- lower dog numbers, so usually more individual attention and food from owners, so less food related aggression; and
- perceptions of dogs changing from being pests to pets, there being more pride in healthier animals.

There are preliminary studies in this area which do suggest that dog bite numbers and severity are reduced following a DHP. These studies are based on previous clinic records. Information from clinic staff from various communities confirms this on the whole.

On the other hand, awareness of dog bites is increased so that there may appear to be more aggression. Certainly, more information is needed from sources with as little bias as possible.

So how do we get this data? Obviously talking to people about trends in communities over time is useful, even though dog attacks are a very emotive and so a subjective issue.

Hospital records can be looked at, although here again are problems. Most records only report that it is an animal-related injury, and rarely record the circumstances of the attack — for instance, the breed or size of dog. Also, probably only the more severe attacks would have been reported so give no indication of the non-injurious level of aggression.

Records in the future would be more useful if more detailed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Individual aggressive packs can be a real problem in some areas of communities. In many cases removal or desexing of the leader of the pack can dramatically lessen the overall aggression of the pack.

All dog programs should include dog population control as health improvement alone can cause an explosion of dog numbers and attendant problems.

Solutions are difficult to pin point as variables are always changing. Certainly introduction of large aggressive breeds of dogs should be viewed with caution. Desexing of these dogs would obviously reduce their impact.

Perhaps another solution could include education for children on dog behaviour and avoiding dog bites.

SUMMARY

So to conclude, we need a lot more data on dog aggression in the indigenous communities before we can answer these questions. There needs to be a concerted approach to collect more data as more communities start these DHPs, from as many different sources as possible. In this way we can ensure that the leaders of these communities have as much information as possible to make informed choices about whether or not to have DHPs, and whether preventative measures are needed to stop the influx of large aggressive dogs into communities.

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