

Beach education survey: A social change campaign

DANI VUKOJE

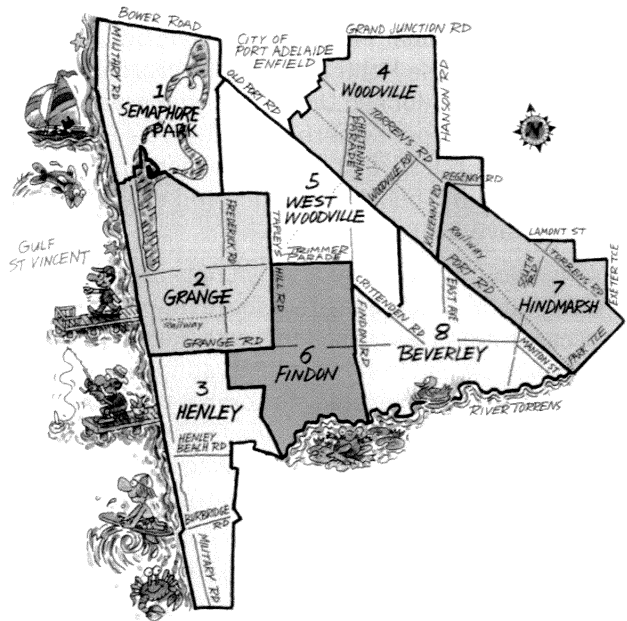
City of Charles Sturt, SA • In conjunction with VANESSA ROHLF, Anthrozoology Research Group

Abstract

Failure to abide by leash laws is a common issue facing urban councils. Not only do unleashed dogs present a nuisance to the public they can also cause harm to people and other animals. Through regular Animal Management Beach Patrols, the City of Charles Sturt identified the need to address this issue along a 13 km stretch of foreshore. Using information gained from 'Why pet owners don't always do the right thing' (Rohlf, 2010) and the assistance of our Beach Education Officer we developed and implemented a questionnaire designed to identify the cause of non compliance in this area. The design and results of this survey will be discussed. Particular attention will be paid to how this information will be used to inform our upcoming intervention. In doing so we also hope to highlight how information gained from conferences such as AIAM can be effectively applied to tackle 'real world' animal management issues.

Introduction

The City of Charles Sturt is located on the western side of the Adelaide City CBD. It is one of the State's largest Councils covering an area of 5557 hectares with a population of 105,573 people and 14,937 registered dogs. Ideally located within the western suburbs the City of Charles Sturt is close to the City of Adelaide, the beach, the River Torrens Linear Park, the airport, shopping facilities and entertainment venues. The City is characterised by a diversity of land use having a balance of residential including high density, industrial and commercial activities; and a diversity of people in terms of culture, age and socioeconomic character.



One of the particular highlights of the City of Charles Sturt is its coastline. The City boasts 13 kms of coastline which are divided up into six beach areas; Grange, Henley, Henley South, West Beach, Tennyson and West Lakes. These beaches are very popular, particularly in the summer months, and are used for a variety of recreational purposes by the City of Charles Sturt residents as well as visitors to the area.

The Council welcomes dog owners to all six beach areas. In order to balance the needs of other beach users with those of the dog owners the council allows dogs to be off lead but only during designated times. These are during the daylight savings period, before 10am and after 8pm. Further to this when dogs are off lead owners must ensure that their dog is under effective control. This means that the person in control of the dog must be able to demonstrate voice control of the dog and it must be within close proximity of and within sight of the person in control of the dog.

These requirements are important because they ensure the safety of all dogs and people.

Recently however council received complaints concerning non-compliance with leash laws and nuisance dog behaviour along the coastline. Some residents were so annoyed by these occurrences that they expressed their concerns to the local newspaper (Gorka, 2011; Williams, 2011). Clearly then, the behaviour of dogs and their owners along the coastline needed to be addressed. An intervention program targeting these behaviours needed to be designed and implemented in order to re-establish harmony among the beach users. The question was however, where to begin?

Attending the Australian Institute of Animal Management Seminar in 2010 in Adelaide and listening to Vanessa Rohlf from the Anthrozoology Research Group, Monash University, who presented on the topic "Why pet owners don't always do the right thing" (Rohlf, 2010) it became evident that knowledge, skills, beliefs, attitudes and compliance appear to have a strong link.

Thinking about the current issue of non-compliance from dog owners along the foreshore following her presentation I discussed this with Vanessa. At this stage I was already contemplating the implementation of a strategy to combat the non-compliance however listening to Vanessa's presentation made it clear that prior to implementing a strategy the factors underlying non-compliance needed to be identified.

Before designing and implementing a strategy we arranged to identify the problem and its magnitude. We also wanted to identify who to target in our intervention, when and how. This was done by exploring a number of pre - intervention questions:

1. Who uses the beach and how often?
2. How many people are non-compliant with on-lead requirements?
3. How many off lead dogs display potentially problematic behaviours defined as running up to people or jumping up on them?
4. Why are people doing the wrong thing?

Taking these points into consideration Vanessa and I developed a questionnaire for dog owners and non- dog owners along the foreshore, the questionnaire was designed to tackle the above questions by exploring compliance with on lead requirements, the frequency and perceptions of potential nuisance behaviour, as well as knowledge

of on lead requirements and effective control. We also sought to determine whether non-dog owners and dog owners differed in terms of their perceptions towards potentially problematic behaviours and whether the frequency of non-compliance with on-lead requirements and potentially problematic behaviours differed across the six beach areas surveyed.

The aim of this paper is to describe the method and results of our pre-intervention. I will conclude by outlining the implication of these results in terms of how they will be used in our campaign to address nuisance behaviour and non-compliance with leash laws.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

The sample comprised 82 dog owners and 70 non-dog owners. Frequency of beach use for both groups was high with 37.5% of participants using the beach several times a week and 42.1% of participants using the beach daily.

MATERIALS

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section was directed towards dog owners and non-dog owners and comprised 16 questions. These questions asked about beach use, if and when participants witnessed dog's off-lead, their experiences with potentially problematic dog behaviours and their perceptions towards dogs and dog owners. The second section was directed towards dog owners only and consisted of eight items. These questions related to compliance with leash requirements, knowledge of off-lead times, awareness of the term 'effective control' and perceptions of their dogs' behaviour.

PROCEDURE

To ensure the questionnaire was developed effectively I attended a short course looking at Principles of Questionnaire design at the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This allowed me to develop a questionnaire that was non-threatening to its audience and directed towards answering the pre-intervention questions. This process was vital as correct questionnaire design would minimise errors in data collection and give a truer account of the required information.

The questionnaire was executed by our Beach Education Officer¹ who was briefed about the

1 I met our future Beach Education officer at the AIAM conference in Adelaide who at the time was a university student and was doing a presentation on a recent research paper. As the officer was not authorised to expiate for unlawful behaviour and was acting in an education role only this proved to be a very effective strategy as he was able to gain a range of answers from both dog owners and non-dog owners alike giving us truer account of people's opinions.

purpose of the project and provided with a script to use when approaching people on the foreshore and one-on-one training. Training included running through various scenarios of issues he may face when approaching people on the beach, delivery of the questions and recording the data. The Beach Education officer had rostered hours of work that included very early starts and late finishes to ensure data was captured in a range of times as well as the different beaches along the foreshore and this was changed fortnightly. Raw data was entered into an Excel worksheet and sent to Vanessa for analysis.

Results

BEACH USE

Table 1 shows that dog owners and non-dog owners were equally represented among each of the six beach areas.

Table 1 Beach use by area

	Dog owner (%)	Non-dog owner (%)
Grange	23.2	20.0
Henley	29.2	30.0
Henley South	20.7	17.1
West Beach	14.6	14.3
Tennyson	4.9	10.0
West Lakes	7.3	8.6

Table 2 shows the times of day participants mostly visit the beach.

Table 2 Beach use by time of day

	Dog owner (%)	Non-dog owner (%)
Before 10am*	56.1	52.9
Between 10am and 2pm	14.6	24.3
Between 2pm and 8pm	13.4	18.6
After 8pm*	15.9	8.6

*Off lead times

As can be seen in Table 2, over half of the dog owners and non-dog owners use the beach before 10am (designated off leash time). While 42.9% of non-dog owners use the beach between 10am and 8pm (designated on lead time), only 28% of dog owners use the beach at this time.

COMPLIANCE WITH ON-LEAD REQUIREMENTS

The majority of participants (98%) had witnessed dogs off lead at the beach. Those who had witnessed dogs off lead were asked at what times they had witnessed these dogs. As can be seen in Figure 1, while most dogs off-lead were witnessed before 10am, a designated off lead time, a third of the dogs (31.5%) off-lead were witnessed during between 10am and 2pm (17.4%) and between 3pm and 8pm (14.1%), designated on lead times.

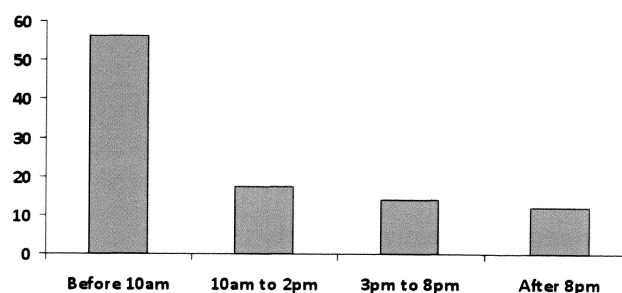


Figure 1 Percentage of dogs witnessed off-lead

Of the 82 dog owners in this sample 83% report that they 'always' keep their dog(s) on lead when required to do so, 15.1% report that they comply with on lead requirements 'most of the time' and 1.9% report that they only comply with the requirement 'some of the time'.

FREQUENCY OF OFF-LEAD POTENTIAL 'NUISANCE' BEHAVIOURS

Running up to people

Dog owners were asked how often their dog ran up to people on the beach. Most dog owners reported that their dog 'never' (53.7%) or 'rarely' (35.4%) ran up to people on the beach. Very few dog owners reported that their dog 'sometimes' (7.3%) or 'often' (3.7%) ran up to people.

Both dog owners and non-dog owners were asked how often they have dogs run up on the beach. Just over a quarter of dog owners and non-dog owners (25.7%) reported that they had 'never' had dogs run up to them at the beach. A third of the sample (31.6%) reported that they dog have run up to them 'rarely'. A similar proportion reported that dogs have 'sometimes' run up to them at the beach (34.2%). Very few reported that dogs ran up to them 'often' (7.2%) or 'always' (1.3%).

Jumping up on people

Dog owners were asked how often their dog has jumped up on a person at the beach. Most dog owners reported that their dog never (84.1%) or rarely (13.4%) jumps on people. Only 2.4% of dog owners reported that their dog sometimes jumps up on people.

When dog owners and non-dog owners were asked to estimate the frequency with which they have had a dog jump up on them at the beach over a third of respondents have 'never' (36.8%) had a dog jump on them with 27% of the sample experiencing this incident only 'rarely'. A third of the sample (31.6%) reported that off lead dogs 'sometimes' jump on them but very few reported that this occurred 'often' (4.6%).

KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge of on-lead and off-lead times

Dog owners were asked if they were aware of on lead and off lead times at the beach. Only 53.9% of dog owners reported that they were aware of these times. Further to this of those that reported that they were aware of on lead times, when asked what these were, 26.8% were actually incorrect!

Knowledge of effective control

Dog owners were asked to define the meaning of the term 'under effective control' and what it means in terms of off-lead dog behaviour. The majority of dog owners reported that 'under effective control' means that dogs must come when called (62.2%). Under half of the sample (40.2%) reported that the term means that dogs should be under complete verbal control and a similar proportion reporting that effective control meant that the dog must be in close proximity to the owner and/or in sight (43.9%). Additional explanations included that the dog should not interfere with other beach users (11.0%). Interestingly, when dog owners were asked how often their dog returned when they called it only 61% reported that their dog 'always' returns.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS DOG OWNERS

Most respondents reported that the majority of dogs they see on the beach are 'very friendly' (75.0%) or 'friendly' (22.4%). Only 2.6% of respondents were 'neutral' and no respondent reported the majority of

dogs were 'unfriendly', or 'very unfriendly'. Similarly, most respondents reported that the majority of dogs they saw on the beach were 'obedient' (31.6%) or 'very obedient' (62.5%). Few were 'neutral' (5.3%) and fewer still believed that the majority of dogs were 'disobedient' (0.7%). No respondent reported that the majority of dogs were very 'disobedient'

When respondents were asked whether or not they believed the majority of dog owners were responsible, most agreed that they were 'responsible' (22.4%) or 'very responsible' (71.1%). A small proportion of the sample was 'neutral', while a minority believed that the majority of dog owners were 'irresponsible' (0.7%) or 'very irresponsible' (1.3%).

Most respondents also believed that the majority of dog owners had control over the dog at the beach with 28.9% believing they had 'total control', 51.3% believed that they were 'mostly in control' and 17.1% believed that they were 'somewhat in control'. Few thought that the majority of dog owners had little (2.0%) or 'no control' (0.7%).

PERCEPTIONS OF POTENTIAL NUISANCE OFF LEASH DOG BEHAVIOURS

Table 3 shows the level of agreement or disagreement with how annoyed, frightened or amused they were with having a dog run up to them.

As can be seen in Table 3, a majority of respondents were neutral with regards to these interview questions. Over a quarter of the sample reported their response to a dog running up to them was one of amusement. Nevertheless a small proportion of beach users reported that they were annoyed and even frightened by the experience(s).

Table 4 shows the level of agreement or disagreement with how annoyed, frightened or amused they were with having a dog jump up on them.

Table 3 Perceptions of dogs running up to beach users

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Annoyed	0	0	93.8	5.3	0.9
Frightened	0	0	99.1	0	0.9
Amused	0	0	73.5	24.8	1.8

Table 4 Perceptions of dogs jumping up on beach users

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Annoyed	0	0	86.5	9.4	4.2
Frightened	0	0	95.8	3.1	1.0
Amused	0	0	69.4	27.6	3.1

As can be seen in Table 4, most beach users reported that they felt 'neutral' towards these interview questions. It can also be seen in Table 4 while some participants were amused by the experience, a small proportion of beach users reported that they were annoyed and even frightened by the experience.

COMPARISONS BETWEEN DOG OWNERS AND NON-DOG OWNERS

Chi square analyses revealed that there was no significant difference in the levels of non-compliance witnessed by dog owners and non-dog owners.

A Mann Whitney U test found that there were no significant differences between dog owners and non-dog owners in terms of beliefs about friendliness, level of obedience and level of responsible ownership. Dog owners and non-dog owners did differ however in terms of how much control the majority of dog owners are perceived to have over their dog with perceptions of control being greater among dog owners compared to non-dog owners.

Mann Whitney U tests also found that there were no significant differences between dog owners and non-dog owners in terms of how often they experienced a dog run up to or jump up on them and their perceptions of the experience. This means that dog owners are no more likely than non dog owners to report that they have had a dog jump on them. Further to this, dog owners are no more likely than non dog owners to report that they were annoyed, amused, or frightened by having a dog run up to them.

COMPARISONS ACROSS BEACH AREAS

Chi square and Kruskal Wallis analyses revealed that there were no significant differences levels of self-reported non-compliance by dog owners and witnessing of non-compliance by dog owners and non-dog owners across the beach areas.

Independent samples Kruskal Wallis analyses found that there were no significant differences among beach areas with regards to the frequency of off lead dogs running up to or jumping up on people. Further to this there were no significant differences among beach areas regarding the extent to which respondents were annoyed, amused or frightened by dogs running or jumping up on them.

Independent Kruskal Wallis analyses also found that, in general, there were no significant differences among the beach areas in terms of beliefs towards dogs and dog owners. However, respondents from these beach areas differed in terms of their perceptions of how friendly the majority of dogs are at the beach. This difference was observed between respondents from West Lakes and West Beach where dogs at West Beach were perceived to be

significantly friendlier than the dogs at West lakes. That being said, the difference is only very marginal and the majority of dogs in all areas were perceived as friendly.

Discussion

In response to complaints about non-compliance with leash laws and the existence of problematic behaviours along the 13km stretch of coastline we designed and implemented a survey to determine the extent of the problem and identify factors underlying these issues.

According to the survey there is a definite issue with non-compliance of leash laws across all six beaches with a third of the participants surveyed having witnessed non-compliance. Even 17% of the dog owners surveyed admitted that they don't always have their dog on leash when they are supposed to. It is also likely that these rates of compliance are an underestimate because dog owners may have been reluctant to report acts of non-compliance, especially to a representative of the council. One of the major impediments to compliance appears to be a lack of awareness of the leash laws at this beach. Only 53.9% of dog owners knew what the on lead times were. Even those that thought they knew what the times were incorrect.

The survey results also reveal the existence of potentially problematic dog behaviours across all six of the beach areas with dog owners and non-dog owners being equally affected by these behaviours. Approximately 43% of the beach users surveyed reported that dogs run up to them at least sometimes and 36% reported that dogs jump up on them at least sometimes. Despite this, few people actually reported these dog behaviours are problematic. On the contrary, many were amused by dogs running up to them (26.6%) or jumping up on them (30.7%). Clearly then if the majority of people are not bothered by the incident dogs owners are not likely to be motivated to change their dogs behaviour because the behaviour is being positively reinforced by people's amusement. The fact that some people were annoyed and frightened by these antics however should not be ignored. Dog owners need to be made aware that there are people out there that do not appreciate these dog behaviours.

Overall though, most dog owners are believed to be responsible. Dogs in general are also believed to be friendly and obedient with both dog owners and non-dog owners sharing similar views.

WHERE TO NEXT?

Taking into consideration the results of the survey the intervention we aim to implement will be designed with a focus on education and social

influence. As knowledge was found to be lacking in relation to the on leash/ off leash by laws the strategy will be tailored with a focus of educating beach users of these laws, their origin, requirements and definitions. Strategies such as community events, information nights and information pamphlets will be discussed for the next stage of this project.

These strategies will aim to;

- Target all beach areas on the campaign because there was no significant difference in levels of compliance across the six beach areas.
- Inform dog owners on the leash times.
- Educate dog owners on what 'under effective control' means. Only about 40% correctly understood this term effective control. Highlight that it's more than just being able to recall your dog.
- Remind dog owners to be mindful of other beach users. Their dog might be cute and cuddly to them but there are others who may be afraid of their dog especially if the dog runs up to them or jumps on them.
- Promote dog obedience because only about 61% say that their dog returns always when they recall the dog.
- Inform dog owners and non-dog owners that having pet dogs in the community affords numerous benefits, including economic benefits, psychological and physical health benefits.

As knowledge was found to be lacking education strategies such as the ones outlined above will be the focus of this campaign. Our aim is to make the beaches of Charles Sturt Council safe and user friendly for both dog owners and non- dog owners and through a social change campaign we hope to achieve this aim.

Conclusion

Establishing why dog owners fail to abide by leash laws is a difficult task however by implementing a survey to find the real issues behind the lack of compliance provides us with the tools required to move forward with a tailored strategy.

Conferences like those organised by AIAM give participants' opportunity to not only share ideas and present findings but to look at ways to collaboratively tackle existing issues facing Councils. Through my work with Vanessa we were able to locate the root of the issue regarding non-compliance along the Charles Sturt foreshore through our combined skills and knowledge. Through continuing to work together the aim of developing a tailored strategy towards increasing compliance will ensure a greater outcome.

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◎ BIOGRAPHY

Dani Vukoje

City of Charles Sturt, SA

Email: dvukoje@charlessturt.sa.gov.au

Dani is a Project Officer of Urban Animal Management within the City of Charles Sturt. Her background is in teaching and customer service and she has been in the City of Charles Sturt for over 4 years.

