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Redressing the issues for pets and people in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to provide a partnered and sustainable solution for our future

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Abstract

Animal management in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is not just a remote issue. 76% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live in non-remote areas, predominately along the Eastern Seaboard. Although there are a wide variety of situations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities anywhere across Australia can face similar problems, such as isolation/ access to services, lack of engagement with lawmakers, lack of appropriate consultation and engagement, and lack of understanding of the impact of historical issues. Organisations and groups such as AMRRIC and other service providers are well placed to learn from each other in meaningful ways to deal with these, often complex, issues.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples often suffer a sense of isolation from the people they interact with in remote or urbanised areas. This sense of being isolated and misunderstood can impact on access to services, in both urban and remote areas. For example, in urban areas people may be or feel economically or socially excluded. People sometimes feel 'shame jobbed' or embarrassed about knowledge gaps, social or economic situations, or the condition of their pets.

Understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's different perspectives on family responsibilities and roles of dogs is integral to delivering culturally sensitive programs in remote, rural and urban areas. Therefore appropriate information sharing and preparation prior to vet visits and dog health programs is also crucial. When delivering the program messages, the use of appropriate terminology and methodology can be a factor in the program's acceptance. People need to receive messages delivered in a relevant and culturally appropriate manner, be that through

word of mouth in trusted social networks, and/or through visual aids such as posters etc. However, having visual resources which are too text dominant, or without relevant pictures, can create immediate barriers. For example, in one program it was important program staff didn't speak about removing peoples 'neglected animals' and finding them 'new homes' to avoid creating potentially painful parallels with the stolen generations story.

Having Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people employed in animal management can ease these issues in many ways: by improving communication, building trust, and making services more effective. However, a lack of resourcing for dog health/ desexing programs and a lack of, or insufficient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment, both on the ground and in managerial positions is common. Lack of community engagement and empowerment due to lack of appropriate community consultation with regards to by laws etc often results in 'white fella' top down law that is often difficult to comprehend, irrelevant or impossible to enforce.

Redressing these issues for pets, people and communities will provide a partnered and sustainable solution for our future.

Background

Animal management in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is not just a remote issue as 76% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live in non-remote areas, predominately along the Eastern Seaboard. Opinions and relationships to animals vary from community to community, state to state, individual to individual, as they do in urban areas. However, commonalities still apply.

For example, ongoing cultural significance and traditional law relating to animals in Aboriginal communities cannot be overlooked when considering compliance, partnership and appropriateness of any animal health, welfare and control plans being developed with the community (Hardaker 2008). Recognition and acceptance of these facts will help facilitate the establishment of sustainable culturally appropriate programs.

Respecting the cultural traditions of individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the right of the community to manage their animals and animal programs is imperative to undertaking any work in improving their health and welfare outcomes. Dogs are integral to the fabric of communities: their health is intrinsically linked to the health and well-being of the community. Therefore, a wholistic, 'one health' approach is required to achieve real change in improvements in health and control of animals.

Stakeholders are essential in achieving sustainable and successful programs and can play a crucial role. Collaboration through purposefully building partnerships with stakeholders such as local councils and shires, public health bodies, community agencies, elders and traditional owners (Phelan 2006) enables a more holistic approach to be undertaken. Planning is crucial to developing a long term approach to working together. Planning enables a community to 'own' their program and to stay focused on priorities to more efficiently use the resources at hand, or to gain the needed resources.

In any community companion animal welfare and control can be viewed as either a "top-down" approach i.e. where decisions are made by extra-community employees and imposed on communities, or a "bottom up" approach where the community's needs and concerns generate the animal management strategy. Given the enormous and ongoing cost of the top-down approach many communities worldwide are looking for more sustainable and effective practices (AMRRIC 2006).

A bottom-up approach is especially important where differing cultural values exist. Whilst it is clear that, like anyone, many Aboriginal people love and value their dogs and often share their distress about dogs in poor condition, not all people necessarily share western cultural attitudes to animal welfare and individual responsibility to care for their animals (Donelan 2006). What can seem cruel to an Indigenous person can seem normal to a western person and vice versa. Two examples: Very often we hear 'let him die natural way' in response to an old diseased dog that a western eye might think would be kinder to euthanase. This is a challenging situation for any non-indigenous person working in a community. However, cultural attitudes and

beliefs may underlie this attitude. This wish must be considered should the service provider wish to continue to build a trusting relationship that allows further work to be undertaken to improve animal welfare in that community. A palliative approach might gain more cooperation in the first instance, allowing a relationship to be built in which discussion of euthanasia can take place.

Another example from the other perspective is keeping dogs locked alone in backyards: to some people this is incredibly cruel, whereas it is the norm in most urbanised areas.

In Aboriginal communities in particular, animal health, welfare and control tactics dictated by external forces using non-negotiated methodologies have been uniformly unsuccessful and unsustainable. Imposition of welfare and control measures, in the absence of adequate capacity building and two-way education and awareness programs has resulted in unnecessary ongoing expenditure on pure service delivery, both veterinary and law enforcement, and has also been demonstrated to be a completely unsustainable model. Understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's different perspectives on family responsibilities and roles of dogs is crucial to delivering culturally sensitive programs in remote, rural and urban areas.

PERSPECTIVES ON COMPANION CANINES

Some differences in perspectives on normal mores for dogs in communities may have originated from the different traditions of living with canines in either culture. In contrast to the Euro-Australian tradition, Indigenous Australian societies traditionally lived with dingoes brought in as pups from the wild. (Corbett 2001). Dingoes are self reliant, and hunted, often contributing their hunt to their companion Indigenous family. They needed to be free roaming to fulfill this role. Domestic dogs, on the other hand, are almost completely dependent on human carers for food and water (Boitani et al 1995). Also, dingo breeding only occurred in the wild, and at much reduced rate compared to our domestic dogs who are capable of replacing 70% of their numbers every year (Matter and Daniels 2000). Despite these differences, canine companions had, and do still have, important roles as companions and protectors (Hunt 2006).

It is not only the breed of dogs that have changed. The wider social context must be considered. European settlement brought displacement from homelands and economies, and institutionalization further led to a chronic disempowerment of people. Roaming dogs, together with this disempowerment has underpinned a common perception/

misconception that some Aboriginal people do not care about their dogs. One only has to be willing to sit and spend time listening and sharing with people to understand that they do care about the health and welfare of their companion animals. Dr Sophie Constable's research confirms this fact. Almost all dog owners interviewed (94.7%) stated that when they were away from their pets they missed them. (89.5%) felt that people should try to minimize animal suffering and 75% people stated that they cared about dogs in the community on the whole, with comments such as: *"People love dogs round here", "Dogs are important", "There's a lot of dog lovers around here", "My pet's part of my family", "dogs are like family", "Dogs have really strong love for people", and "Dog is man's best friend", "When a dog dies, people get sick (pointing at her own heart), and when dogs get sick, same."* (Constable et al 2008).

Indigenous people keep pets for many of the same reasons as non-Indigenous people. Companionship is the key reason for people to keep dogs, cats or pigs and interactions between them and their owners are often affectionate or sometimes cruel as in any developed society. Whilst dogs everywhere can be part of human families, in many Indigenous communities this is recognized in a formal way by including dogs in the kinship system. Dogs can also serve a practical purpose by assisting in hunting, though not all town dogs go "out bush" (Donelan 2006). Dogs are seen as 'protectors and guardians, both of property in a territorial sense but also in a spiritual sense: to ward off evil spirits. Many elders and community members have shared with the author stories of the spiritual and cultural significance of dogs in their lives, both in urban and remote areas.

"Dog Dreaming" is a very real and important feature of dog ownership and treatment within many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. To overlook or dismiss this issue at a community level is firstly disrespectful and ignorant and secondly, results in significant non compliance with laws or imposed plans in many communities.

SHARED ISSUES

Most common problems relate to animal welfare and public nuisance. They include overpopulation from uncontrolled dog breeding; visibly diseased, malnourished animals (mainly dogs); public health considerations related to external and internal parasites; noise and nuisance from fighting and pack behaviour; spreading of rubbish while scavenging for food and public safety concerns with dog bite injuries from aggressive animals (Donelan 2006). Unrestrained breeding of larger pig dogs negatively influences the makeup of the next generation of pups (AMRRIC 2007).

Communities often indicate that they are overwhelmed by free breeding dogs and cats, have little access to desexing programs and population control. They feel disempowered by non-Indigenous decision makers and struggle to access resources such as normal veterinary services, medications, information or education to improve the situation resulting in the overall poor state of animal welfare in many remote Australian Indigenous communities.

Indigenous people will commonly share their concerns that health status of their dogs (in particular) impacts on human health and welfare. Zoonotic diseases and mental health and wellbeing concerns such as embarrassment or 'shame' about the state of their companion animals' health are common concerns. They express fear of attacks from free roaming dogs to themselves and other dogs.

Although there are a wide variety of situations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities anywhere across Australia face similar problems. AMRRIC has worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities nationally for many years from small country towns on the mid coast of NSW to extremely remote communities in the Pilbara and NT. It appears that longstanding animal health and welfare management issues exist in many of those communities with varying degrees of resources, education or professional support to address the situation.

Access to veterinary services has, on the whole, been poor for many communities. This may be due to many reasons, such as private or local government budgetary constraints. Where veterinary service is provided, there has sometimes been an inappropriate use of mass culling as an animal control measure, with or without informed consent from animal owners. Often such programs contain little if any inbuilt appropriate education or capacity building strategies adjunct to veterinary service delivery. Whilst some communities seem to be way ahead in terms of achieving locally owned and driven success in this area, as a nation we have seen few models of truly sustainable change.

The way forward—learning from each other to deal with issues

Organisations and groups such as AMRRIC and other service providers are well placed to learn from each other in meaningful ways to deal with these, often complex, issues.

THE BENEFITS OF LOCAL EMPLOYMENT

Many Aboriginal people possess authority or custodianship over dog matters within the existing systems of traditional governance. For lasting and beneficial companion animal control change to occur it is essential that those with authority to speak contribute to planning a control program (Phelan 2006). Consulting extensively within the community to facilitate the development of a strategic animal health and management plan guided by community needs and circumstances is crucial. It is vital we 'join with people so we can work with rather than for them' (Phelan 2006). Imposing a pre-determined program, developed through non-Indigenous eyes can mean little to no sustained compliance with the approaches undertaken. Without extensive consultation the vet may even arrive in the community to undertake the pre-decided program to find that the community, in fear of what is being imposed based on previous history, have evacuated their dogs to a 'safer' place.

However, a lack of will and availability of resources for dog health/desexing programs and a lack of or insufficient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment both on the ground and in managerial positions is common in many places.

Where they are in place, Environmental Health Workers (EHWs), and Animal Management Workers who work alongside veterinarians are highly valued. Training AMWs and EHWs enables them to deliver parasite control programs and injectable temporary sterilisation of animals. EHWs can also be trained in skills such as packing and sterilising surgical kits, which greatly expedites surgery. They can also provide feedback and statistical information for national and local data collection and assist Shires and communities with strategic planning. Their contribution to animal management programs means vets don't need to undertake all the groundwork in establishing the program as the EHWs are well known and trusted by their community, resulting in a more efficient program. Local helpers assist vets to understand and navigate local sensitivities. In remote areas these might be 'ceremony business, dog dreaming and sorry business' (Donelan AMRRIC 2006), but the program's interaction with politics, social tension and personal traumas need to be appropriately handled in urban communities as well.

Local animal management workers can be a wealth of knowledge and provide vital language translation when required. They ensure that vets and other external staff are informed of cultural differences that they may otherwise be unaware of. "EHWs are pretty handy when you're there: they're even handier when you're not there," Dr Robert Irving explains, "they ring you up and let you know what's going on. It makes continuity of programs better if you have someone in-house. You can go backwards very quickly in these places if you don't have the right help." (Irving cited in Constable and Lucia 2011)

Dog programs where vets and local trained AHWs work together achieve the lowest percentage of mangey dogs and the biggest improvement in condition (fatness). The AMWs are best placed to obtain informed consent and higher numbers of consents that Non Indigenous people to treat dogs (81% as against 53%). This results in better control of diseases such as mange. Having 50% or more of the face-to-face treatment team composed of local AMW's and other community people was associated with a significantly reduced prevalence of mangey dogs, compared to teams with less than 50% local Indigenous members (Constable et al 2010).

DEVELOPING TRUSTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Given the culturally complex nature of dog welfare and control, and the often fraught history of cross-cultural interaction, it is important that a community representative(s) take management responsibility for their own program. To bring workers from another area/ language/clan group can create mistrust in the program. Historically Aboriginal communities have been subjected to a wide variety of often brutal forms of companion animal management with routine poisoning, shooting, or more recently, large-scale pressured euthanasia campaigns forming the mainstay of companion animal control. To increase compliance with animal control the climate of mistrust must be minimized.

"Some of the greatest challenges in providing veterinary services to remote communities centre on lack of understanding and trust. Education and developing a trusting relationship with community members is the key to success, but often there are barriers, [including] language and cultural'. (Kennedy cited in Constable and Lucia 2011).

Unless people have a trustful relationship with the veterinarian or the animal management staff in a community they are not likely to pick up the phone or reach for assistance. This can also be an issue in urban areas where people may be or feel economically or socially excluded, e.g. when people are 'shame jobbed' or embarrassed inadvertently or purposefully about the condition of their pets.

Acting with integrity to build respect and trust with community stakeholders and community engagement in the program is a must to improving the welfare of animals (Donelan 2006). In a climate of mistrust, resulting from inappropriate culling programs or treatments and surgical procedures undertaken without owner permission, nothing can be achieved. Everything we do relies on the process of relationship building and respect.

DELIVERING APPROPRIATE MESSAGES

Education or 'two way knowledge sharing' is a critical component of companion animal health, welfare and control bridging knowledge gaps from both European and Indigenous cultures. Sadly this vital program component is often disregarded due to budgetary constraints, lack of trained Indigenous staff and the will of government. Through education and advocacy, and two-way knowledge transfer we are able to create the resources the community require to establish a plan to achieve animal health and welfare standards that everyone can be proud of.

For the majority of Aboriginal people in remote communities English is their third or fourth language and English literacy rates are poor (Donelan 2006). We must bear this in mind when communicating messages from our world perspective. On a recent community trip a poster (pictured opposite) was observed stating: '*Section 75A (2) SUMMARY OFFENCES ACT, The owner of a cheeky dog that-Bites, chases or scares another person or animal is guilty of an offence. Penalty: \$5,000*' and '*Section 6 ANIMAL WELFARE ACT- Any dog at your house must be fed and well looked after. Your dog must be healthy with hair and no sores. You must not hurt your dog. Penalty: Up to \$11,000 fine or 12 months imprisonment*'. Given that many people in the community have English as a third or fourth language, they could not read the sign. There was little to no fencing to prevent any dog from coming and going from their house. As the community has limited access to veterinary services, or funds to pay such fines, the poster quickly became a joke and an insult to the local people, as expressed to the author. World view, an imposed western one in this case and as so often seen, becomes the single most important factor in accounting for communication breakdown (Australian Volunteers International 2004). Lack of community engagement, empowerment due to lack of appropriate community consultation with regards to by laws, as seen in this example, coupled with inappropriate messaging, images, and language results in 'white fella' top down law that is difficult to comprehend, irrelevant to the audience it was intended for and impossible to enforce.

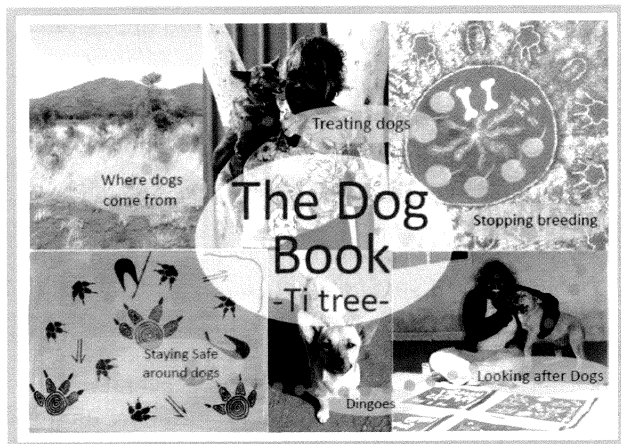
Communication is often better delivered in local Aboriginal English or creoles instead of Standard Australian English. Successful animal management workers are the expert communicators in delivering the right messages (Constable et al 2010).

Even when the correct language is used, the messages being conveyed need to be checked, or better yet, developed in cooperation with local people. For example, external visitors speaking about removing people's 'neglected animals' and finding them 'new and better homes' can create painful parallels with the stolen generations story.

Without doubt local, trained animal management workers are best placed to raise awareness and improvements of dog health issues through locally delivered education strategies. Verbal 'yarning' was demonstrated to be the preferred method of knowledge sharing for 68.4% of those interviewed by Constable et al 2010, and 79% of the people preferred locally produced education resources over commercial resources that had no real meaning for them (Constable et al 2010). However, every community differed in their preferred way of



sharing knowledge: some preferred passive pictorial resources and others preferred active participative dog health demonstration days.



Above: Resource developed by Ti Tree community through Dr Sophie Constable



**FLEAS, TICKS and
MANGE GOR
MEKE DOG BLO U
SICK**

**E GUD
TREATMENT POR
THEMPLA**

**E RESPONSIBILITY BLO
YOU POR HELP E DOG
BLO YOU**

E BY LAW BLO UME



Queensland Government
Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries

People need to receive messages delivered in a relevant and culturally appropriate manner, to best encourage communication and to avoid forming barriers through misunderstandings.

Asked about how community people heard about the local dog health program 50% of participants were informed directly through an Indigenous community service organisation while 30% were informed by family members and 10% from friends (Prendergast et al. 2008). Prendergast's research demonstrated that family members play a key role in shaping dog ownership behaviors and decisions concerning participating in education and dog health and desexing programs.

Further, developing an understanding of relevant legislative requirements through targeted education and training programs will enhance the capacity of

communities to benefit from the implementation of programs. Enabling communities to understand the process fosters effective and appropriate long term change and compliance. Likewise, enabling service providers and other stakeholders to understand better the environment they are working in allows them to appreciate the kinds of barriers that impede immediate term change in essential areas of animal welfare and management.

Conclusion

Building awareness of animal health and management problems and ownership of the effective management of these issues within the community is critical. With ownership comes engagement and responsibility.

Sustainability is only possible with strong community support, employment, leadership, engagement and ownership.

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◎ BIOGRAPHY

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As Executive Office of Animal Management in Rural and Remote Communities (AMRRIC) Julia's background is in health and community development. She has worked primarily in management in the Non-Government, Not for Profit programs sector in NSW, the NT and in Afghanistan. She has studied Aboriginal Community Development and Peace Studies. In Afghanistan she provided support to programs in remote Health Clinics and developed multiple training packages from Leadership to Peace Building Programs. Her second role in Kabul was as a Management Advisor to an Afghan Women's Resource Centre, assisting the organisation to centralize its programs and management in Kabul. Julia was the Coordinator of an Indigenous Health Care Program in the Southern Barkly Communities in the NT prior to moving to Darwin to take up the position with AMRRIC.



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