

20

Upwards and onwards: Envisioning the future and developing a research agenda

PAULEEN BENNETT

Director of Regional Operations, School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University, Victoria

Abstract

For scientists to work effectively with Animal Management Personnel, clear goals are required, as is a general strategy for attracting the funding required to reach those goals. In this interactive session the views of the audience will be canvassed during a targeted discussion about the most pressing short-term and long-term issues facing the industry. A research agenda will then be developed, as will strategies for meeting this agenda. The outcome of this session will be a white paper identifying the research needs of the sector. This will be used out-of-session to inform ongoing attempts to attract government and industry funding to the area, and to recruit scientists able to meet the needs identified. This session presents an exciting opportunity for those at the conference to contribute directly to future developments in the field. Delegates are therefore invited to attend this session armed with a bunch of good ideas.

Introduction

Humans and animals have always lived closely together, their lives intertwined by the necessity for common resources such as food, water and shelter. In evolutionary terms our relationships with animals were instrumental in shaping the development of our species. Indeed, some respected authors argue that humans learned to think and then to speak because of our need to understand, predict and communicate about what the animals in our environment would do next (Shepard, 1996).

The importance of animals is evident when one considers humans' earliest attempts to communicate with each other using symbolic representations; early cave art is replete with animal images (for examples visit www.bradshawfoundation.com/). This has implications for the psychology of modern humans, who still depend on brains that evolved many thousands of years ago.

The subsequent domestication of animals, beginning with canines, was another critical step in development of the modern world. It profoundly

altered previous relationships between humans and other animals, resulting in a period of time in which small groups of humans learned to effectively 'manage' animals living within their midst. Again, this has implications for human psychology.

More recently, our environment has changed once more. With industrialisation, supported by advances in science and technology, our everyday reliance on animals is far less obvious, even if it is no less real. Most of us no longer spend our mornings doing farmyard chores, we no longer rely on animal power for transport and energy and we no longer eat animals that we knew when they were living. Yet thousands of people visit zoological gardens and feed the wild birds or cats that visit their yard. Others wear leather clothes or shoes or play a sport which involves a leather ball. And of course most of us eat animals and their products (meat, eggs, milk, cheese) on a regular basis. Even our fruits, grains and vegetables are fertilized using animal products and, without bees to pollinate our plants, we would have no produce at all.

Perhaps amazingly, millions of modern humans also choose to keep animals as pets and companions. While doing so appears to be associated with a number of physical, psychological and social benefits, it is not without considerable risk. Dogs cause serious physical harm to a number of people each year and disrupt communities with uncontrolled barking and other undesirable behaviors. Cats similarly cause neighborhood disputes, provoking ongoing conflict between various community sectors. These problems are so significant that they underpin a relatively recent addition to the services expected to be provided by local government - Animal Management.

Roles performed by Animal Management Officers vary extensively across different municipal areas and are constantly evolving as community and government expectations change to reflect local and national events. Often the role is one of reacting to, or attempting to prevent, actual and possible emergencies through enforcement of local laws.

Being able to react appropriately depends greatly on previous experience, but also reflects the general state of knowledge in a field. If you were given a team of scientists to play with for several years, what research questions would you want them to answer? Can you identify three areas in your current role where you wish you had more evidence to inform your practice? How common are these issues amongst your AMO colleagues from other areas? While local issues will likely need a local approach, more global issues may benefit from collaboration across local government areas, of the type that an institution like AIAM could facilitate.

Looking to the immediate future

While research can help to inform current practices, one of its strengths is being able to help us prepare for the future. Assuming you might still be working in the sector five years from now, or ten years from now, or even twenty, what would you expect your daily activities to comprise? What animal management problems will have been solved by then and what do we need to do now to solve those problems?

Perhaps one of the biggest issues with cats is the fact that research has shown that many people semi-own members of this species, providing food and shelter but little else (Toukhsati, Bennett & Coleman, 2007). Cat semi-owners allow their unidentified and often undesexed animals to wander throughout the community, potentially contributing to overpopulation, nuisance and disease. If semi-owned cats were wholly owned, confined to their owner's property as effectively as most dogs, desexed and microchipped many of our current management issues might be resolved. What impact would this have on your daily activities? Is it a feasible state to aim for and, if not, what are the barriers? Could research be used to find effective ways to convince more cat semi-owners to own, confine, desex and identify their animals? How successful was the previous campaign (www.whosforcats.com.au/) designed to do just this in Victoria?

Dogs tend to be wholly owned and more effectively confined than cats, at least in urban areas. Most responsible dog owners also desex and identify their animals (Rohlf, Bennett, Toukhsati & Coleman, 2010). This means that dog overpopulation per se is of less concern than cat overpopulation. Instead, perhaps the big issue in dog management is encouraging and then helping people to obtain the 'right' dog for their circumstances. This requires identifying the characteristics of the 'right' dog and then finding ways to produce more of these dogs relative to the total canine population. Research to identify the 'ideal' Australian dog has already been conducted; these dogs are safe, sociable, calm, non-aggressive

and easy to manage (King, Marston & Bennett, 2009). Research has also been carried out to find out why some owners fail to engage in responsible ownership practices, including training (Bennett, Cooper, Rohlf & Mornement, 2007; Rohlf et al., 2010). But where do good and bad dogs come from? Dog breeding is contentious for many reasons but a prolonged social campaign to eliminate 'backyard' breeders and commercial puppy farms has resulted in a potential shortage of appropriate dogs and a higher proportion of inappropriate dogs in our community than is desirable. Where should the dogs of the future come from and can research help to identify and promote socially acceptable breeding and rearing practices?

Looking to the more distant future

While we can never know for certain what future Australian communities will be like, we can use what knowledge we have to make sensible predictions. Five things we can be relatively sure of are:

PREDICTION A: OUR POPULATION WILL BE LARGER

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS: www.abs.gov.au/), Australia's population first passed 22 million people in 2009 (ABS, 2010a). The population is expected to keep growing, the current growth rate of 2% being faster than at any other time in the past few decades and faster than in most other developed countries. Even the most conservative population estimates produced by the ABS (Series C below) place the total population in 2056 at over 30 million (ABS, 2010b). More realistic estimates range from close to 35 million people (Series B), to over 40 million people (Series A). These changes all occur within approximately 40 years, with further increases typically projected to take place beyond this time.

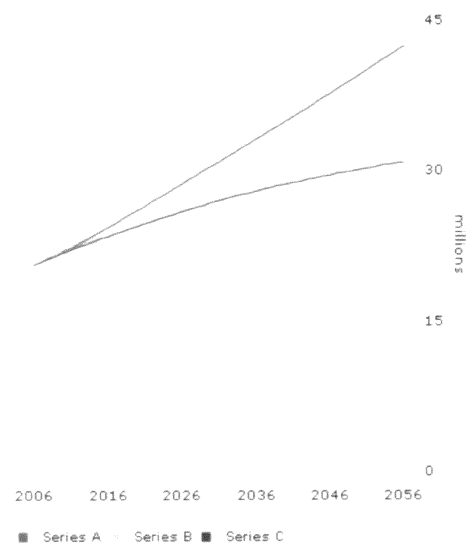


Figure 1 ABS Population Projections, Australia, 2006-2101 (Cat. No. 3222.0)

PREDICTION B: OUR POPULATION WILL BE MORE DIVERSE

Australia's current and anticipated population growth reflects two components; natural increase due to the ratio of births versus deaths and increase due to migration. While there has been a slight increase in births relative to deaths in recent years, most of our anticipated population growth is due to migration (ABS, 2010a). Economic incentives for people to migrate from less developed countries to Australia remain strong and are more apparent due to increasingly global communication systems. International travel is also more affordable than previously. Successive governments have supported migration to further economic and national building objectives. Many migrants are students or young adults and the vast majority migrate to our most populous states because of stronger employment or educational opportunities. People migrating to Australia bring with them a diverse range of cultural views and expectations.

PREDICTION C: OUR POPULATION WILL BE OLDER

ABS predictions regarding age parallel those in most of the developed world. Low levels of fertility (often by choice) will combine with increased life expectancy to significantly alter the age composition of the Australian population (ABS, 2010a; 2010b). In 2006, people aged 65 years and over comprised 13% of the Australian population. This will approximately double to between 23% and 25% in 2056 and will be even higher in 2101. Taking into account the overall increase in population size, this represents a massive social change. Moreover, while there were relatively few people aged 85 years and over in Australia in 2006 (1.6% of the population), this group will grow to between 4.9% and 7.3% by 2056. To watch an animation of this increase, go to <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/home/Population%20Pyramid%20-%20Australia>

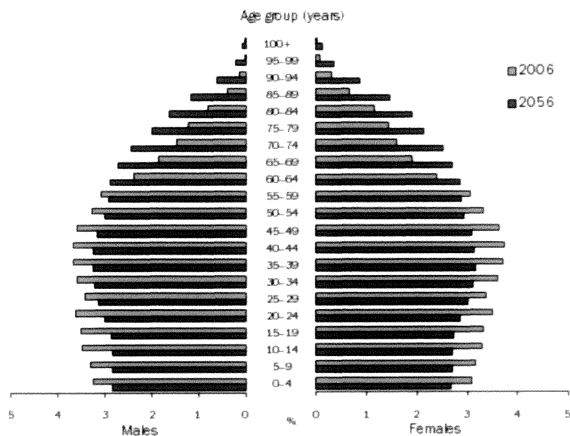


Figure 2 ABS Population Projections, Australia, 2006-2101 (Cat. No. 3222.0)

PREDICTION D: OUR POPULATION WILL BE MORE MOBILE

Several factors mean that our population will be more mobile. More people are expected to start families later or not at all in the next few decades (up to one third will never marry or have children) so the number of young people living alone in SPUDs (Single Person Urban Dwellings) will increase. More people will work from home in small businesses providing services and, because of the relatively low ratio between workers and older retirees requiring services, highly skilled workers will be in high demand globally. This will increase demand for cheap, high density, single or multiple person dwellings (somewhere to crash not raise a family), and result in fewer home owners ('mingles' and 'freemales' typically cannot afford mortgages and prefer not to be tied down) and less stability (singles relocate more often and travel more frequently). In the next 15 years the number of people living alone in Australia is expected to increase from less than 2 million to more than 3 million, an increase of between 57 and 105%. There is also expected to be a marked increase in the number of couple-only (no children) families (ABS, 2005).

PREDICTION E: OUR POPULATION WILL BE MORE URBAN

Population growth is expected to be uneven, occurring mostly within capital cities. In 2008 approximately 64% of Australians lived in capital cities. This is expected to increase to 67% in 2051. This 3% increase is massive given the overall increase in population size. This, along with the other trends described above, is expected to lead to a marked increase in urban density (ABS, 2010a).

Potential implications for animal management

If we take a longer-term perspective, all of these social trends have substantial implications for animal management, particularly in urban areas – but exactly what are these implications and what knowledge do we need to collect now to help us prepare for the changes we are likely to experience?

One positive change might be increased demand for 'easy-to-manage' pets like cats, smaller, friendlier and calmer dogs, birds and small mammals. Because these animals are easier to manage, there may be less need for management services to cope with potentially dangerous dogs and roaming cats. Also, because older Australians typically spend more time at home, and because more younger Australians will work from home, companion animals may be expected to spend more time in the dwelling and less time in the (often

nonexistent) backyard. This may reduce complaints related to barking or wandering dogs. Imagine an environment with no barking dogs, no dangerous dogs and a greatly reduced number of stray animals. This environment already exists in some European countries but what effect might it have on the daily activities of an animal management officer and how can we prepare for a smooth transition?

With 'baby boomers' retiring en masse, complete with relatively high disposable incomes and high service expectations, we might also expect to see increased demand for pet-friendly housing and pet services (grooming, walking, boarding, veterinary services, daycare), particularly in high density areas. The capacity for people to own pets for long periods (the life of the pet) might be reduced, however, by the effects of aging and increased mobility. Aging Australians often travel extensively and also spend more time in hospital than their younger counterparts. Because many more people will live alone, with limited family support, this might mean that we need to put many more local government resources into animal management services designed to support and facilitate pet ownership. Perhaps shelters and pounds will need to change their focus from sheltering and re-homing unwanted or abandoned pets to providing short or long-term respite care for much-loved pets while owners are temporarily incapacitated. Maybe we will see a greater need to rehome pets, unable to accompany relocating younger owners, or a growing demand for foster pets by people who know they will live in a given area only transiently.

The effect of increased cultural diversity on roles for animal management officers are difficult to predict. Some cultures have not typically kept animals as companions and migrants from these cultures may choose not to adopt this practice. Alternatively, it is possible that many migrants will participate in pet ownership. With limited ownership experience these sectors of the population may need more or different forms of local government support. Being able to predict these needs in advance may have positive outcomes for the general community and for the welfare of the animals involved.

Conclusion

Scientists have much to offer animal management professionals but need to know where to begin. In the absence of a crystal ball, all of the changes presented in this paper are speculative, designed primarily to inspire reflection on the part of key stakeholders. It is probably relatively easy to identify issues that need to be addressed right now, particularly at a local level, but we can also be absolutely certain that we are going to see massive

social changes in the next few decades. Preparing for these changes and influencing them in an informed and positive manner requires a coordinated approach led by a national organization like AIAM, capable of generating widespread interest and of working with scientists to develop strategies to generate the required resources. The future starts here! We can either wait for it to happen to us and respond as best we can, or we can direct it using evidence-based policies and practices that will improve outcomes for all Australians.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005). 4102.2 – Australian Social Trends, 2005. Retrieved 20.08.2011 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4102.02005>.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010a). 4102.0 – Australian Social Trends, Jun 2010. Retrieved 20.08.2011 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4102.0Jun%202010>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010b). 1370.0 – Measures of Australia's Progress, 2010. Retrieved from [http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1370.0~2010~Chapter~Population%20projections%20\(3.4\)](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1370.0~2010~Chapter~Population%20projections%20(3.4))
- Bennett, P.C., Cooper, N., Rohlf, V.I., & Mornement, K. (2007). Factors influencing owner satisfaction with companion-dog training facilities. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 10(3), 217-241.
- King, T., Marston, L.C., & Bennett, P.C. (2009). Describing the ideal Australian companion dog. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 120, 84-93.
- Rohlf, V.I., Bennett, P.C., Toukhsati, S., & Coleman, G. (2010). Why do even committed dog owners fail to comply with some responsible ownership practices. *Anthrozoös*, 23(2), 143-155.
- Shepard, P. (1996). *The other: how animals made us human*. Washington, DC- Island Press.
- Toukhsati, S.R., Bennett, P.C., & Coleman, G.J. (2007). Behaviors and attitudes towards semi-owned cats. *Anthrozoös*, 20(2), 131-142.

BIOGRAPHY

Assoc Professor Pauleen Bennett

Director of Regional Operations, School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University, Victoria

Email: pauleen.bennett@latrobe.edu.au

Pauleen is director of the Anthrozoology Research Group, a group of researchers who specialise in understanding and improving human-companion animal relationships. She has been instrumental in initiating many research projects in the area which have direct application to the field of animal management and has recently taken up a new position in the School of Psychological Science at La Trobe University, based at the lovely rural campus in Bendigo.