

# What should be done with Stray Dogs?

## Evidence and Proposals

**Only a change of behavior from pet holders could really solve the problem faced by several communes in the country. Measures such as sterilization, kennels with adoption programs, and euthanasia in extreme cases, are only complementary measures which can even end up having a boomerang effect while facilitating animal negligence and abandonment.**

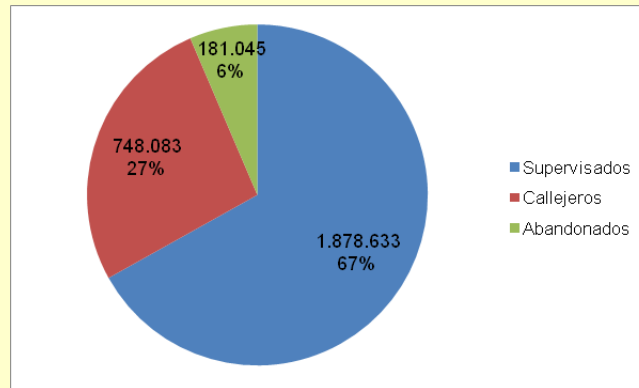
The presence of wandering and stray dogs has become a major problem in most of the country. In some communes of the capital city, we can see up to ten or more dogs on average per block, for example, in Cerro Navia, Renca, Quilicura, Pedro Aguirre Cerda and Lo Espejo. It is estimated that between 177,000 and 285,000 unsupervised dogs are wandering in the streets.<sup>i</sup> This situation repeats itself in several regional cities like Calama, Valparaiso, Osorno and Punta Arenas. Therefore, it is clear that the subject has not been effectively dealt with neither by the sanitary authority nor by most of the municipalities.

This situation implies serious drawbacks in security matters. The Health Seremi of Santiago (Regional Ministerial Secretary) estimates that, only in 2011, more than 35,000 people were bitten by stray dogs in the country.<sup>ii</sup> In the last months, several cases of attacks by packs of dogs have received broad media coverage, which have started a public debate.<sup>iii</sup>

Additionally, the population has been forced to cope with public health problems due to the presence of animals in the streets. The waste left on the streets contaminates the environment and favors the transmission of parasitic zoonoses. Conservative estimations indicate that this waste accounts for 32 tons just in the city of Santiago. As a consequence thereof, it is calculated that a third of the squares and two thirds of the parks in Santiago present contamination with parasite eggs, while in other zones – such the IV Region – the population has suffered diseases like hydatid cyst, which is transmitted by dogs.<sup>iv</sup> The Ministry of Health estimates that, in total, approximately US\$1 million are spent annually to care for diseases and attacks by stray dogs.<sup>v</sup>

Chart 1

### ESTIMATION OF CANINE POPULATION IN CHILE



Source: Fundación CEFU

#### Abandoned or Neglected Dogs?

Contrary to what we may think, most of the unsupervised dogs circulating in the streets have an owner. In fact, it has been calculated that 63% of the dogs wandering in the streets of Santiago corresponds to animals that are liberated during the day by their owners. Only 26% of the stray dogs are ownerless abandoned dogs. The remaining fraction is classified as “neighborhood” dogs, that is, without a recognized owner that is responsible for them, but who are fed and protected by residents from a street or park.<sup>vi</sup>

Abandoned dogs have little influence on the canine population growth, since their precarious health condition makes it difficult for them to reproduce. Therefore, these animals have a relatively low life expectancy and usually do not attack the population because of their weakness. Instead, the problem lies in the so-called “wandering dogs” and “neighborhood dogs”, which have an owner or are fed by a group of people, but where no one is responsible during most of the day, allowing them to wander aimlessly along the streets with no control. Most of these animals are not sterilized, so they are the main cause of the canine population growth, thus increasing the number of abandoned dogs and puppies.

Some of the puppies that are born and survive are liable to adoption, but the high reproduction rate largely exceeds their “absorption rate”.<sup>vii</sup> According to calculations from the CEFU Foundation, more than 700 new puppies are born and survive each year, while in Chile there is an adoption capacity of scarcely half of these animals. This means that around 350 thousand dogs, born from females with owner, increase the number of abandoned animals every year.

Is it the animal's fault? No. the responsibility falls directly on the owners of these pets, since they do not keep the dogs inside their homes, they do not control them when going out the street and/or do not sterilize them.

### **What does the Chilean Law Say?**

Currently, Law N° 20,380 on animal protection is in force, which was enacted in 2009 after 10 years of proceeding. This law forbids the abuse, but it does not provide for rules concerning mandatory responsible ownership, does not sanction abandonment nor provides for population control policies.

Therefore, at the end of 2009, the government of Michelle Bachelet, by means of an alternative instruction to another bill, introduced an initiative aimed at a responsible ownership, which also stipulated mechanisms for canine population control. This bill generated polemics among animal organizations, since it allowed municipalities to practice euthanasia in case animals picked up from the street were not claimed after a certain period of time.

The current government eliminated the urgency character to this bill in January 2010, and at the end of the same year it introduced an alternative instruction, stipulating that unclaimed animals would be handed over to an animal protection NGO.

Furthermore, the bill which is currently under proceeding in the Congress provides for the creation of the "National Council of Animal Protection", an organism formed by the undersecretaries of Interior, Health, Education, Agriculture and Finance. This Council would be in charge of elaborating a National Strategy for Animal Population Protection, aimed at working out public policy guidelines regarding dog population control and protection, taking into account the content of Law N° 20,380. The Strategy should include, at least: education campaigns for responsible ownership aimed at the entire population; tools enabling adequate responsible ownership; programs for preventing abandonment and animal adoption stimulus; massive and mandatory sterilization programs; pet registration and identification systems; mechanisms to discourage the indiscriminate breeding and reproduction of pets or companion animals, and strategic associations with NGOs that promote responsible ownership in order to collaborate in the design and implementation of different policies. The bill is also explicit as for sanctioning animal abandonment in public spaces, stipulating money penalties and allowing the animal's seizure in case of repeated offense.

In general, this bill has been well received in animal organizations, except for the power of municipalities to pick up and give abandoned dogs to animal protection NGOs for their maintenance (until they are adopted), due to insufficient available funds. In addition, considering that the number of dogs who are born and survive exceeds the human population's adoption

possibilities, many animals would run the risk of staying in the NGO shelters with no hope of being adopted, thus increasing the financial burden of the Treasury and the municipalities, and deviating funds that could be used in giving substantial solutions to the problem.

It should be noted that, together with this legislative proposal, there have been other efforts by some municipalities to cope with the issue of stray dogs. We should highlight the Municipality of Peñalolén, whose ordinance emphasizes responsible ownership, stipulating, among other things, the obligation to identify animals either through collars or electronic chips and the prohibition to leave loose animals in the streets, under penalty of fines. Likewise, the Municipality of Santiago offers free vaccination and parasite control programs and chip identification, as well as sterilization plans.

### **Towards an Optimal Public Policy**

The question arises as to where should an adequate public policy aim at to face the stray dogs' problem.

Some propose euthanasia (dog elimination) as the most effective way to reduce dogs in the streets, arguing that, when done in a painless way, the dog does not suffer much. Maybe euthanasia is justified in certain cases; for example, when the animal picked up in the street is evaluated and it is concluded that his weakened condition does not make him eligible for adoption. The risk is that once this measure is accepted, it could be considered a first option and not a last resort alternative, as it should be.

There are also well-grounded reasons to believe that this measure, on its own, is not a definitive solution. Applying euthanasia implies to assume the responsibility of its consequences, but not the problem's cause, which is the irresponsible behavior of animal owners who do not see that their animals remain inside the home and do not supervise them when they go out in the streets or who openly abandon their pets. This could even turn into an abandonment facilitator, since it liberates the owner from the costs of getting rid of the animal. Moreover, euthanasia faces a strong opposition from certain citizen groups and animal organizations, in addition to being banned by the law, except in case of rabies (practically extinguished today).

The creation of shelters does not solve the problem either. Once they start operating, we should expect to see a reduction in the initial stock of animals in the streets; however, inasmuch as abandonment is not stopped, they will only serve for owners to get rid of their animals in the streets, while feeling reassured that they will be taken to a shelter, which is financed with everybody's funds. Furthermore, after a while, these facilities could not accept any more animals, because the dog reproduction and abandonment rate is higher than the absorption rate through adoption processes.

Sterilization is another recurrent measure set forth to reduce the canine population growth rate. As a matter of fact, a good sterilization and citizen awareness program could be part of the solution, inasmuch as it reduces the canine population growth to levels close to the “absorption capacity”, thus allowing all born animals to be given for adoption. The question is how we finance these massive sterilization programs, since considerable funds are required, and the public policy sphere has to assess the alternative uses of these financial resources.

In any case, the substantial solution must be necessarily focused on changing people’s conduct concerning animals. In fact, an adequate public policy should aim at “closing the door” to animal abandonment and not simply searching for short-run sensational measures (such as their elimination). The fact that there are dogs on the streets reflects a social behavior problem, which is attributable to a perception of the animal as a consumption (and disposable) object, which is exacerbated by the lack of penalties for negligence or abandonment.

Therefore, measures are needed to make owners responsible for their animals’ care and for the pets’ conduct towards others, and which also prevent abandonment. In this perspective, it is essential to boost initiatives such as those promoted by the bill which is currently in the second legislative proceeding. This will enable to advance in massive sterilization plans, making dog identification mandatory –either through collars or microchips with information about their owners and the way to contact them- and explicitly stipulating the abandonment’s penalization, since the current law only deals with abuse and cruelty against animals; if abandonment is considered a way of negligence or not is left at the judges’ criteria.

We can also modify behaviors by means of imposing money penalties (for keeping dogs in the streets without supervision, leaving waste in public spaces and streets, etc.), which could be enhanced by an adequate control. If awareness and complaint agencies are created, control would not be the sole responsibility of the police and municipal inspectors, but of the residents themselves too.<sup>viii</sup>

We should also evaluate the possibility of establishing controls over the so-called “neighborhood dogs” at the municipal level. Experience on this matter has been diverse<sup>ix</sup> and there are opposing opinions on this issue, but the truth is that well-intentioned actions of the neighbors who feed dogs that wander in the streets end up increasing the problem for the rest of the community. Anyhow, the Prefecture should organize coordinated work among the different municipal ordinances, in order to achieve certain homogeneity in relation to the ownership and protection regulation, because even if the right measures are taken, these will not be effective if they are applied in just a few communes.

### Conclusions

The only way to terminate with the issue of stray dogs is dealing with the core of the problem, which means to put an end to abandonment. Therefore, measures aiming at animal responsible ownership should be implemented.

There are also other complementary measures regarding the awareness and promotion of responsible ownership that are cost-effective, such as sterilization. According to estimations from the CEFU Foundation, with a 10% sterilization rate it is possible, in less than 10 years, for the puppy production to reach a level allowing all born animals to have adoption opportunities.<sup>x</sup>

On the other hand, euthanasia is not a very effective alternative (it could only cope with ownerless animals), its cost could be even greater than that of sterilization, and it also faces a strong opposition from animal organizations and some citizen sectors.

Meanwhile, a policy based on shelters is still more expensive, because the maintenance cost for each dog could finance the sterilization of several animals. Furthermore, since the adoption opportunities are less than the number of born puppies, these shelters would generate increasing costs for the municipalities and capture financial resources that could be used in more effective policies.

All in all, only a change of behavior from pet holders could really solve the problem faced by several communes in the country. Measures such as sterilization, kennels with adoption programs, and euthanasia in extreme cases, are only complementary measures which can even end up having a boomerang effect while facilitating animal negligence and abandonment.

#### In brief...

#### ACTUAL CONDITIONS OF STRAY DOGS IN CHILE:

- In Greater Santiago, it is estimated that between 177,000 and 285,000 unsupervised dogs are wandering in the streets.
- The Health Seremi of Santiago estimates that, only in 2011, more than 35.000 people were bitten by stray dogs in the country.
- The bill which is currently under proceeding in the Congress provides for the creation of the "National Council of Animal Protection", an organism formed by the undersecretaries of Interior, Health, Education, Agriculture and Finance; they would be in charge of elaborating a National Strategy for Animal Population Protection, aimed at working out public policy guidelines regarding dog control

and protection, taking into account the content of Law N° 20,380.

- The only way to terminate with the issue of stray dogs is dealing with the core of the problem, which means to put an end to abandonment. Therefore, measures aiming at animal responsible ownership should be implemented.

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<sup>i</sup> Ibarra, Espínola and Echeverría, “*Una prospección a la población de perros existente en las calles de la ciudad de Santiago, Chile*”. It is important to highlight that the trouble with counting stray dogs with reasonable precision results in the existence of a great variance among different estimations, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.latercera.com/noticia/nacional/2010/11/680-304726-9-seremi-de-salud-reporta-18-mil-ataques-de-perros-por-ano-en-la-rm.shtml>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.latercera.com/noticia/nacional/2013/01/680-503979-9-la-ciudad-dividida-por-los-perros.shtml>

<sup>iv</sup> Ibarra, Espínola and Echeverría, *op. cit.*

<sup>v</sup> “*Perros vagos: Chile sigue sin ley que los regule, pese a 50 mil ataques anuales*” (El Mercurio, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012).

<sup>vi</sup> Ibarra, Espínola and Echeverría, *op. cit.*

<sup>vii</sup> The absorption rate represents the number of puppies with adoption possibilities, given the human population inhabiting a territory.

<sup>viii</sup> The existence of Animal Control Units in the Police Departments of several cities in the state of New York is worth mentioning; they are in charge of responding to complaints concerning the presence of dogs without supervision or collar in public spaces, animal maltreatment, biting and/or fighting. These units have trained personnel and patrols to respond to the complaints 24 hours a day.

<sup>ix</sup> The Municipality of Santiago, for example, tried to dictate an ordinance that ordered not to feed dogs in the streets, but due to the opposition of certain organizations, it had to be changed and finally, it only stipulated rules for dogs’ feeding. Meanwhile, in Peñalolén they have chosen to make responsible, at the same level of an owner or carer, those who usually shelter or feed them.

<sup>x</sup> It is estimated that a massive sterilization program would have an approximate cost of CLP\$12,000 per dog.