

On the Positive Side

By Judy Long / For the Sun-News

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LAS CRUCES - Issues of animal welfare or abuse that plague Las Cruces today have many parallels with challenges and controversies over child protection and welfare. Both pose deep challenges to traditional ideas about dominance, ownership, fairness and finally, ethics toward our fellow mammals.

Readers may assume that current thinking about animal welfare is borrowed from our history with issues of child welfare. In fact the reverse is true. Child protection legislation in the United States followed the outlines of animal welfare activity in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom. Organizing for animal welfare has been established since the 1880's. In Britain, the first animal cruelty legislation was passed in 1882, and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1884.

The early targets of the RSPCA were industries where animal cruelty could be observed in public: slaughterhouses, coach horses, markets. Their mandate included taking custody of lost, neglected, homeless or injured animals.

Standards evolved: animal welfare is now thought to include freedom from thirst and hunger; freedom from pain, injury and disease; freedom from fear, distress and mental suffering. In addition, animals should be free to express behavior normal to their kind, including having the company of their own species, and should be free of physical discomfort such as might result from being confined in too small a space.

These goals apply today to pet shops, breeders, animals that live behind fences or behind walls, including those in the privileged category we call pets.

Medieval forms of animal torture such as bear-baiting and bull-baiting were abandoned long ago in Europe. But bullfighting survives. In New Mexico today, dogfighting and cockfighting have gone underground in reaction to recent legislation banning these blood sports.

These are not sports; they are industries, profiting a few humans, and sentencing hundreds of animals to substandard living conditions, short lives and brutal deaths. Patrons who think of them as "sport" are able to overlook the fact that the "athletes" are abused, mutilated and drugged, while the "owners" have no obligation for their wellbeing. The enormous power differential between humans and other animals, and the concept of property, are used to justify animal cruelty.

Hidden costs of such activity are paid by private citizens who in no way support dog racing or dogfighting. They must step up and try to provide homes for the animals that survive.

Greyhounds have large litters; most of those who survive their short racing career will never see the 12 years of their theoretical life expectancy, unless they are adopted. Raids on illegal dogfighting produce a large surplus of dogs that swamp the animal welfare facilities, such as the animal shelter. This unhappy surplus inevitably leads to excessive euthanasia rates. And Las Cruces is a town striving for the ideal of zero kills.

Resistance to pressure for animal welfare is bolstered by private property and the profit motive. Ownership means control. Once again we find a parallel to child welfare struggles, where parental authority can trump an independent evaluation of the wellbeing of the child.

Accusations of neglect and abuse can be shrugged off where the head of the household "owns" his children. A parent can assert that nutrition is adequate, "discipline" is necessary, and emotional abuse is "only words."

With animal abuse as with child abuse, institutions outside the family sometimes take a hand. Plato may have been the first man to observe that the best interests of the child may require removing her or him from the home.

Recognizing the limitations of families as guardians of children, public institutions have assumed some degree of oversight over child welfare in modern times. Personnel of schools and health facilities now have a legal obligation to report cases where child abuse is suspected.

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Recently the problem of bullying has come into focus. Schoolyard bullying, we discover, eerily mirrors familial abuse. And animal abuse. Repeated ridicule and name calling are recognized as forms of emotional abuse.

In some cases a child's property is destroyed, or his/her animals tortured or killed. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to recognize the threat of such a message. In both settings, help for children has been slowed by attitudes that minimize suffering or dismiss abuse as "normal." The walls of the household can conceal sexual abuse, parents' substance abuse, and domestic violence.

The problem of animal hoarding is another practice that affects the community, not just the household. Animal lovers who do not spay and neuter their animals achieve overpopulation in the twinkling of an eye.

A person who can afford to feed five animals, and intends to provide veterinary care for them, suddenly finds herself or himself with a hundred. A would-be animal rescuer cannot keep up with births (and deaths) in their home. Next comes public health complaints, criminal charges, overcrowding in the animal shelter and yes, more euthanasia.

Standards have changed (for the better), and standards are changing. Dog-fighting and cockfighting are against the law. Members of the public engage the property owner with concern for animal welfare.

Private households foster animals that have a chance at adoption. Schoolchildren are learning about pet overpopulation, and sometimes educate their parents. Community facilities (never adequately funded) can be a way-station or a final destination.

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