

Romania's stray dog problem through my eyes

Reason and compassion
By Alex Ionescu

Who I am

- BA in Psychology, Bryn Mawr College, USA
- MSc in Applied Animal Behaviour and Animal Welfare, with dissertation on canine temperament testing, University of Edinburgh, UK
- President of NGO Romanian Stray Dogs Ploiesti
 - Our Ploiesti Neutering Challenge has provided over 2,300 free sterilizations for the community since 2012
- Manager of social vet clinic Friendly Vets for Pets
 - A modest 'social' vet clinic with affordable prices
- Vet technician, currently vet school student

What is with stray dogs in Romania?

- Old established problem in Romania
- Communism. The big forced move from countryside into cities for labor
 - dogs left behind
- Lack of education and irresponsible dog ownership
 - ongoing abandonment
 - law against abandonment never reinforced
- Weak or bad legislation– catch & kill
 - wrong approach all along for the wrong reasons

Legal background

- For over 20 years, a catch and kill policy, whether legal or behind closed doors
 - No real improvements in homeless animal numbers
 - Quite on the contrary... catch and kill not only does not work, but costs hugely in terms of numbers of animals to be sacrificed as well as financial resources involved in the process
- No animal protection law until 2004
- 2008 was a big breakthrough:
 - It became illegal to put down healthy dogs in theory
 - Abuse and cruelty against animals became a crime according to law
 - In reality, old habits die hard
 - Instances of animal cruelty and abandonment almost never prosecuted according to law
 - Local administrations often suspected for mass poisoning campaigns
 - A law is only as good and strong as it gets reinforced by authorities. But what do you do when authorities are accomplices?

In recent past

- September 2013. The crucial legal change following an unfortunate event
 - While still not very clear as to what exactly happened, it appears an unattended child trespassed private land and was attacked and killed by the dogs in that territory
- Mass dog cull is implemented again
 - Mass hysteria following a child being killed by dogs; subsequent hate waves and acts of cruelty against homeless animals as “preventive” means to protect children
 - In 2014 the legal court suspended the guidelines for the mass kill policy. In theory, a law without legal guidelines cannot be applied. Yet this is precisely what is happening in reality.

Reality versus theory

- In June 2014, the guidelines for the newly reintroduced catch and kill law were officially suspended following Vier Pfoten lawsuit
 - Since June 2014, catching, transporting and killing dogs is illegal in theory
 - In reality, dogs are still caught and transported day and night into state pounds across Romania to be put to sleep
 - Especially so in Bucharest where authorities themselves (ASPA= Association for Animal Surveillance and Protection) take the lead and set a notorious example for the rest of the country

This is what we see in reality -1-

- Authorities afford themselves the freedom to catch and kill animals despite the killing law guidelines being officially suspended
 - Laws are on paper alone
 - It is authorities themselves first and foremost that ignore legislation
- Without healthy dog population management practices, animals keep on being born and abandoned on public domain, hence a circle of never-ending suffering

This is what we see in reality -2-

- Authorities catch dogs by no criteria
- Public pounds are unbelievably overcrowded
- There is no such thing as animal welfare
- Volunteers' access is highly restricted in pounds
- Adopting out a dog from a public shelter is never easy nor cheap – emotional blackmail
- 14 days to be adopted, otherwise euthanized is a myth
 - The cocktail of deadly viruses is often enough for a stressed and traumatized animal
 - Animals kill each other over food and space

This is what we see in reality -3-

- Puppies continue to be born in people's courtyards, only to be killed or abandoned
- In front of the local pound, new litters of pups abandoned almost daily
 - Sure death for them as the cocktail of viruses for unvaccinated puppies is lethal. Pure suffering
- Moms with pups or pregnant females are also at high risk to be abandoned
- No one ever taken to court for dumping
- Never ending supply of animals to kill for money

Which brings us to the heart of the problem

- As long as they exist, stray dogs are good business for some
- In Bucharest, ASPA's budget for next year to catch and kill dogs will be 7 million euro
- Catching and killing a dog costs on average 330 ron (approx. 70 euro), sometimes as much as 900 ron (200 euro)
 - All from taxpayers' money

They do not want the stray dog supply to end

- TNR works! (if you sterilize all females, owned and homeless)
- Highly efficient in terms of costs and long lasting impact
- As an example, in Oradea with massive TNR:
 - They sterilized for free all females, homeless or owned, even from the most remote villages of the larger Bihor County
 - As a result, homeless animal numbers went down from 4,500 to 300 in 6 years
 - The costs for the sterilization program were in the range of 60-80 ron per dog (13-18 euro)

Why would they not listen?

- Authorities typically ignore this data and are traditionally in favor of catch and kill
 - In my hometown Ploiesti, authorities rejected only months ago a proposal calling for sterilization of all dogs, homeless or owned
 - Reason invoked: lack of funds. But they do find the money for catch and kill
 - As a result, what we've seen across town: new waves of newly abandoned animals taking over

The big points

- Catch and kill does not solve stray dogs' problem
- Catch and kill is unfortunately quite profitable business
- Huge difference between what authorities claim and the actual reality
 - Authorities are accomplices in crime

What authorities say versus do

- In December 2013, members of the European Parliament visited Romania and met with Romanian authorities
 - Romanian authorities claimed the newly implemented law was a law encouraging adoptions, not killing; that the law was humane and that public pounds worked under sheer transparency
- In January 2014, members of the European Parliament returned to Romania to see for themselves the actual state of affairs
 - They found appalling differences between what authorities claimed and what was actually happening in public dog pounds

Looking dangerous?



photo ©C.Arsene - FNPA

Believe it or not, these dogs live in pounds and die on a lot of money



photo ©C.Arsène - FNPA

Huge difference between costs and what we actually see



Defeated and abused

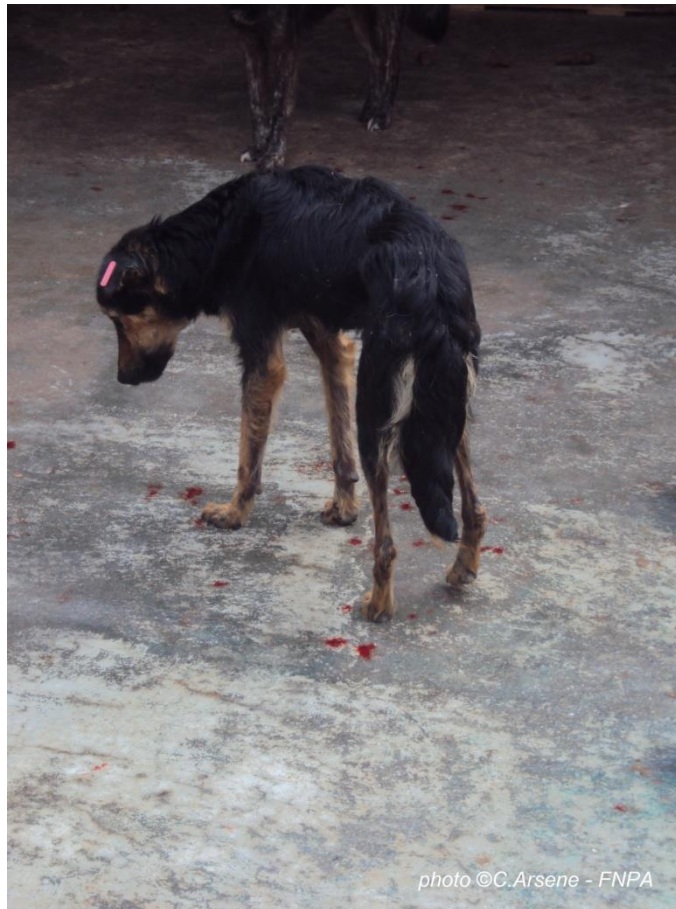


photo ©C.Arsene - FNPA

Simply born to suffer



photo ©C.Arsene - FNPA

Hard reality for people too

- Current European treaties do not set a legal basis for animal protection across member states
 - Each country for its own
- The only way to force the European Commission to intervene in Romania is in the context of citizen's well being/mental health
 - Already cases of people that suffer greatly; people that have died from cardiac arrest
 - In Bistrita, a British researcher found that 86% of the children that had witnessed animal abuse were affected emotionally
 - Emotional trauma is very real
 - In July 2014, the European Commission was summoned at the European Court of Justice- towards implementing a legal frame across all member states

Now tell me again...

- Why do animals have to keep on being born to suffer? Something is really rotten here.
- Unhappy about the state of affairs, not counting anymore on local authorities nor national bodies to implement the right policies, we've taken on the responsibility to change things around in our corner of Romania, solely from private donations
- When citizens lose faith in corrupt authorities, it is their duty to take action

Putting Ploiesti on the map



Romanian Stray Dogs Ploiesti & Friendly Vets for Pets



What we do is we sterilize like mad



We provide daily free sterilizations
for females owned or homeless



More and more female dogs or cats



Our sterilized cats' pyramids!



Someone has to do the right thing



It's a minimally invasive procedure



Really tiny



It's easy



You wake up...



And then you never have to worry
about suffering litters again!



Sterilizations save lives

- We often hear from dogs' caretakers: "If she was going to give birth one more time, then we were going to dump them on the side of the road"
- Sterilizing females not only reduces animal numbers, but ensures these females themselves are kept instead of being dumped
- We've operated on many females with pyometra. Similarly, pregnant females with dead puppies inside and unable to give birth. These animals are now alive because they were sterilized.

AFP helped make this possible - We say thanks!

- Last year our partner organization Dog's Wish was awarded a 750 euro award at the Stray Animal Foundation symposium
- It helped us towards starting up our small social vet clinic Friendly Vets for Pets in a rented building, and make a world of difference for Romanian animals in our part of the country

It is never easy though

- To run an organization and a social vet clinic while being a full time vet student is wrecking
- Donations fluctuate and we always have to work hard so we can cover from donations at least 100-150 monthly free sterilizations
 - It is unbelievably hard to persuade people to donate towards sterilizations as means to prevent future suffering. Very few donate
- Sometimes you'd truly want to be able to do more for that one animal, such as re-homing her

It's cheap but it's not

- One sterilization costs our organization as little as 21 euro but makes such a big difference here in the local community
 - We're talking here about a very 'social' price covering vet materials and supplies; a social price that is a fraction of the prices practiced across other vet clinics
- Even so, we struggle each and every single day for donations that can keep our work going in the service of animals

The good: Mentalities can change

- A lady said her female dog was yet again in the early stages of pregnancy but that she did not want to sterilize her
- I told her it's her decision, but that she would be morally responsible to those puppies for all their lives, for the next 10-15 years; whenever they suffer, whenever they are left outside in the cold, abused or abandoned
- Minutes later she returned to schedule the female dog for a free sterilization

The bad: More to worry about -1-

- Current law requires all dog owners to microchip and register their animals at their own cost by January 2015. Owners of mix breed animals will also have to pay a tax if animals are not sterilized
- According to research by FNPA (National Federation for Animal Protection), 5.2 million owned dogs live in rural areas where people lack the money and concern to sterilize, microchip and register their animals
 - Fear of upcoming widespread abandonment as means to avoid being fined for not having a microchipped dog or taxed for owning an entire dog
 - People will not pay to sterilize their animals...

The bad: More to worry about -2-

- The poor economy encourages more and more people to leave Romania to seek employment and better living standards abroad
 - Guess what happens with their dogs?
 - In the last few years we've personally witnessed dramatic increases in the numbers of abandoned animals in rural landscape in larger Prahova County
 - Certain villages from where substantial numbers of people left for employment abroad are now invaded with abandoned dogs

Future horizons from the NGO pov

- The ultimate frontiers are
 - the Romanian countryside, the poor neighborhoods
 - That's where the vast numbers of abandoned animals are coming from!
 - If we can infiltrate free sterilization campaigns in here, then we win the war
 - Educational campaigns at a large scale
 - Unable to count on laws and law enforcement, all we can do is open people's eyes- TV maybe?

How you can help

- Yes, you CAN help!
- Persuade your authorities to put pressure on the European Union to set clear laws concerning humane and responsible animal management practices across all member states. Don't count that Romanian authorities will do the right thing by themselves. They have to be made to.
- Encourage and help those small organizations that work on a tiny budget to make wonders in their local communities via sterilizations and education
- Help us help ourselves

There is hope!

- Today there is presidential election day
- Change is not impossible
- Keep your fingers crossed
- Wake up, Romanian!

Thank you!

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