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Beyond Overpopulation: A Comment on Zawistowski et al. and Salman et al.

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The intentional production and destruction each year of millions of companion animals is a sobering fact. The need for meaningful statistical data on this phenomenon is urgent. No less pressing, however, is the need for a conceptual framework to make sense of the empirical findings. The conventional focus on overpopulation is inadequate and places unnecessary limits on the way in which the problem is approached. I propose in its place a market-based model that takes seriously the role of consumer demand and considers the flaws and inefficiencies distorting the market for companion animals. Shifting attention to the choices consumers make in acquiring and discarding animal companions suggests new possibilities for change and provides a useful focal point for further empirical work.

There is a pressing need for solid statistical data on the millions of companion animals destroyed in animal shelters each year. Zawistowski, Morris, Salman, & Ruch-Gallie (1998) and Salman et al. (1998) properly prioritized the systematic gathering of such data and contributed important new empirical findings to help fill the statistical void and lay a foundation for further study. Yet no compilation of statistics can lead to a reduction in the number of animals killed in shelters unless an adequate theoretical framework exists for assimilating and making use of that information. I believe that the conventional conceptual framework focusing on the concept of overpopulation is unequal to the task. Indeed, it is possible that this limited focus impedes the collection of empirical data regarding ani-
mals destroyed in animal shelters. Where the problem is defined as simply too many animals, statistics may seem to offer only a dreary index of failure.

I contend that the overpopulation model is both inaccurate and misguided. Not only is it heavily freighted with untested assumptions and blame-placing rhetoric, it presupposes a highly constrained toolkit of solutions. A better conceptual framework is one modeled on market analysis that takes account of the supply of and demand for companion animals, as well as the flaws built into the market for such animal companions. The economic and cultural forces that drive the ongoing cycle of production and destruction, as well as the impact of animal shelters on supply and demand, are of central importance in such a model. Because a market model focuses on the choices made by consumers rather than on the “mistakes” made by “irresponsible pet owners,” it offers new avenues for social change, such as the possibility of raising public consciousness about the implications of pet acquisition decisions.

In this article, I consider the implications of such a model. Although I focus primarily on canine companions in working through the market model, my observations apply to other companion animals as well, mutatis mutandis.

INADEQUACIES OF THE OVERPOPULATION MODEL

My quarrel with the term *overpopulation* begins with its lack of descriptive accuracy. It suggests that there is a literal overabundance of companion animals and that the country is teeming with them. This is not quite true. If animal control workers are doing their job effectively, collecting stray and unwanted animals from the community and killing those whom they cannot quickly rehome, there is never a significant oversupply of animals at any given point in time. As Brestrup (1997) observed, “killing the excess preserves the balance between live animals and numbers of available homes and shelter spaces” (p. 79). Thus, the overpopulation of which animal welfare organizations speak is largely of the latent variety, the idea that there would be far too many pets if the work of killing the “extras” were to slacken. This is no mere quibble over semantics. By stressing the idea of overpopulation, animal welfare organizations unwittingly convey a picture of the world that does not square with reality as most pet owners experience it. It is certainly not the reality experienced by those who make their living by bringing more puppies into the world.

Some would protest that overpopulation remains a meaningful concept even if society is spared its ill effects, because it can be easily quantified by simply looking at the number of “excess” animals killed each year. By this reasoning, if 3 million dogs were destroyed in animal shelters last year, it means there were 3 million too many dogs in existence last year. At first blush, one might find this statement so obviously true as to admit no argument. But on closer examination,
one finds that it contains a hidden assumption: The act of destroying millions of dogs annually has absolutely no impact on puppy birth rates. In other words, it assumes that if all animal shelters were to shut their doors, puppies would continue to be born at current levels, notwithstanding the millions of extra dogs that would be forced out into the cities and counties of the nation. Even as dogs assumed plague-like proportions, humans would continue to oversee the intentional or accidental production of just as many new puppies as before. Hence, another problem with the overpopulation model is its failure to account for the impact that the systematic destruction of dogs in animal shelters may have on the production of puppies.

**ROLE OF CONSUMER DEMAND**

The rhetoric of overpopulation has the further effect of placing blame for the destruction of unwanted companion dogs on the shoulders of those who are responsible for the birth of new puppies without exploring the implications of canine acquisition decisions. Thus, an overpopulation model myopically focuses on stemming the supply of dogs without even considering the demand side of the equation.

As Patronek and Glickman (1994) pointed out in their article modeling dog population dynamics, the role of demand is largely overlooked in analyses of shelter euthanasia. The primary focus is on limiting supply through such measures as breeder bans, breeder fees, public education, and spay-neuter laws (p. 39). Indeed, Finsen and Finsen (1994) identified the “war on breeding” as “the common thread in the new approach to this problem” (pp. 150–151). Yet unless the overall demand for puppies drops, artificially constricting the supply of puppies from a particular source will only spur an increase in production elsewhere to meet the demand (Patronek & Glickman, 1994, p. 40).

**Response to the Market**

Although it is difficult not to blame those who produce additional puppies for sale as millions of unwanted dogs are being put to death, these merchants are simply responding to market forces in a predictable manner. This does not mean, of course, that we should excuse pet producers who commit independently blameworthy actions, such as running crowded and unsanitary puppy mills. Nonetheless, blaming producers merely for meeting consumer demand is misguided. Economist Stigler (1986) likened it to “blaming the waiters in restaurants for obesity” (pp. 82–83). Because euthanasia takes many dogs off the market, only a limited number of homeless dogs are available for adoption at any given time. This means that those who sell puppies for profit or those who give away puppies produced accidentally or for “educational” purposes must meet
the bulk of the demand for companion dogs. The available statistics on sources of dog acquisition bear this out. Only 14% of all owned dogs were acquired at an animal shelter (Handy, 1992). The remaining 86% come from other sources, most of which involve new production. Almost all these puppies are produced either in direct response to demand or as an indirect consequence of it.

That professional breeders and pet store owners whose livelihood is the selling of puppies are responding to consumer demand is obvious. Perhaps less obvious is the impact of demand on a backyard breeder who is seeking to recoup or multiply his original investment in a purebred dog by selling the offspring. Unfortunately, certain unscrupulous sellers of puppies make this purported ability to earn back one’s investment in a purebred dog an integral part of the sales pitch (Benning, 1976; Nowell, 1978). If there were truly a glut of puppies, such a suggestion would be nonsensical.

Subtle Forces at Work

Nevertheless, it may seem odd to view the production of puppies through accidental or educational litters as anything other than plain human error or stupidity. Yet the reality of supply and demand relates even here, assuming that those responsible for such litters are uninformed or misguided, not malevolent. Even though an owner whose unspayed dog gives birth to a mystery mix litter is unlikely to make any money on the event, more subtle forces are at work. In a world in which there is unmet demand for puppies, the arrival of such a litter is a joyful event in the neighborhood, with friends and relatives often reserving certain of the pups for themselves. However accidental such a litter may be, the ability to place the puppies and the social approval (or lack of social disapproval) that go with having such a litter undoubtedly exert a subtle influence on the persons responsible for the accident. Perhaps their resolve to spay their pets softens, or they are led to reassure a friend that there is no real downside to having just one litter as an educational experience for the children. Nowell’s (1978) exasperated observation 2 decades ago remains relevant today: “Clearly, the message is not getting through. Pet owners are not being informed that it is socially unacceptable to add litter upon litter of puppies and kittens to species which are seriously overpopulated” (p. 181). The reason the message is not getting through, however, is not lack of information in the abstract, but a lack of tangible social consequences.

Popular culture reinforces this benign view of puppy production. First Lady Barbara Bush (1990) raised nearly a million dollars for charity with a picture book about her dog’s litter of pups. Thomas (1993) wrote a bestseller that detailed the reproductive lives of her wandering, unaltered pets, and Johnston’s (1996) popular comic strip For Better or For Worse cast both the accidental mating of two pets
and the resulting litter of mixed-breed puppies as humorous, wholesome, life-affirming events (pp. 166–171). Many popular pet care books, such as *Dogs for Dummies* (Spadafori, 1996), contain a how-to section on backyard breeding. To its credit, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Choosing, Training & Raising a Dog* (Hodgson, 1996) refrains from encouraging its target audience to dabble in dog reproduction. This fond view of animal reproduction is not confined to the popular press. In a recent scholarly book, a British professor of animal husbandry (Webster, 1994) advised against spaying and neutering domestic dogs, and recommended that female dogs have at least one litter to reduce health risks associated with an intact uterus. He viewed two or three litters as ideal, and asserted without any support that “bitches that have reared puppies may also be less likely to develop neurotic behaviour patterns such as furniture abuse or irrational fear or aggression in the presence of strange people or other dogs” (p. 207).

It should not be surprising that accidental and intentional litters abound, given the lack of social stigma associated with pet reproduction and the lack of any visceral evidence of overpopulation. As Brestrup (1997) queried, “where is the inherent pressure to change?” (p. 80).

THE MARKET FOR COMPANION ANIMALS

Only by putting aside the rhetoric of overpopulation is it possible to examine the market failures that contribute to the cycle of production and routine destruction of companion animals. The ongoing demand for canine companions is evident. Equally apparent is the fact that the vast majority of that demand is currently being met through newly produced puppies. What is unclear, as an empirical matter, is the extent to which the demand presently satisfied by the production of new puppies could be met by the adoptable canine companions being routinely destroyed in animal shelters.

Consumer Choice and Substitution

Put in economic terms, the question is whether shelter dogs are good substitutes for newly produced puppies. Salman et al.’s (1998) study brings us closer to an answer. Significantly, it found that less than 10% of owners who surrendered their dogs cited aggression toward people as the reason for relinquishment; higher percentages cited less severe behavioral problems and factors under human control such as human housing and lifestyle issues (p. 212). Although it is questionable whether the explanations offered by surrendering owners can be taken entirely at face value, the study offers significant insight into the characteristics of the shelter population. An owner, in the process of rationalizing a dif-
ficult or guilt-inducing decision, may over report animal-related problems. An owner, hoping to maximize the pet’s chances for adoption, may downplay the animal’s behavioral problems.

At a minimum, Salman et al.’s (1998) findings suggest that many suitable companion dogs end up in shelters. Puppies under 5 months, however, comprise only a small part of the shelter population (p. 213), making it important to determine whether demand can be effectively shifted to adolescent and adult dogs. It is sufficient for present purposes to note that, other things being equal, the more the demand for companion dogs is satisfied by dogs in shelters, the less demand there is for newly produced puppies. This reduction in demand could be expected to reduce the number of new puppies produced, as well as the death rate for unwanted dogs.

When animal advocate Sturla (1993) argued that “each animal produced by a breeder provides a death sentence for an adoptable animal at a shelter” (p. 929), she made a complex argument with several imbedded assumptions. The statement assumed that, given a choice between a newly produced puppy and a shelter dog, a consumer always selects the newly produced puppy, thus consigning the shelter dog to death. It further suggested that people will accept shelter dogs as substitutes for newly produced puppies if and only if breeders can somehow be stopped from producing the more attractive alternative. This is not very different from the argument typically raised by breeders that people choose to buy purebred puppies, preferring them to the companion dogs available in the local animal shelter. Asking breeders to stop producing a highly desired product in order to force people to switch to a second-choice product does not seem like a promising strategy.

Animal Shelters and Market Failure

The demand side of the equation, however, requires further attention. Can one simply assume that consumers always prefer newly produced puppies to animals available in shelters? That relatively few people currently choose to acquire their pets from animal shelters might be offered as evidence for this claim. Closer examination, however, reveals numerous imperfections in the market for shelter animals, and these imperfections very likely are creating distortions in consumer behavior.

A thought experiment illustrates some of the dimensions of the problem. Within my own occupational field, law, there is always some movement of employees and some changing needs of employers, which means that some subset of lawyers are out of work or between jobs at any given time. Imagine a world in which the sight of unemployed lawyers roaming the streets during normal business hours is considered the epitome of urban decay. The mere sight of an unemployed lawyer loose in the streets, resume and cellular phone in hand, excites violent dis-
gust in this world. To relieve the aesthetic agony inflicted on the city by these un-
fortunates, the ruling authorities decide to set up a job transition facility that, be-
cause of zoning restrictions, is sited next to the public landfill on the outskirts of
town where few residents ever venture. Trucks roam the streets to round up any
lawyers found at large during business hours and transport them to the facility.
There, lawyers await new jobs or, if no new job is offered within a calendar week, a
painless process is implemented that erases all legal training from their brains and
renders them unsuited for further legal employment. The authorities realize that it
is not really necessary to kill all the lawyers, if one can turn them into ordinary hu-
man beings again through the brain erasure procedure.

At the job transition facility, poorly trained personnel do intake, wrestling re-
sumes from the hands and briefcases of lawyers and redoing them in their own
words, making numerous mistakes, often misidentifying the lawyer’s area of spe-
cialization, and the like. These redone resumes are put outside each lawyer’s con-
crete cell, where they are often splashed with the water and bleach solution used to
clean out the facility. Sometimes the records become scrambled, but the lawyers
are given no chance to make corrections or offer explanations. The facility is dimly
lit, and the ruling authorities find it a handy place to put people charged with vio-
 lent crimes when the cells at the local jail become full. In short, it is a noisy, con-
fusing, dirty, ugly place. The lawyers are fed only once a day, which makes them
grumpy and surly. Because they are given infrequent access to bathing facilities,
they quickly become unshaven and wilted in appearance, their clothing wrinkled,
their hair unkempt. Morale plummets. They sit morosely in their cells all day, not
even bothering to engage in witty repartee.

Employers are permitted to visit and recruit, but this is not really encouraged.
Hours of operation are limited; the location is inconvenient. If employers do visit,
the facility staff persons often treat them rudely, give inaccurate and contradictory
information about the history of individual lawyers, and routinely suggest they
may not be good enough to hire a lawyer from the facility. Prospective employers
get only a brief chance to speak with the prospective employees, and there are of-
ten lengthy delays in getting even this opportunity. When such an interview does
occur, it takes place right in the middle of all the noise and confusion. An employer
who wishes to hire a lawyer from the facility must fill out exhaustive forms, await
the completion of a lengthy bureaucratic process that includes an intrusive site
visit to the employer’s offices, and pay a fee to the facility. On occasion, an em-
ployer goes through the whole process and arrives to collect the new hire, only to
learn that the lawyer’s brain was already erased by accident or that, due to a paper-
work error, she was hired away by another employer.

The other recruiting option open to employers is simply to go to the sparkling
new law school on the campus of the local university and hire from the ranks of the
graduating doctoral students. At the law school, the employers are treated with so-
llicitude, offered coffee and sodas, and ushered quickly into clean, comfortable,
private interview rooms. There they meet freshly scrubbed and immaculately dressed candidates who have their own crisp (proofread and spell-checked) resumes in hand, printed on good quality paper. It is easy to negotiate a job offer on the spot, if desired, and just as easy to arrange a follow-up interview.

In such a world, it would not be surprising if most employers chose to fill their vacancies from the graduating law class, rather than hazard a visit to the job transition facility. This would not necessarily signify any innate preference for new graduates over experienced lawyers. Instead, it might well reflect the fact that the market for new graduates is orderly, whereas the market for experienced lawyers is deeply flawed. Although many animal shelters greatly improved customer service and operations in recent decades, there is reason to believe that similar issues of inaccessibility and inconvenience continue to plague the secondhand dog market.

An additional factor that deters people from visiting animal shelters, of course, is the knowledge that pets are killed at the site. There is no way to calculate how many people who want a companion animal turn away from the shelter, afraid of becoming emotionally attached to a doomed animal, of being subjected to emotional blackmail, or of having one’s children exposed to the harsh realities of shelter life. Obtaining a pet is supposed to be a happy occasion, and it is not surprising that many people fear that a visit to an animal shelter would put a damper on the experience.

Geographic Mismatch

Still other barriers to obtaining a companion animal from a shelter arise from demographic and legal restrictions. Suburban areas surrounding major urban cities are probably the largest sources of demand for dogs and puppies, such that demand, especially for puppies, often far outstrips the supply in the local shelter. For example, in Fairfax County, VA, a large, affluent suburb of Washington, DC, people reportedly line up at the shelter door before opening time in the hope of getting a puppy. Meanwhile, the shelter in Fauquier County, a rural area about 40 miles away, is literally flooded with puppies, outpacing the demand that such a sparsely populated area can generate. Resolving the situation should be simple—either take the puppies to the people or let the people come get the puppies. In practice, however, things are considerably more complex.

First, families giving up puppy litters—a fairly commonplace scenario in rural counties—do not have the option of taking the puppies into a suburban shelter where demand is higher. Shelters typically refuse to accept “give ups” from outside their own county or jurisdiction. This is an understandable and even essential policy: Shelters must devote their limited funds to serving their own jurisdiction and cannot afford to become a dumping ground for animals from other places. Yet the practice exacerbates mismatch, forcing the puppies into a shelter in an area
where demand is low, which is, of course, usually the reason that the puppies are being given up in the first place. True, a particularly enterprising family could advertise its puppies in the suburban areas and place them personally, but in practice this is unlikely to happen.

Nor can potential adopters in suburban areas simply drive out to a rural shelter to adopt a puppy. Under Virginia law, for example, shelters may only approve adoptions to people who reside in the city or county in which the shelter is located or in an immediately adjacent political subdivision (Code of Virginia, Section 3.1-796.96(C), 1999). Thus, because a strip of Prince William County separates Fauquier County from Fairfax County, Fairfax County residents are prohibited from adopting a puppy from the Fauquier Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). Although it is sometimes possible to overcome these barriers by transferring animals between the two shelters (Code of Virginia, Section 3.1-796.96(C), 1999), the apparent senselessness of the rule often drives potential adopters away in disgust. The restriction must appear to the public as simply another bureaucratic excuse to kill more animals.¹

Unfortunately, such bureaucracy abounds in animal shelters. Contrary to popular perception, there is no unifying national organization that controls the roughly 4,700 shelters currently operating in the United States (Zawistowski et al., 1998, p. 196). Each shelter is independently operated; has its own paperwork, policies, rules, and approval processes; and typically has no relation to any other shelter. In this age of computers and web sites, almost all animal shelters remain purely local institutions with very little coordination even among nearby shelters in the same state. There are often wide variations, even among nearby jurisdictions, in the number and characteristics of dogs available (Rowan, 1997). Although some shelters experimented with the importation of puppies into higher demand areas (Patronek, Glickman, & Moyer, 1995, p. 31), such measures are relatively rare. Sadly, for the inhabitants of many animal shelters, geography is indeed destiny.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis raises the possibility that companion animals are being destroyed in animal shelters not because they are naturally inferior to the new animals being produced or because people naturally prefer the new production. The market for new companion animals (puppies and kittens) is relatively orderly and well developed, whereas inefficiencies and distortions beset the market for previously owned companion animals. As the primary clearinghouses for previously owned pets, and as the agencies that must dispose of unwanted sec-

¹Editor’s note: In 1999, the Virginia General Assembly amended Section 3.1-796.96(C) of the Virginia Code to allow any person to adopt from any Virginia shelter, if the animal is first sterilized.
ondhand companion animals, animal shelters provide a focus for examining problems in the secondary market. The problems are myriad.

Despite all this, times have probably never been better for shelter animals. A change in culture is underway. Many shelters consciously seek to increase their "market share" through public outreach and improved facilities (Handy, 1992, p. 4; Moulton, 1991, p. 1175). The San Francisco SPCA is a pioneer in this area, with its posh new Maddie's Pet Adoption Center, featuring a grand entry, light-filled hallways, and private, fully-furnished apartments for the pets (Snapp, 1998). The dark, filthy municipal shelter filled with uncaring or even sadistic employees is, happily, well on its way to becoming a thing of the past, at least in the better-funded areas. As more people have successful adoption experiences, the stigma associated with shelter dogs and the psychological barriers to visiting an animal shelter seem to be fading. As Thurston (1996) explained:

Empathy for homeless animals appears to be growing. Archaic notions that shelter dogs are unattractive, diseased, or ill-tempered—the bottom of the canine barrel—have been pretty much dispelled, and the adoption of mixed-breed dogs is more and more viewed as a hallmark of an enlightened sense of social responsibility. (p. 276)

Books specifically targeted at shelter adoptions have begun to appear on the bookshelves (Benjamin, 1990; Rubenstein & Kalina, 1996), and the shelter clientele is clearly expanding.

These developments speak to the demand side of the equation and, as such, offer real promise. No amount of rhetoric about overpopulation can reduce the number of new puppies if demand exists for them. A more effective approach is to remove the flaws and inefficiencies in the market for shelter dogs so that more of the demand for dogs is met through that source. In addition, by making people aware of the relevant market forces and of the implications of their dog acquisition decisions, positive preferences for shelter dogs can be fostered. Eventually, the acquisition of a canine companion may become an act of conscience, rather than merely the optimizing act of a consumer.

Such a raising of public consciousness cannot be done without the necessary supporting data. At present, millions of animals are destroyed each year as a result of consumer decisions about which very little is known. When one considers the quantity and quality of statistical data that are compiled about far less momentous consumer choices—brands of breakfast cereal, for instance—the necessity and importance of empirical work in this area become clear. Salman et al.'s (1998) detailed profiling of surrendered pets and their owners was an excellent start. It provides a wealth of information about the decisions that consumers make in discarding certain canine and feline products. More work is needed to profile the choices that pet owners make in acquiring animal companions.
There are practical barriers to obtaining meaningful data: the thousands of independently operated animal shelters, the lack of a standardized format for data collection, and the uneven record-keeping practiced by many shelters (Zawistowski et al., 1998, p. 203). But these barriers are not insurmountable. Zawistowski et al. were correct in asserting that a "long-term outreach effort to shelters" (p. 204) is in order if the necessary information is to be collected. A market-based model could provide the shift in focus necessary to make such an outreach effort successful and its results meaningful.

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Code of Virginia, § 3.1-796.96(C) (1999).


