

For the Love of Dog: The Human-Dog Bond in Rural and Remote Australian Indigenous Communities

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Abstract:

The nature of the human-animal bond in contemporary Australian Indigenous communities is little researched, but it is essential to understand this bond in order to develop much needed appropriate animal health and management practices. A semi-structured interview format was used to elicit information on attitudes to dogs in seven Australian Indigenous communities. This explored the importance of dogs to the community and to the individual, and the balance between the positives and negatives of having dogs in the communities, with particular reference to improving dog and community health and welfare. Theme analysis of the semi-structured interview responses ($n = 137$) revealed a variety of attitudes to dogs within the communities. A strong theme was the importance of dogs at a community level. Many of the reasons given for the importance of dogs in the community were based on traditional cultural values or beliefs. These included dogs being necessary to guard people at night from spirits, and as part of the kin system. Further, the cultural practice of "pay-back" for wrong-doing included wrong-doing directed at dogs in all communities, even the most westernized. Occurring simultaneously with these positive attitudes, the poor health and overpopulation of dogs in the community was acknowledged and the negative effects on people's lives recognized. However, the value of the dogs to the community meant that shooting dogs without consent or poisoning them were not seen as appropriate solutions to overpopulation. Many people were prepared to euthanize some of their dogs (via an overdose of barbiturate) or have them undergo sterilization surgery. Thus, contrary to appearances from a Western perspective, the traditional Indigenous human-dog bond was found to be strong, and thus must be taken into account in developing appropriate and sustainable animal health and management practices.

Keywords: [ANIMALS](#); [ATTITUDES](#); [CROSS-CULTURAL](#); [INDIGENOUS](#)

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