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The Fix Is In: Substantial Progress Made on Slowing Pace of Dog and Cat Euthanasia

In the 1970s U.S. shelters euthanized 12 million to 20 million cats and dogs annually, whereas there were 67 million domesticated pets in the U.S. Today three million to four million animals are killed, and more than 135 million cats and dogs have homes

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Dear EarthTalk: Are as many cats and dogs being euthanized these days as back in the 1970s and 1980s when indiscriminate breeding led to explosions in pet populations?—*Mary H., Knoxville, Tenn.*

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), the leading non-profit devoted to animal welfare, reports that in the 1970s American shelters euthanized between 12 and 20 million cats and dogs every year at a time when there were 67 million pets in U.S. homes. According to statistics gleaned from the Asilomar Accords, which tracks animal shelter care and euthanasia numbers, U.S. shelters today euthanize three to four million [animals](#), while there are more than 135 million cats and dogs in American homes.

“This enormous decline in euthanasia numbers—from around 25 percent of American dogs and cats euthanized every year to about three percent—represents substantial



LESS OF A GOOD THING: Major progress has been made in reducing the overpopulation of cats and dogs that had resulted in some 12 million to 20 million being euthanized each year in the 1970s. Today more than twice the number of animals live in U.S. homes. Although the number euthanized yearly is down to three million to four million, there is still more work to be done.
Image: Comstock

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progress,” reports HSUS. “We will make still greater progress by working together to strike at the roots of animal overpopulation.”

These numbers are only estimates as there is no centralized reporting protocol for shelters. However, the Asilomar Accords method is gaining momentum as a standard for more accurately tracking animal shelter care and euthanasia numbers; it posts annual statistics for some 150 different U.S. shelters on its website.

And what exactly are the roots of the problem? Foremost is irresponsible breeding—pet owners failing to get their animals spayed or neutered, leading to unwanted offspring. Some 35 percent of U.S. pet owners do not spay or neuter their pets, despite increasing public awareness about the pet overpopulation issue.

Another factor is low adoption rates: Only 20 percent of the 17 million Americans that get a new pet each year opt for a shelter pet; the vast majority buys from pet stores, breeders, or through other private arrangements. And six to eight million pets are given up to shelters or rescue groups every year for one reason or another, leaving these organizations with many more animals than they can place in homes.

Beyond these factors, HSUS also cites our society’s “disposal pet” ethos, whereby owners are quick to relinquish their pets for any number of reasons. The majority of shelter pets are not overflowing litters of puppies and kittens, but companion animals turned in by their owners. “To solve this problem, we would need to effect a cultural change in which every individual fully considers all of the responsibilities and consequences of pet ownership before adopting, and then makes a lifetime commitment to their pet.”

The National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy is a coalition of eleven of America’s foremost animal welfare organizations concerned with the issue of unwanted pets in the United States. The Council and its partner groups, including HSUS, work to promote responsible pet ownership and reduce pet overpopulation through public education, legislation and support for sterilization programs.

As to what individuals can do, HSUS recommends spaying or neutering their dogs and cats, adopting from shelters or rescue groups, and considering all the ramifications of pet ownership before deciding to take on a cat or dog in the first place.

CONTACTS: HSUS, www.hsus.org; Asilomar Accords, www.asilomaraccords.org; National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy, www.petpopulation.org.

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1. J. Swift

09:57 AM 9/16/11

There is a constructive alternative to euthanizing our unloved dogs. In more than several countries, dog is considered to be a delicacy. Instead of spending money and time to euthanize the excess population of dogs in the USA, I propose that these pets be profitably exported to those countries where they would benefit several more people by being the main course at dinner. I am assured by an acquaintance from the Philippines that dog is a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled. The income realized from this new export would not only benefit the animal shelters but would also improve the balance of trade for our nation.

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2. bertunders

in reply to J. Swift

01:46 PM 9/16/11

I am absolutely horrified. Some people view these animals like innocent children. The fact that you would opt to expose these innocent creatures to an inhumane existence and end is deplorable.

I understand that your intentions may be to feed hungry people, but at what expense to a persons humanity, character and general sense of what is right and wrong! The funds raised for your NATION'S economy would be a meager economic boost in balance with the blood it would put on their hands.

TREASONIS!

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