

Dogs in Society Position Paper

The importance of dogs in society

Background

Humans and domesticated dogs have had a close association for thousands of years in many different cultures. This special bond between humans and dogs has survived the transition in our lifestyles from pre-historic hunter/gatherers to modern urban dwellers.

Dogs are still an important part of Australian society. Almost 40% of Australian households currently own dogs, and this country has one of the highest rates of dog ownership in the world. Australia currently has a canine population of about 4 million.

In recent decades constant social, cultural, economic, political and technological changes have caused fundamental shifts in the values and attitudes of Australian society. Research shows that as a result of these changes many Australians have heightened feelings of loss of control, loss of confidence and an increasing sense of isolation. As our society becomes more urbanised the opportunities for contact with animals are becoming limited.

The reliable and unconditional companionship provided by dogs is an effective therapeutic strategy to improve quality of life. Dogs can help to lower stress, alleviate loneliness, improve health, and encourage people to exercise more and enjoy the outdoors. They improve feelings of safety - both in the home and in public places. Dogs act to break down the barriers in society, and help people to meet and make friends. They are wonderful companions that engender caring and responsibility in our children. They are more often than not regarded as members of the family.

Dogs serve us not only as companions but also as workers. They have proven to be invaluable in a number of roles, including such examples as guide dogs for the blind, hearing and assistance dogs for the disabled, sniffer dogs used by police and customs, and farm dogs used for stock work.

Threats to Dog Ownership

Despite the proven benefits of dog ownership, there is a growing attitude that dogs are not a valuable and legitimate part of our society. This perception is restricting our ability to own dogs. Urban consolidation, environmental concerns, changing lifestyles and government legislation are creating an environment in which dog ownership is under threat.

Dog ownership in many urban areas is being increasingly compromised by the trend towards higher density housing development. Smaller backyards and apartment living tend to discourage people from owning dogs and place more demands on public open space. Dogs are actively banned from many retirement villages and apartment developments.

Dog owners need ready access to public areas within walking distance of home to be able to manage their dogs successfully. Urban planners need to intelligently allow for the integration of dogs into public open space and into housing and community developments.

Finding dog friendly rental accommodation is often difficult. Many rental agreements prohibit the keeping of dogs as a matter of course. People who do not currently own dogs cite unsuitable accommodation, such as rental properties or accommodation without yard space and lack of anyone at home to care for a dog as the key reasons for their lack of animal companions.

ACAC believes that serious attention should be given to the issues limiting dog ownership, because of the considerable benefits that dog ownership brings to individuals, the community and the economy. The various tiers of government can hinder or help dog ownership. Hindrance may vary from restrictions on access to open spaces, to limits on the ownership of dogs, through to increased costs of compliance with council registration requirements.

ACAC believes that dog owners need to be educated and supported by the community to ensure that facilities and services encourage them to own their dogs in a responsible manner. People should not be made to feel guilty about their decision to own dogs, nor should they be given the perception that dog ownership is a privilege available only to the wealthy.

Dog ownership can be fostered through informed decision-making that takes into account the popularity, value and place of dogs in society. Education programs that encourage a thorough understanding of the needs of dogs, and teach responsibility and sensible behaviour around dogs, can help dogs, their owners and others in the community.

The needs of dogs, dog owners and non-dog owners are all legitimate. These needs must be appreciated and integrated within society and the environment to ensure that people and dogs live harmoniously.