

Stray Dog Management in Kanglung, Bhutan: Challenges and Community Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The present study focused on and discussed the causes, problems, and possible solutions to the stray dog problem in Kanglung town, Trashigang district, eastern Bhutan. The study used qualitative methods and conducted interviews, field observations, and secondary data from the local health and municipal office, as well as literature review. Uncontrolled breeding of dogs, food access from waste materials, abandonment of pet dogs by students and temporary stayers, and low veterinary care capacity were reported as the major causes of stray dog population in Kanglung town. The community, mainly the residents, in Kanglung had mixed perceptions of the free-roaming dogs in terms of safety, health, noise, and waste concerns. The livestock office in Kanglung was also found to be overstretched and needed government support, funding, and collaborative NGOs and community support for more veterinary care services to be provided in Kanglung. The paper concluded by providing some practical interventions and recommendations that can be applied and adopted by the government, NGOs, residents, and other stakeholders in Kanglung town to help manage the stray dog problem in the community.

Keywords: Stray dogs, dog population control, animal welfare, community-based solutions

INTRODUCTION

The problem of an overpopulation of stray dogs has been an emerging issue and has drawn more public and government attention in many parts of Bhutan. As a problem affecting public health, environmental hygiene, animal welfare, and human-animal relations, the overpopulation of dogs, especially unowned free-roaming dogs, is now becoming more visible in some urbanizing areas. In Kanglung, a semi-urban town in Trashigang district, eastern Bhutan, there is a sizable uncontrolled population of stray dogs that have been a growing source of anxiety for many of the local residents, government, and animal welfare groups in the town. The dog problem has become particularly acute in the vicinity of Sherubtse College, the local school, and market areas where dog bites, noise from their incessant barking, and scavenging of waste have interrupted the daily lives of the residents, creating an atmosphere of unease and posing potential health risks. . In the first six months of 2024, Kanglung alone recorded over 30 reported dog bite cases in and around Sherubtse College, schools, and the market, where growing numbers of unrestrained dogs were observed. Bhutanese hospitals nationwide continue to report increased dog bite incidents and rabies fears, with an average of thousands of reported exposures and related PEP costs annually, particularly in border districts (Ministry of Health, 2024; WHO, 2017). Contributing to the problem are two key areas of systemic deficiency: lack of management and lack of accountability. Initial culling, impounding, and re-homing strategies were socially and practically untenable, with ad-hoc and sometimes violent dog catch operations being viewed as incompatible with Buddhist principles of non-violence (ahimsa) and having limited long-term effects on dog population control (Rinzin et al., 2017; The Bhutanese, 2025). The current Nationwide Accelerated Dog Population Management and Rabies Control Programme (NADPM & RCP) – a national scale CATCH-NEUTER-VACCINE-RELEASE (CNVR) programme established by Royal Command – has since been successfully implemented, with the majority of free-roaming dogs now sterilized and vaccinated, and over 61,000 sterilization operations and over 31,000 micro-chipped pets registered as of late 2023 (Kuensel Online, 2023; WOA, 2024). However, the program's impact on dog management is being diluted by a lack of enforcement and community ownership issues: unregulated feeding of strays remains a problem, as do incidences of pet owners not securing aggressive dogs

or public spaces from their animals. Local enforcement authorities are often not taking action until an attack occurs, despite being made aware of packs of roaming dogs posing a threat, creating a climate of unaccountability. This absence of accountability has resulted in a situation where both human safety and animal welfare have been compromised. It is in this context that this research sets out to comprehensively assess the causes, impacts, and public perceptions of free-roaming dogs in Kanglung and to provide well-informed and culturally sensitive policy recommendations for improved dog population management and animal welfare.

In general, the study will address and investigate the following: 1. Causes of the free-roaming dog problem in Kanglung. 2. Consequences of stray dogs to the residents of Kanglung and the community in general. 3. Residents' perceptions and suggested solutions. 4. Actionable recommendations based on the literature and study data that the government, communities, local authorities, NGOs, and other stakeholders can adopt to help manage the situation in Kanglung and similar problem-prone areas. The research was significant in the academic and public policy discourse on dogs and urban-animal relations in Bhutan. In human settlements that continue to expand and increasingly overlap animal habitats in the country, it is important to understand how local communities manage free-roaming dogs and mitigate the risks to public health, economic development, and ethical obligations to the animals.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews, field observations, and secondary data from local sources. Interviews were conducted with 25 residents of Kanglung living in different parts of the town. Field notes and observation of free-roaming dogs were recorded using a researcher-made form while secondary data from the local health offices and municipal office were obtained to further understand the context and problem. Thematic analysis was used to identify and categorize themes and patterns in qualitative responses. The literature was triangulated with data from the field for corroboration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stray and free-roaming dogs have often been reported to cause public health hazards, including rabies and dog bites, especially in countries with low waste management standards and poor veterinary infrastructure (WHO, 2018). Dog control records in one local government unit in Ireland, for example, showed that the uncontrolled stray dog population in the unit was linked to poorly managed physical environment (O'Sullivan & Hanlon, 2012). Pet abandonment, unmanaged garbage and waste pits, and lack of community sterilization have also been identified as major factors (Chua, Rand, & Morton, 2017). Other similar studies from Europe have also shown that human-dog relationships are often shaped by ambivalent perceptions of dogs that could swing from love to hate and aloofness (Jackman & Rowan, 2007). In the Bhutanese context, Dorji and Tamang (2019) showed that effective stray dog population control and management were difficult to roll out in a generalized, one-size-fits-all approach in the country. Instead, more locally driven and participatory CNVR (Catch-Neuter-Vaccinate-Release) methods were required to work in rural areas of Bhutan. Mass CNVR, where dogs are captured, sterilized, vaccinated, and released to the population, has been adopted by many countries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a more humane and sustainable alternative to shooting or killing stray dogs for population control (Morters et al., 2014). This method, however, can only work if administered regularly through a collaborative partnership of the government veterinary care services, trained non-profit staff, and active community engagement and public education on the matter.

Findings

Stray dog population estimates: Based on visual observation and triangulated with field notes on the number of stray dogs observed at various points, it is estimated that in a 5 km radius from the center of Kanglung town, there are 120–150 stray dogs. These stray dogs were observed near garbage sites, residential areas, market areas, and school zones. Cluster formations of dogs were also noted at some points and were assumed to be formed for reasons of collective protection, food access, and sociality. A similar finding was made by Hughes and Macdonald (2013), who also found that dogs aggregated at sites where more food was available (garbage pits).

Public health and safety concerns: Kanglung town was reported to have had over 30 reported cases of dog bites in the first half of 2024, which was recorded at the Trashigang DHO office. Children were also said to be the most vulnerable group to dog bites because of the long distances to school. Bhutan has since remained rabies-free, but stray dogs with unknown vaccination history can always pose the risk of an outbreak (Tshering, Wangchuk, & Letho, 2021). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018), the key way of preventing potential zoonotic diseases in areas with uncontrolled dog populations is a mass vaccination program.

Residents' perceptions and attitudes: Interviews with the residents and some employees of non-governmental organizations (BARC) from Bhutan Animal Rescue and Care (BARC) showed mixed perceptions from the community. While many of the residents were concerned and wary about the aggressive dogs, their barking, and dog packs around the town, others seemed to care for the dogs by feeding them or leaving food and water sources on the streets. This was not too different from the mixed ambivalent emotions Jackman and Rowan (2007) found about street dogs and communities that live alongside them. It is further evident that our relationships and perceptions of street dogs and animals in general are greatly influenced by emotional closeness and previous experience with them. Most of the respondents have never heard about the CNVR strategy of dog population control as seen in Figure 1. The finding is in line with the concerns expressed by Morters et al. (2014) that local dog population control mass media and public campaigns have in most cases failed due to lack of local awareness, follow-up, or community involvement in the process.

Causes of the problem:

Uncontrolled breeding: Dogs in Kanglung were found to breed and multiply without control, either because of lack of sterilization services or simply open breeding opportunities. Morters et al. (2014) observed high dog reproduction in neighborhoods with few, if any, sterilization programs.

Pet abandonment: Pet abandonment, as suggested from most of the respondents and the administration officers in some institutions, is a major cause of the stray dog population. This factor was also similarly reported by Chua et al. (2017), where pet abandonment from students, temporary staff, and new entrants to a community was linked to increases in free-roaming dog populations in Australian cities.

Food from waste materials: In most parts of Kanglung, open garbage pits and home waste materials were often left open on the streets to rot. Dogs easily access food from these points, and the constant food availability has likely sustained the large dog population (O'Sullivan & Hanlon, 2012).

DISCUSSION

This study into the stray dog problem in Kanglung town in Trashigang district of Bhutan revealed that stray dog overpopulation was a visible and persistent problem brought about by factors such as uncontrolled breeding, access to food from open dumping of waste materials, abandonment of pet dogs, and lack of veterinary care. The study results were consistent with the research questions and were able to demonstrate the presence of an apparent link between poor waste disposal and sanitation systems and the free-roaming dog problem. As evident from many parts of Kanglung town, indiscriminate dumping of garbage in open pits, littering, and unsecured home waste were common activities and had led to an increase in free-roaming dogs that were frequently scavenging for food and water from around residential areas and learning institutions. In general, a wide range of compassionate to general fear and aversion from the growing stray dog population in Kanglung town was common. Survey participants had noted health concerns related to aggressive stray dogs and expressed their fears about rabies, noise, scavenging, and dispersion of animal carcasses and feces around the residential and learning institutions. This situation has also been widely reported in parts of South Asia where the level of angst and community member responses towards the stray dog population was of a similar scale (Sudarshan et al., 2007). While the government and several non-governmental organizations had been running humane dog population control and rabies vaccination campaigns nationwide, including the Nationwide Dog Population Management and Rabies Control Project (MoAF, 2021), the reported impact had been limited in Kanglung town for several reasons that included poor implementation at the local level, poor financial resources, and limited public awareness and sensitization. The Bhutanese culture of compassion to all

living beings has been well-documented (Dorji, 2019), and from general observation and the field visits, the community seemed to generally still subscribe to this general principle as was evident by the behavior of leaving food for the roaming dogs and the general disposition towards free-roaming dogs in the area. However, a more proactive and structured local level participation, awareness, and action plan was currently missing in the area, despite evidence of interest and institutional ownership from some groups such as Sherubtse College and the local learning institutions during this study. These learning institutions could be tapped to provide a leadership role in sensitizing the public and the student community through public awareness campaigns and student volunteer leadership to form and run student-led dog management and protection clubs and activities as part of Bhutan's drive towards service learning or extracurricular programs (Reece & Chawla, 2006). As has been proven by the available literature and the local data collected during this study, stray dog control and management cannot be effective if the solutions are not local, participatory, humane, and evidence-driven. In conclusion, the stray dog and free-roaming dog problem management in Kanglung, Bhutan, is a complex and multi-causal problem and requires long-term investment, a humane vision, and active engagement with local communities, local authorities, and non-governmental organizations. While local culture and traditions in Bhutan have generally supported and encouraged compassion to all living things, including animals, in recent years the challenges of reconciling animal rights with public safety and health concerns have begun to drive growing anxiety in the community and a search for solutions. Results from this study and a review of the available literature point to the urgent need not only to address the stray dog problem with a one-size-fits-all program and approach but to actively engage and support communities and relevant stakeholders to come up with participatory and contextually-sensitive action plans that work for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government should conduct regular mass sterilization and vaccination of dogs following a proper follow-up protocol. This can be done by establishing mobile clinics in the town or in partnership with NGOs and other stakeholders with technical know-how and interest in the community.

Local government and NGOs in the town should start a public awareness campaign in schools, public places, and local media on responsible pet ownership and feeding of free-roaming dogs. In particular, communities should be discouraged from feeding dogs without ensuring the dogs are first sterilized or neutered. Radio talk shows and social media can also be leveraged as additional channels to reach many people in the town.

Municipal services should be improved by not only collecting and disposing of garbage and home waste more regularly and systematically but also by encouraging home composting of organic food wastes. Proper garbage bins should be installed in strategic points around the town, particularly in residential and high-density areas.

Animal shelters for sick, injured, and aggressive stray dogs should be considered in the town. This can be a small-scale structure managed by the local animal rescue and care NGOs and community groups in collaboration with the local animal care authorities. Community-owned and supported dog adoption programs should also be piloted in the town to support stray dogs.

Schools and colleges in the town, in particular Sherubtse College, should take a lead in organizing awareness and sensitization programs for students and teachers on animal rights and welfare. Students can also be guided and encouraged to form clubs that take on activities as part of their service-learning and voluntary work that will see them engage in regular interaction and care for stray dogs.

Local government and animal care office in Kanglung should establish a local animal welfare committee to monitor dog population trends, case follow-ups, coordinate efforts from relevant stakeholders, and run a public hotline for reporting and responding to stray dogs that are found to be sick, injured, or aggressive.

CONCLUSION

This study of the stray dog problem in Kanglung town in Trashigang district of eastern Bhutan provided a multi-dimensional and participatory look at the causes and consequences of a persistent public health and safety challenge with community and animal welfare management implications. While Bhutan's Buddhist

culture has long espoused and acted on the principle of ahimsa (compassion to all living beings), a parallel, sometimes hidden, and growing anxiety is developing in the country about the consequences of free-roaming dogs and the lack of a structured response to the stray dog problem in residential areas. Many communities and non-governmental organizations had taken an ad hoc approach to managing the situation, and this study had found that a more structured, humane, and long-term action plan was needed to turn the tide and change public perception and behavior. The study results had suggested that no single party or ministry alone can successfully resolve the dog population control and stray problem in Kanglung. The community, NGOs, local governments, and animal care offices must all act quickly to mitigate the problem and its consequences for public health and safety and general environmental sanitation. The results from this study, which highlight local context, ownership, and participation as key to success, may also inform and guide policies and programs in other similar communities, towns, and districts across Bhutan facing a similar stray dog problem.

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