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cover story

Doggone dilemma

It's a vexed issue – dog owners reckon they get a raw deal on open-space access from most councils but park users say irresponsible owners need restrictions.

Words **Kelsey Munro**

ON A Saturday morning in Rushcutters Bay Park, walkers, joggers, young families and a kennel's worth of dogs are soaking up the winter sunshine. Most of the dogs are on-leash – it's after 8am and they're supposed to be – but in the centre of the park half a dozen dogs are chasing each other and bounding after tennis balls. Joggers and families steer a wide berth.

Three months ago, Lord Mayor Clover Moore opened 30 of Sydney city's 350 parks to off-leash dogs at all hours. That galvanised a community debate, which at times grew hysterical. Fanatics from both ends of the spectrum – dog-lovers and dog-haters – gave the for and against cases a bad name. The council heard dog-haters threatened to leave broken glass in raw meat around parks, while obsessive dog-lovers acted as though their dogs should have the same rights as children.

The majority – 73 per cent – of public submissions supported the proposal to increase off-leash parks but most of the people who turned up to speak at the hearing were fervently against it.

One of those was Alison Herbert, who takes her nine-month-old son to Rushcutters Bay Park daily and has had problems with uncontrolled dogs disrupting her mothers' group.

"Some of the dogs were big and they would have been knocking over the kids if we weren't there," she says. "They were eating the food off our plates, the dog owners were

laughing, only one was apologetic. It's not good enough. It worries me with the new law that dog owners are going to be empowered even more. There's blatant disregard for the rules, they let their dogs off the leash when they shouldn't be. Maybe it's because I'm a first-time mother but I worry... It would be a terrible tragedy if it took someone being hurt to get something to change."

The Deputy Lord Mayor, Tony Pooley, fought the expansion of off-leash areas in Sydney council parks. He says the balance has been tipped too far in favour of dog owners.

"You go down to Sydney Park any day," he says, "Two-thirds of the park is off-leash but the wetlands and the oval are supposed to be dog-free. But dogs are on the oval, they're wandering through the CARES facility, which is where little kids learn to ride a bike, they're running in the lakes and scaring off the ducks. And I think that's replicated across the city."

Pooley proposed compromises that were rejected, such as keeping some parks dog-free, fencing off dog areas or boosting ranger numbers. There was a counter-suggestion that children's play areas be fenced for safety but some rejected it angrily, suggesting this would prioritise dogs over children.

"The Lord Mayor is of the view that dogs should be able to socialise in the city's parks," Pooley says. "I don't share that view. At least, I don't think they should do it 24 hours a day. My concern is the more we encourage dogs off-leash in the city parks, that has the net effect of discouraging families, older people, people that are less comfortable with dogs out of the park."

Ku-ring-gai Council in the city's leafy north has about 20 off-leash dog parks for its 16,000 dog owners. Mayor Nick Ebbeck, who used to own a dog, says canines are an important part of the community. However, "as a mayor I've got to say it's very difficult". He arbitrates disputes over barking dogs, gets complaints about dangerous dogs and hears from dog owners who believe there's not enough dog-friendly



space. "It's like being a very bad referee, no one likes you."

"The State Government is pushing for more than 10,000 new home units in Ku-ring-gai over the next 20 years," Ebbeck says, "so we will need more open space, more passive parks, which have been taken up in many cases by off-leash dog users. So the problem's only going to get bigger."

However, Central Coast resident Eedra Zey, founder of the lobby group Barking Mad, says most councils have the balance wrong.

"Balance? There is no balance," she says. "Forty percent of households in two beach-council areas have a dog as a family member. There are 30,000 dogs in these areas that have 55 kilometres of shoreline and only one 500-metre space where dogs are officially allowed."

Zey made headlines earlier this year when she was arrested while riding on a Victoria Road bus with her border collie, Pema, who works as a therapy dog in hospitals. The driver had given his permission but transit police later intervened. The situation escalated and Zey was taken off the bus and charged with resisting arrest. The charge was dropped.

She rejects the argument that dogs are gaining priority over children. "Where did we get into this child versus dog thing?" she asks. "Families are the biggest demographic with dogs."

However, Zey says she has sympathy for people who don't like canine company. "We need to respect people who don't want dogs around them," she says. "That's just having a well-socialised dog and being a responsible citizen. Obviously in social spaces – cafes and so on – you have to keep them on a leash."

She is irritated that responsible dog owners get tarred with the same brush as those who don't pick up after their dogs or let their dogs

run rampant. "There are over 3 million dog owners in Australia and I don't think we've had a voice," she says. "Dogs are getting a bad rap."

Michael Lloyd-Jones and his wife run Leichhardt's Cafe Bones, a spot dedicated to dogs and their owners. The cafe's outdoor tables are typically surrounded by a chaotic jumble of off-leash mutts – dozens at weekends.

"We discourage aggressive dogs," Lloyd-Jones says. "A leash-free dog park is a privilege, not a right and not every dog is suitable in a leash-free park ... across the canal it's on-leash only, so people have that option. Where Clover Moore has made a lot of the area's leash-free, I think it's a little harsh for people without dogs. I would hate to think that option's been removed from them."

Lisa Treen, editor of *Urban Animal* magazine and owner of two Dalmatians, agrees. "One of the biggest problems we've got is there are owners who don't have dog-park etiquette down," she says. "People want to take their dogs down to the shops and have them as part of their social network. But we have to understand people who don't like dogs have to share spaces with people who do and it's about both sides being respectful of that."

Treen rejects the argument that people who want more restrictions are "dog-haters". "No one wants a marauding labrador jumping on them in Centennial Park," she says. "It's not my right to force my dog onto other people who might not feel comfortable, just like it's not your right to force your yowling child on to me."

There's that child versus dog thing again. Perhaps they do have one thing in common.

"Dogs are a bit like children in that owners become very emotional about it all, as do parents," Alison Herbert says. "There should be a way for both to coexist."

Puppy love

- ❑ In 2005, 2.8 million or 38 per cent of Australian households had pet dogs.
- ❑ NSW dog owners spent \$958 million on their dogs' food and care in 2005 alone.
- ❑ There are more than 83,000 working dogs in Australia including seeing-eye dogs, dogs that visit hospitals and nursing homes, and dogs that help the mentally ill.
- ❑ University of Western Australia research shows dog owners are more likely to meet their recommended exercise requirements.
- ❑ Dogs enhance your dating prospects: 81 per cent of women surveyed by Petcare find a man who owns a dog more appealing than a man who does not and 82 per cent said having a dog with you helps start a conversation.

Pet hates

- ❑ Owners not picking up after their dogs in parks or around the neighbourhood.
- ❑ Neighbours' dogs barking constantly.
- ❑ Dogs jumping on or tripping walkers and joggers.
- ❑ Dogs disrupting picnics or small children at the park.
- ❑ Dangerous or threatening dogs off-leash



Emotional rescue

For Christmas four years ago, Katrina Thompson's fiancé gave her Archie (left), an energetic, friendly Jack Russell-cross from an Animal Welfare League shelter.

"I honestly don't remember what life was like before him," she says.

"There have been difficult times when having a dog has made all the difference; he gives me a sense of emotional security as well as physical security."

Thompson says Archie motivates her and her partner to exercise more regularly and helps connect them with their community in Leichhardt.

Archie loves swimming and she would like to see some beach space in Sydney opened to dogs.

As for the leash-free parks, she has mixed feelings: "It's great that dogs can run free but I'm also aware there are irresponsible dog owners."



Water hound ... a Dalmatian pup; (below left) Katrina Thompson and Archie.

Photos: Ken Irwin (main), Tamara Dean