



Dogs make great friends – and big problems too



JENNY STEWART

You can tell a lot about a country by the way it treats its dogs. In Bhutan, the dogs one sees everywhere are communal dogs – fed by all, but owned by no one.

The Bhutanese dogs are not exactly feral, but they are not exactly tame, either. They inhabit a doggy society parallel to the human one. Indeed, they do not seem particularly interested in humans, and trot about on various missions, extraordinarily self-possessed. Watching their antics, it is not difficult to believe, in keeping with the Buddhist faith of the Bhutanese, that many of them are reincarnated people.

As good Buddhists, the Bhutanese do not favour drastic solutions to their dog problem. The government has plans for getting the canine reproduction rate under control, not least because the tourists who provide much of Bhutan's foreign exchange do not like the night-time howling. (An army of Indian street sweepers disposes of the excrement).

But Bhutan is a poor country, and there are many other priorities. Unlike the Bhutanese, we like to have personal relationships with our dogs, at least those we designate as pets. It's just as well Australian dogs speak English, and can understand almost everything we say to them, because many become members of the family. Forsaking the traditional backyard kennel, they live inside the house, dining on gourmet meals and

watching TV with the family.

In keeping with current trends towards higher-density living, many of their inner-city cousins have taken to apartment-dwelling. Indeed, there seems to be an inverse relationship between the size of the apartment and the size of the dog.

Why are dogs so important to us?

In the past, they earned their keep by protecting us, or catching prey, or rounding up sheep. Some no doubt deter would-be burglars, while exacting a heavy toll on postmen and meter readers. But for the most part, families keep pets because they derive emotional satisfaction from doing so, and are convinced that their pets feel the same way about them.

Recent research supports at least the human side of the story. Dr Lisa Wood at the University of Western Australia found that pet owners were more likely to be involved in their local communities than non pet-owners.

Other work showed that dog ownership, in particular, was good for people's health, because in taking their owners for a walk, dogs motivated them to be more physically active. Keen to pass on these findings, the researchers have, reportedly, sent them on to local councils throughout the country.

Whether the councils were overjoyed by this news is another matter. For local government bears the brunt of the dark side of dog

ownership – it is council officials that have to deal with barking dogs, neglected dogs, wandering dogs, sometimes even killer dogs. When these issues are raised, dog owners tell us that it is the irresponsible members of their ranks that cause the problems.

This is undoubtedly true. But even responsible dog ownership is associated with some difficult public policy problems. Dogs need to be exercised, and many dog owners like to let their pets off the leash. This is, quite properly, permitted in only certain areas in most jurisdictions.

The problem is that humans also like to use the recreational areas – the parks, ovals and beaches – that are favoured by dog owners.

One recent case from Sydney's North Shore shows how bitter the resulting disputes can become. For many years, the home ground of Gordon District Cricket Club was the Bert Oldfield ground in Killara.

A few years ago, dog owners successfully lobbied the local council to allow the oval to be used as an off-leash exercise area when the cricketers were not using it.

Unfortunately, many of the dog owners neglected to pick up after their animals and the cricketers, understandably, became increasingly reluctant to use the facility.

The issue rapidly became a very



emotional one. A councillor who took up the cricketers' cause (and that of members of the public who liked to run or exercise on the oval) received death threats. The first grade cricketers decided to decamp to nearby Chatswood Oval, while expressing the hope that they might eventually return to their traditional home ground. It is unlikely that the dog owners will welcome them back.

Here in Canberra, we are blessed with so much open space that (as far as I know) there are no outright conflict zones – although the requirement that dogs in off-leash areas should be “under the effective control” of their owners is interpreted fairly liberally in some cases.

And too many dog owners continue to take their pets off-leash

when they are not supposed to – around cycle paths, for example. Like most jurisdictions, the ACT has a panoply of fines for unwanted animal behaviour that are rarely enforced.

Dogs may contribute to family happiness, but this is not always the case. Indeed so powerful is the belief that they should have a dog, many families acquire one “for the kids”, only to find that the kids quickly tire of the creature, and the parents have to look after it. Some dogs (and cats) linger long after the last child has left home. Mum and dad are too kind-hearted to have the family pet put down, but hope secretly, guiltily, that it won't hang around too long.

And not everyone does the right thing when circumstances change. Every year, thousands of unwanted

animals are mistreated, dumped and, all too often, have to be destroyed.

When are we, as a species, going to outgrow our need for companion animals? Not any time soon. Human companions are in general more interesting and more autonomous than canine ones, but they are also more difficult, demanding and capricious.

When Paul Keating was asked about friendship in politics, his reply was blunt.

“If you want a friend,” he said, “get a dog.”

■ **Jenny Stewart is professor of public policy, the University of NSW, at the Australian Defence Force Academy.**