

SOLVING THE PROBLEMS OF ABANDONED DOGS IN SLOVENIA *

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ABSTRACT

In October 2002 Slovenian veterinary administration confiscated 312 dogs from one private animal collection. Of them 287 were able to be transferred in a provisional shelter Lahovo. We studied dog's behaviour, prospects for socialization and rehoming, and monitored their health status. The most common behaviour characteristic in Lahovo was fearfulness, which was observed in 59.6% of dogs. 40.7% of dogs needed veterinary care, flea infestation was 100%. During the month of their stay at Lahovo 185 dogs were transferred to certified shelters in Slovenia, Austria and Germany. 99 dogs were rehomed from Lahovo to Slovene adopters. 63.3% of these dogs were fearful immediately after the adoption and 30% were still fearful seven months later. Other common behaviour problems were eating anomalies in 65.2% and sleeping disorders in 18.8% of dogs. In addition to flea infestation, the most common health problems immediately after adoption were digestive problems in 51.1%, dental problems in 51.1% and ear infection in 50% of dogs. After seven months of individual handling of the dogs their behaviour disorders and health problems reduced or disappeared.

Key words: animal protection / abandoned animals / dogs / illegal shelters / Slovenia

REŠEVANJE PROBLEMATIKE ZAPUŠČENIH ŽIVALI V SLOVENIJI

IZVLEČEK

V oktobru 2002 je Veterinarska uprava republike Slovenije odvzela 312 psov iz nelegalnega zbirališča. 287 od teh psov je bilo sposobnih za prevoz v začasno zavetišče Lahovo. Tam smo proučevali obnašanje, možnost socializacije in oddaje v posvojitev ter spremljali zdravstveno stanje psov. Najpogostejša značilnost obnašanja na Lahovem je bila plašnost pri 59,6 % psih. 40,7 % psov je bilo potrebno zdraviti, bolhavost je bila 100 %. V času enomesečnega bivanja na Lahovem je bilo 185 psov premeščenih v legalna zavetišča v Sloveniji, Avstriji in Nemčiji. 99 psov je bilo oddanih posvojiteljem. Takoj po posvojitvi je bilo plašnih 63,3 %, sedem mesecev po posvojitvi pa 30,0 % psov. Poleg plašnosti je kazalo 51,1 % posvojenih psov motnje v prehranjevanju in 18,8 % pri spanju. Poleg bolh je imelo takoj po posvojitvi prebavne motnje 51,1 %, poškodbe zob 51,1 % in vnetje ušes 50 % psov. V sedmih mesecih po posvojitvi so se motnje v obnašanju in zdravstvene težave zmanjšale ali povsem izginile.

Ključne besede: zaščita živali / zapuščene živali / psi / nelegalna zavetišča / Slovenija

INTRODUCTION

The term “homeless animals” refers to both abandoned and stray animals. Abandoned animals are those who had a home, but lost it for one of various reasons – they escaped, were abandoned, confiscated, lost, etc. Stray domestic animals, in most cases cats and dogs, however, had never

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lived with people and were already born to stray animals. The most efficient methods of controlling the stray animal population are neutering programs.

Homeless dogs or cats placed in shelters should be first veterinary examined, vaccinated for contagious diseases and placed in quarantine for 10 (dogs) or 14 (cats) days before adoption. All female dogs and cats are neutered, all male cats castrated and all animals microchipped before adoption in accordance to Slovenian rule for conditions in abandoned animal shelters (Pravilnik o pogojih za zavetišča za zapuščene živali, 2000).

Very serious problem of solving the problems of abandoned animals are many illegal shelters which do not comply with shelter standards and animal welfare legislation, especially if they are run by so called animal collectors. Arluke *et al.* (2002) describe two different types of animal collectors:

- Collectors, who accumulate larger number of animals for various reasons while usually providing appropriate care and housing for them.
- Hoarders, who irrationally accumulate larger numbers of animals without providing even basic care for them.

As a form of passive cruelty, animal hoarders keep large numbers of neglected companion animals in inappropriate, inadequate, and over-crowded conditions that cause starvation, disease, behavioural problems, or death (Campbell and Robinson, 2001, cit. in Arluke *et al.* 2002). For a hoarder, it is more important to be surrounded by large numbers of animals than providing even basic care for them. Their ill and injured animals do not receive veterinary care and they can't depart even from the dead animals (HARC, 2002). Animals, which are rescued from such conditions, are usually so ill, old, exhausted and asocial, that it is almost impossible to rehome them.

The largest influence on social development of the dog has its surroundings. Puppies mostly react to mother's behaviour, however experiences during adulthood also influence dog's behaviour. During so-called socialization period, especially between the age of six and 12 weeks, contacts of puppy with humans are crucial (Nott, 1992).

The goal of our research was a study of rescuing animals from one hoarder's accumulation as seen from the perspective of the dogs' behaviour and possibility of socialization and rehoming.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In October 2002 Veterinary Administration of Republic Slovenia (VARS) confiscated 312 dogs from illegal accumulation. Altogether 287 of them were transferred into provisional shelter in Lahovo under care of Society for the Protection of Animals of Ljubljana, Slovenia. The remaining dogs stayed under veterinary care in veterinary clinics due to extremely poor health condition and were rehomed directly from there or transferred directly to certified shelters. In Lahovo dogs were examined by group of veterinarians, treated and offered for adoption. Dogs were placed in Lahovo for one month, from October 19th, 2002 to November 19th, 2002.

There were 21 large pens in a former poultry barn at Lahovo. When we received the dogs, we put the collar with number on each dog, checked for the presence or absence of microchip with chip reader and filled in the chart with data and description for each dog. Then we distributed dogs into pens – forming groups of dogs that were not aggressive to each other and putting five most aggressive dogs into individual cages. Dogs formed in smaller groups new rank within one day. We took care of them from 7 am to 9 pm. During this time we offered them food and water, cleaned the pens, observed their behaviour and worked on the dogs' socialization. We were observing behavioural patterns of individual dog while tending to it in order to recognise dog's behaviour as guidance for working with it and to present it to the adopters, veterinarians or managers of shelters. The behavioural patterns we were observing in dogs were mainly different

stages of fearfulness, aggressive behaviour, level of socialization, etc. At the beginning we needed to pay extra attention to any signs of aggression within groups, especially at the time of feeding. We fed dogs with dog food, soaked in warm water, ad libitum. The victims of attacks were usually submissive dogs and dogs that showed any signs of illness – in those cases more dogs attacked the ill dog at once.

We tried to socialize dogs during tending to them. We tried to establish contact with timid dogs – from using voice to first attempts to touching and stroking them. We placed smaller dogs into our laps or sat besides larger dogs, talking to them with soft voice and stroking them and in this way showing them that we do not pose any threat to them. This way even the most timid dogs started to respond to us and let us approach them; some of them even started coming to us themselves. Most difficult was gaining trust of most timid dogs – those were so submissive that after arriving in Lahovo would not dare lie down so they slept in standing position for few days after arrival.

First days after arrival dogs used most of the day to eat and rest and during this period even young dogs didn't show any playing behaviour. After approximately one week we observed first playing behaviour among dogs – at the same time as food was beginning to be left over in feeders. Younger dogs were first to start exhibiting playing behaviour. Dogs on the bottom of the rank by principle didn't play.

Two days after arrival we started offering dogs for adoption. During the months stay in Lahovo 99 dogs were adopted by Slovene families, 47 exported to shelters in Germany and Austria and 138 distributed to three shelters in Slovenia. Additionally, two dogs had to be euthanised due to veterinary reasons and one was rehomed directly from veterinary clinic where she was treated.

We followed these dogs in three intervals – at arrival to Lahovo, at the time of adoption and seven months after the adoption. We conducted a questionnaire amongst Slovene adopters, asking them about the dog's health state and behaviour immediately after adoption and seven months later. We also conducted interviews with managers of the three Slovene shelters for abandoned animals that took the dogs from Lahovo. We asked them, if they find these dogs different from dogs they usually receive in shelters and if they are, in what way.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The behaviour of all 287 dogs in Lahovo was separated into 9 different groups regarding to reaction to being approached by caretakers (Figure 1). 5 of 9 groups are indicating different degrees of fearfulness, as this was the most common amongst the dogs at the time of arrival to Lahovo. 11 (3.8%) dogs also urinated or even soiled themselves as well as freezing when we tried to approach them, which was the most extreme form of fearfulness. They were included to the group of dogs that froze when approached, altogether 36 (13%). 26 (9%) dogs were trying to flee when approached and 21 (7%) were defensive. 27 timid dogs (9%) were trying to avoid contacts with us, but after some persuasion let us approach them without panic or defensive reaction. Passive submission was observed in 63 (22%) of dogs which let us approach them, but were extremely cautious and in most cases laid on their backs. Another 61 dogs (21%) were overly intrusive (active submission). Ten dogs (3%) were aggressive to people and 31 (11%) were dominant to people or other dogs. Only 14 (5%) dogs behaved normally.

Marks (1987, cited in Walker *et al.*, 1997) has separated fearfulness of dogs in shelters into four groups: Freeze, Flight, Flirt, Fight (4 Fs) which is very useful categorization, however it only describes the dogs' first reaction to subject dog fears. We followed and tried to approach dogs that were trying to flee and most of those dogs froze when we managed to corner them and among the ones that fled most frightened were the ones that urinated when they were caught.

Most authors who describe behaviour of dogs from shelters state that most common behavioural characteristic in those dogs is fearfulness. Almost 60% of dogs in Lahovo was fearful and very few were socialized. Scott and Fuller (1965, cited in Nott, 1992) reared puppies between 4 to 12 weeks of age without any contacts with humans. Later these puppies avoided any contact with people, were fearful and practically impossible to train. We can therefore conclude that common catalogue of behaviour of all dogs from Lahovo was consequence of insufficient and/or inadequate interactions with people in the past and isolation from people and other influences before coming to Lahovo.

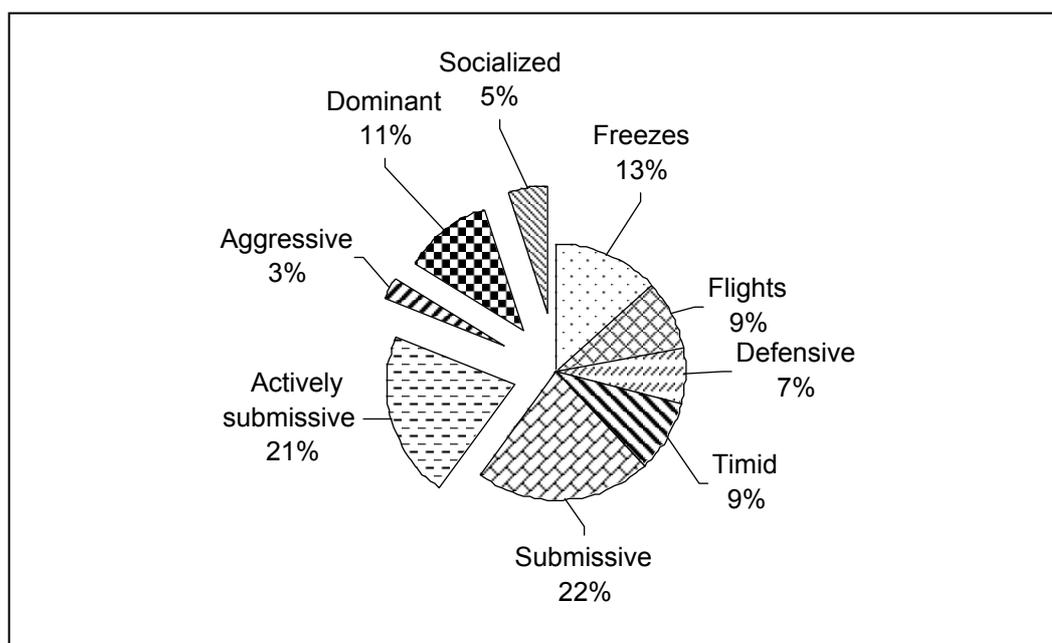


Figure 1. Behavioural characteristics of dogs at arrival to Lahovo (n=287).

90 of 99 Slovene adopters responded to the questionnaire. Immediately after the adoption 51 (56.7%) dogs were friendly to people; 29 (32.2%) were also social and playful (Table 1). At the time of arrival to new home 57 (63.3%) dogs were also fearful to people. Five (5.6%) dogs were protective to their adopters, and another five were dominant with people. Eight (8.9%) dogs showed different level of aggression, mainly defensive.

Seven months after the adoption 83 (92.2%) dogs were friendly and 59 (65.6%) playful or social to people. There was a decrease in fearful responses – only 27 (30.0%) dogs were showing signs of fear. Twelve (13.3%) dogs were protective to their adopters and five (5.6%) were dominant. Aggressive behaviour to people, especially strangers, is periodically shown in 14 (15.6%) dogs. 60 (66.7%) adopters stated seven months after adoption that the adopted dog had emotionally become attached to them. As most dogs showed more than one behavioural characteristic, the sum of portions is over 100 (Table 1).

We asked adopters if adopted dog shows any unusual behaviour and asked them to describe this behaviour. Immediately after the adoption 69 (76.7%) dogs showed some kind of abnormal behaviour. Seven months after adoption the proportion of dogs with abnormal behaviour was 38 (42.2%). In most cases (45 dogs; 50.0%) various eating disorders were present. Mainly dogs hide their food or eat it rapidly. Fear of specific stimuli is present in 16 (17.8%) dogs; in most cases they are afraid of sudden noises, chains, sticks or specific type of people. Seven (7.8%) dogs fear rapid gestures. 13 (14.4%) dogs have various sleeping disorders; most of them fear sleeping on the ground and are trying to sleep on furniture or they dig holes or find similar shelters to sleep

in hidden. The adopted dog is overly attached to seven (7.8%) adopters and eight dogs (8.9%) lied motionless in the corner of a room for several days without even urinating for up to 3 days immediately after arrival to new home. In one such case physically healthy dog had to be carried for 3 weeks, she was even eating in lying position. One female dog was sleeping in standing position for first days after arrival to new home and didn't urinate for 3 days. Six dogs (6.7%) show such separation anxiety that they can never be left alone. Other behavioural disorders such as stereotypical running in circles around house, howling every day at the same time of day, climbing and similar were observed in 13 (14.4%) dogs (Table 2). Feeding and sleeping anomalies represented more than half behavioural anomalies.

Table 1. Behaviour of adopted dogs in relation to humans immediately after the adoption and seven months later

Behaviour pattern	N (Total=90)	Percentage, %
At adoption		
Friendly	54	56.7
Playful, social	29	32.2
Fearful	57	63.3
Protective	5	5.6
Dominant	5	5.6
Aggressive	8	8.9
Seven months after adoption		
Friendly	83	92.2
Playful, social	59	65.6
Fearful	27	30.0
Overly attached	60	66.6
Protective	12	13.3
Dominant	5	5.6
Aggressive	14	15.6

With time after adoption more behavioural abnormalities were diminished or disappeared.

According to the managers of all 3 shelters that took in dogs from Lahovo there is a distinctive difference between dogs from Lahovo and the ones they have experienced in everyday work. Dogs from Lahovo were more asocial, timid and defensive. From health point of view there were more skin problems and scars.

Table 2. Abnormal behaviour observed in dogs in seven months after adoption

Abnormal behaviour	N (Total=90)	Percentage of total number of dogs, %	Percentage of specific behavioural anomalies, %
Feeding anomalies	45	50.0	39.1
Fear of specific stimuli	16	17.8	13.9
Sleeping anomalies	13	14.4	11.3
Frustration at arrival	8	8.9	7.0
Fear of rapid gestures	7	7.8	6.1
Overly attached	7	7.8	6.1
Separation anxiety	6	6.7	5.2
Other	13	14.4	11.3

We can conclude that entire project of removing this large hoarder's accumulation of dogs was successful. Practically all the dogs were rescued which proves that by cooperation of NGOs and governmental organizations even projects of this magnitude can be solved.

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