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# A Snapshot of Companion Animal Welfare in British Columbia



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# INTRODUCTION

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Canadians love their pets. Research in 2014 found that over half (57%) of Canadian households own pets<sup>1</sup>. The majority of families with pets have cats and dogs, with a smaller number (9%) owning small animals, reptiles and birds.

Advancements in research on the emotional and intelligence capacity of animals<sup>2</sup> is changing the nature of our relationship with companion animals. Most people with pets (89%) consider them to be a part of their family and this is reflected in their spending habits. In 2012, Canadians spent 6.5 billion dollars on their pets<sup>3</sup>.

Animals are good for our health. A recent US study found that having pets saved 11.4 billion dollars in health care costs<sup>4</sup>. Recent research also indicates children who live with pets are less likely to get sick than children without pets and have a lower risk of developing allergies<sup>5</sup>. The significance of the emotional bond between people and their pets is profound. This can be most significantly demonstrated among vulnerable populations, such as the elderly and those that are homeless<sup>6</sup>.

Despite the significance pets have in many people's lives and the positive impact they have on our physical and emotional well-being, communities are faced with animal welfare issues, such as pet overpopulation, abuse and neglect and abandonment. Although the majority of people with pets consider them to be part of their family, animal welfare is not a priority for government at all levels.

With the exception of a recent 5 million dollars in capital funding for the BC SPCA from the Government of British Columbia and access to gaming grant funding, there is no consistent funding for animal welfare work in BC. Municipal funding and regulation vary from community to community. The range of support runs from state of the art shelters and progressive animal control bylaws to no municipal

shelter with no means of regulation, care or control. There is also no regulation of animal welfare and rescue work, no operational criteria rescue organizations must meet and no mechanisms of accountability.

No other caring profession is expected to operate under such precarious circumstances. Yet every day, animals across the province depend on the good will of animal lovers, many who volunteer

their time, to rescue and rehabilitate them, and advocate on their behalf. A more sustainable system is needed. More information is required to create a professional, accountable and sustainable animal welfare system. To start, we need a more accurate picture of the animal welfare system and the organizations that have established themselves to help animals and a better understanding of the issues communities across the province are facing is required.

The intent of this report is to take the first steps in finding out.

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<sup>1</sup> Province of Alberta, “Consumer Corner: Canadian Pet Market Outlook 2014”, [http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/sis14914](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/sis14914) (retrieved January 30, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.livescience.com/49093-animals-have-feelings.html> (retrieved February 10, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Globe & Mail, April 8, 2013 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/small-business/startups/pet-owners-represent-65-billion-a-year-business-opportunity/article10430341/> retrieved February 2, 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Clower, Terry L & Neaves, Tonya T (2015). “The Health Care Cost Savings of Pet Ownership” The Human Animal Bond Research Initiative(HABRI) Foundation [https://habri.org/docs/HABRI\\_Report\\_-\\_Healthcare\\_Cost\\_Savings\\_from\\_Pet\\_Ownership\\_.pdf](https://habri.org/docs/HABRI_Report_-_Healthcare_Cost_Savings_from_Pet_Ownership_.pdf) (retrieved January 31, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> <http://healthland.time.com/2012/07/09/study-why-dogs-and-cats-make-babies-healthier/> (retrieved February 10, 2016)

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Van't Haaff, C. “Dogs of the Homeless” Modern Dog Fall 2014 pp: 58-61

## THE SURVEY

The first step was to find out how many organizations were operating across the province to improve the lives of animals. A mapping exercise was conducted to create an inventory. A total of 170 rescue organizations were identified. The BC SPCA has a provincial office and 43 regional shelters. A total of 17 municipal shelters were also identified.

Two online surveys were designed to inform this report. One survey, “Animal Welfare and Rescue Work” was a 24 question survey for members of the general public. The other survey, “Animal Welfare and Rescue in BC” was a 41 question survey designed specifically for those working directly with animal welfare and rescue.

All animal welfare and rescue organizations, including municipal shelters and the BC SPCA were sent an email asking to participate in the survey, and to share the community survey with their network and supporters four different times over three months (November 2015 – January 2016). Links to the survey were also shared on Facebook and Twitter, and through our monthly e-newsletter.

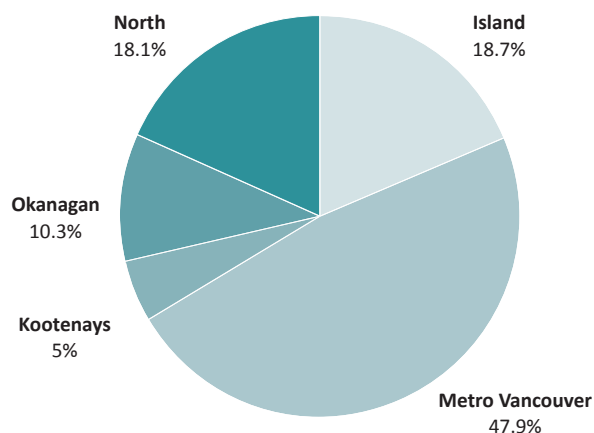
In total there were 616 responses to the community survey and 82 responses to the rescue survey.

## WHAT WE FOUND

### Representation

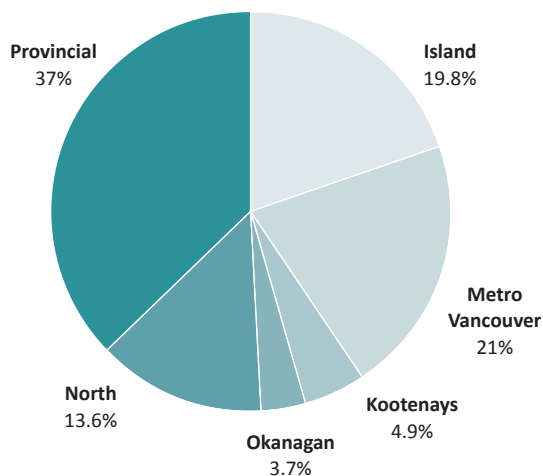
The majority of the community responses (47.9%) came from Metro Vancouver, with the least amount of respondents from the Kootenays (5%).

Community Responses



Many of the organizations that responded (37%) have a provincial service mandate. There was a strong representation from Vancouver Island (19.8%) and Metro Vancouver (21%). Similar to the community survey, only 4.9% of respondents were from the Kootenays. Overall, organizational response is representative of the number of organizations across the province.

Organization Responses





Given the community survey was distributed to the networks of animal welfare organizations, and promoted on social media via existing followers, it is not surprising that over half (50.4%) of the community respondents either volunteered or worked for an animal welfare/rescue organization. The vast majority (94%) were female.

Most of the community respondents (88%) had at least one pet. These included, fish, ducks, rabbits, cats and dogs. The vast majority acquired their pets through a

rescue organization (55%) or shelter (32.8%). Of those who purchased a pet, nearly 20% purchased their pet through a breeder they met in person, while a smaller amount purchased their pet online and through a pet store. Again, because of the high number of respondents that were involved in animal welfare/rescue work in some form, it is difficult to know if these responses are an accurate reflection of how the general population acquires a pet.

## ANIMAL WELFARE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

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Close to 70% of the community respondents indicated there is a shelter in their community, with 21% reporting no shelter and close to 10% who did not know.

Only 15% of respondents knew of an animal rescue organization in their community, with a small number (2.4%) reporting that there were no animal rescue organizations in their community.

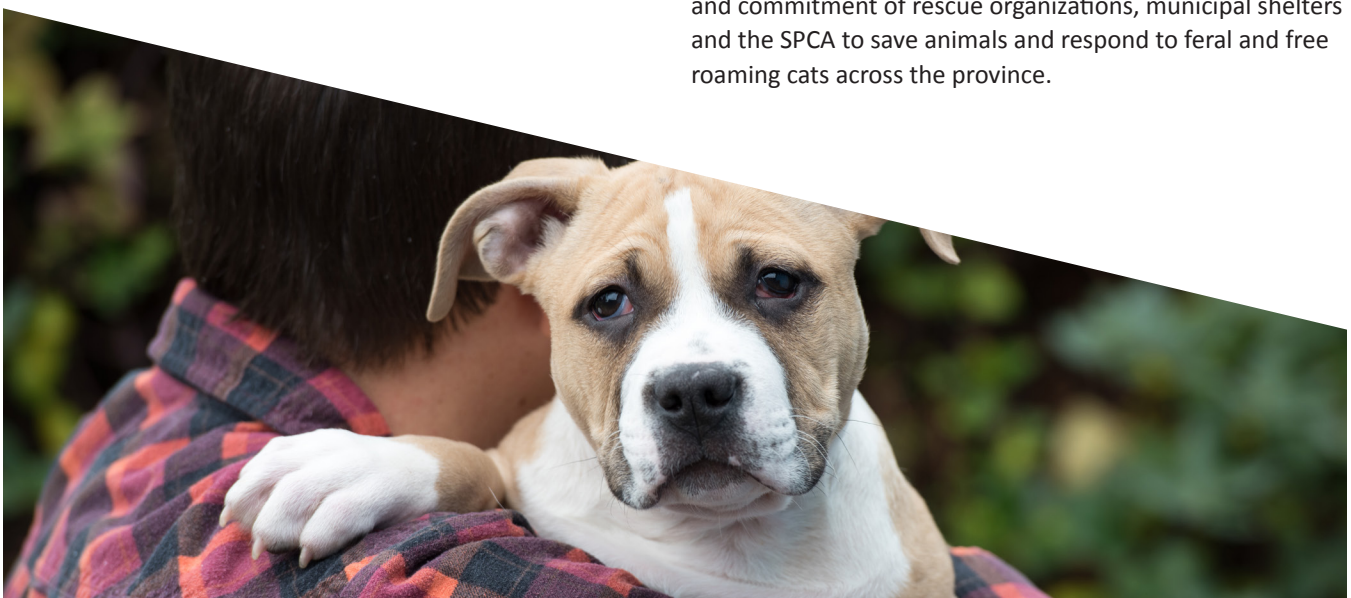
With no regulation of animal rescue work, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of the standards of care. While there is much discussion within the animal rescue community about unethical rescue practice, there seems to be very little public awareness. An example of the consequences of unethical rescue practices can be seen in a series of articles published by the Penticton online news blog Infonews.ca, that bring to light the closing of a Vernon animal rescue and interviews

from former volunteers and adopters that share disturbing stories of stealing and flipping dogs for profit<sup>7</sup>.

The small percentage (3%) of respondents that did have concerns about the operational practices of rescues they knew of, reported concerns that mirrored issues raised in the Vernon rescue news story. They were:

- Appropriate rescue practices (proper vetting, screening, etc)
- Concerns about the welfare of animals in rescue care
- Lack of accountability
- Lack of capacity to operate
- Ethics of practice
- Lack of funding
- Importing dogs for profit

The majority of respondents acknowledged the hard work and commitment of rescue organizations, municipal shelters and the SPCA to save animals and respond to feral and free roaming cats across the province.



<sup>7</sup> See for example, <http://infotel.ca/newsitem/why-this-vernon-dog-rescue-wasnt-the-saving-grace-it-claimed-to-be/it25607> (retrieved February 8, 2016).

## PET STORES

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Twenty-two percent of community respondents reported there are pet stores in their community that sell pets. Twenty-five percent of respondents did not know. These findings matched the rescue communities reporting, except there were less from the rescue community (12%) who did not know if there are stores that sold animals in their community.

A small portion of the rescue community indicated that the retail sale of animals impacted their work. The impact included having to seize abandoned or neglected reptiles<sup>8</sup>, responding to pet store animals that have been abandoned in public places such as parks, forested areas and in front of veterinary clinics. This is particularly the case with small animals, such as rabbits and mice. Rescues also spoke of receiving requests to take dogs who were purchased online or at a pet store with serious health and/or behaviour issues.

The BC SPCA is also responsible to respond to complaints about concerns of the welfare of animals in pet stores



and those that are bred for sale in pet stores and online. Recently, they conducted what is being called one of the largest puppy mill busts in BC. In total, 66 animals in deplorable condition were removed from a puppy mill in Fort Langley<sup>9</sup>. Images of these matted and injured dogs, many who were soaked in urine and feces sparked huge public outcry and the provincial government has responded with a commitment to create stricter laws to regulate breeders and to provide the BC SPCA with proactive investigative and inspection powers<sup>10</sup>.

## BREED SPECIFIC LEGISLATION

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Breed specific legislation (BSL) is the blanket term for laws that either regulate or ban certain dog breeds in an effort to decrease dog attacks on humans and other animals<sup>11</sup>.

Close to 10% of the community respondents reported their community had BSL. Over 50% reported their communities did not and 38% did not know.

The reported communities were much higher from the rescue community (28%), which is likely because individuals involved in rescue work would have greater knowledge of animal control bylaws in the communities they service (as demonstrated by the low rate that answered they did not know 12%).

A small number of rescue organizations reported that BSL impacts their rescue work. For these organizations, BSL makes it difficult to adopt out dogs that fall into the restrictive breed category, which is overwhelmingly pit bull type dogs. In communities where BSL exists, expensive shelter and bylaw violation fees make it difficult for owners of pit bulls to both license their dogs and pay to have their dog released if picked up by animal control officers.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/reptile-guy-sPCA-raids-1.3351355> for more information (retrieved February 5, 2016)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/puppy-mill-bust-one-of-the-largest-ever-in-b-c-says-sPCA-1.3440109> (retrieved February 10, 2016)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.theprovince.com/touch/news/bc/victoria/moving+tough+rules+commercial+breeders/11716892/story.html?rel=838332> (retrieved February 16, 2016)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.asPCA.org/animal-cruelty/dog-fighting/breed-specific-legislation> (retrieved February 4, 2016)

# ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

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Community members felt that the most significant animal welfare issue was irresponsible pet guardianship (79%). Neglect/cruelty (61%) and pet abandonment (59%) were also highly reported issues. These findings parallel with the perspective from the rescue community, who reported the same priority issues at slightly higher rates, irresponsible pet ownership (88%), neglect/cruelty 60% and pet abandonment at 65%.

**79% OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS FELT THAT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUE WAS IRRESPONSIBLE PET GUARDIANSHIP.**

## REGULATION

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When asked if animal rescue work should be regulated, the majority of community respondents (40%) reported they do not know. Only 18 % said yes and 12% said no.

Standards of care, financial accountability and importing from outside of the country were the three main areas people felt require regulation.

Twenty percent of the rescue community indicated they would support regulation, and only 5% reported they would not. A larger number (28%) reported they did not know.

Like the general public, the rescue community identified standards of care, financial accountability and importing as the three main areas requiring regulation.

## RESCUE PROFILES

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Of the 82 rescue organizations that completed the survey, the majority (36.6%) had a provincial focus. Organizations serving Metro Vancouver represented a significant portion (22%), with the Okanagan (3.67%) and the Kootenays (4.89%) being the least represented.

The vast majority of organizations identified rescue, rehabilitation, rehoming, education and advocacy in their mandate. Almost half (48.8%) identified veterinary assistance/spay & neuter assistance, and only a small

fraction (17% ) included disaster relief and grant funding (12%) as part of their function.

Those that have education and advocacy as part of their mandate focus on the following issues:

- Pet overpopulation / spay & neuter
- Responsible pet ownership / animal safety
- Emergency preparedness
- Animal Welfare Issues (general & specific....such as pet stores, BSL etc)

# INFRASTRUCTURE

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Organizational capacity is a critical component of effective and sustainable service delivery. A weak infrastructure creates a dangerously precarious environment that many animal welfare and rescue organizations operate under. As a consequence, even a seemingly minor setback could have a significant negative impact on an organization.

Sixty-eight percent of respondents are incorporated societies and 57% are registered charities. While all incorporated societies are required to file taxes, hold Annual General Meetings and abide by bylaws, organizations with registered charity status have more reporting requirements and have a higher level of financial accountability to the public. In addition, organizations with registered charity status generally can raise more funds than organizations without charity status, as they can provide tax receipts to their donors. Registered charities are also eligible for more granting opportunities.

Only 21% have a shelter, with the vast majority (81.5%) relying on foster families. Over half (52%) indicated that they have animals housed in their homes. A small number (14%) indicated having a sanctuary, and 12% relying on boarding kennels.

Less than 20% (18%) have paid staff. Aside from the BC SPCA, who reported 398 staff, led by a senior management team province wide, respondents reported a range of one to 100 when asked the total number of paid staff and volunteers who were involved in the day to day operations, with an average of four. This finding indicates that there are many organizations whose work is being carried out by just one person.

Due to differences in the organizational capacity, the range of animals brought into care was significant. From as low as five to the BC SPCA's reported 25,942. Of this, the vast majority were cats and dogs. Rabbits and small animals were cared for by a small number of organizations, and in a limited capacity by shelters.

Organizations reported over all low euthanization rates, and when done was mostly in response to health and/or behaviour issues.

## Partnerships

Over half (52%) report pulling animals from shelters as part of their rescue efforts. 89% report partnering with other rescue organizations.

The vast majority of organizations who partner with other rescue organizations network animals in need of a home and transfer animals between partner rescues to increase the likelihood of adoption.

Partnerships also exist to provide emotional support, and other functional assistance such as home checks of potential adoptive families.

When respondents were asked about the barriers to partnership, the two main barriers identified were difference in rescue ethics and trust.

## Funding

Less than 12% received any government funding, with the vast majority (93.5%) relying on individual donations to support their work. Adoption fees (77%) and events (78%) are also major sources of funding for these organizations, with grants (42%) and corporate sponsorship (32%) providing a fairly important role in funding.

## Importing

An inventory of rescue organizations across the province revealed that over half (55%) of the rescue organizations (excluding the BC SPCA and municipal shelters) imported animals from outside of Canada. Only 25.5% of the respondents reported they import animals from outside of Canada. Of those organizations that import, 100% were dogs. Most of these dogs (95%) are being brought in from the US, with fewer numbers coming from Mexico, Thailand, Korea, Chili and India. Of those who reported importing, almost half of them indicated importing only specific breeds, such as Boxers, Greyhounds, Sporting Dogs, Chihuahuas, Pit Bulls and Rhodesian Ridgebacks.



## FINAL THOUGHTS

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Paws for Hope Animal Foundation's mandate is to create sustainable animal welfare and purposeful companion animal protection in British Columbia. To do this we need to understand the scope of the issues impacting animals in our province and we need to be connected with those doing the important work of protecting and improving the lives of animals across British Columbia.

This report is the first step in creating a collaborative and informed approach to animal welfare in our province.

Survey responses point to some commonly agreed upon concerns. The continued retail sale of animals, irresponsible pet guardianship, cruelty and neglect, the mass importation of dogs, and the lack of accountability in the rescue community were the top concerns identified by both the public and those working in animal rescue.

The precarious nature of the animal welfare system in BC is not sustainable. The vast majority of welfare and rescue organizations operate with no government funding, and are mostly run by volunteers.

Continued advocacy on issues such as the retail sale of animals, breed specific legislation, and specific

animal matters relating to cruelty will continue to be of importance. The need for oversight, and concerns around mass importation will require working with all groups to strengthen the argument around the importance of these issues and the concerns that are had in regards to them.

There are many further steps to take, and there will undoubtedly be challenges along the way. However, with a collaborative and more communicative approach forming the basis of future work between organizations with shared values and principles, improved success in reaching our goals and the outcomes for animals in British Columbia that we all desire can be achieved.

By working together, we can create a more sustainable approach to animal welfare and enhance the scope of the valuable work that is being done throughout the province by so many.

**WE NEED TO  
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