

Born to Die

By Heather Moore

More than 50,000 kittens and puppies are born each day in the United States alone. The only kind word or gentle touch many of them ever receive is from the technician who must end their lives because there simply aren't enough homes—or even cages—for them all.

Between six and eight million dogs and cats enter animal shelters across the United States each year. Of these, approximately three or four million are euthanized. Most are young, healthy, and friendly. Many—about 25 percent of dogs who enter shelters—are purebred. Yet puppy mills and breeders continue to churn out animal after animal like tools on an assembly line.

The Woe Behind That Doggie in the Window

Nearly nine out of every 10 puppies sold in pet stores come from puppy mills, breeding kennels that raise dogs in cramped, crude, filthy conditions. According to Dr. Donald Allen, a veterinarian who worked on a “Dateline NBC” segment about puppy mills in April 2000, “dogs in puppy mills are typically kept in inhumane conditions, tethered to trees or confined to feces-filled wire cages.”

Female dogs are bred twice a year and are usually destroyed when they are no longer able to produce puppies. The puppies are taken from their mothers and sold to brokers who transport them to pet stores for resale to oblivious customers. The puppies sometimes travel hundreds of miles in pickup trucks, tractor trailers, and/or airplanes, often without adequate food, water, ventilation, or shelter.

Both the puppies and their mothers routinely suffer from malnutrition, exposure, and a lack of adequate veterinary care. Dr. Allen reports that some puppy mills do not vaccinate the dogs against diseases and many are sold before they are six weeks old, the federal age limit for interstate puppy sales. Premature weaning may make the puppies more susceptible to diseases, and because the puppies are often inbred, they may possess bad genetic traits or have extremely aggressive personalities.

In 2000, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) conducted an undercover investigation at Nielsen Farms, a Kansas puppy mill. The dogs at Nielsen Farms had no comforts whatsoever—no bedding, little to no protection during the searing hot summers or frigid winters and no veterinary care, even when they were ill. Many had crusted, oozing eyes, raging ear infections, mange that turned their skin into a mass of red scabs, and/or abscessed feet from the wire floors.

An Australian cattle dog with a palm-sized sore on her back was never seen by a veterinarian and the wound did not heal properly. PETA's investigator discovered that the collar on a Labrador retriever had not been adjusted as the dog grew and had become embedded in his flesh. Even though the gangrenous skin fell away as the collar was removed, it was treated with nothing but a worm-repellant spray.

Several pups escaped from their poorly built kennel, and one was killed by other dogs in an adjoining run. Timid dogs were regularly terrorized by their more aggressive cage-mates, who often prevented them from eating and drinking.

Perhaps saddest of all were the old mother dogs who had gone mad from confinement and loneliness. They

circled frantically in their small cages and paced ceaselessly back and forth, back and forth, their only way of coping with despair.

Puppy Mill Prisons

There are thousands of breeders and dealers across the country—in Missouri alone there are an estimated 3,000 dog-breeding operations that generate \$2 billion a year. The nation's largest puppy broker is the Hunte Corporation in Missouri, which has been linked to numerous negligent pet stores and breeders and has sponsored American Kennel Club meetings. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has loaned Hunte more than \$4 million in taxpayer money for expansion and upgrades in the last three years.

The USDA is supposed to monitor and inspect kennels to ensure that they are not violating the housing standards of the Animal Welfare Act, but kennel inspections are a low priority. Puppy mills are rarely monitored by state governments, and existing regulations vary from state to state. In Missouri, for example, 2,100 of the facilities are required to be inspected once a year, but there are only 12 inspectors employed to handle the task. There are an estimated 1,300 puppy mills in Wisconsin and voluntary inspections are expected of the breeders who sell at least 50 dogs and cats, but there is no funding for enforcement of these regulations.

Dealers who want to avoid the few existing U.S. laws often do business overseas. According to one Canadian lawyer, “[P]uppy mill operators in the States buy from us. And crossing the border isn't a problem either. They cross them all the time.” A New Hampshire breeder, who was arrested for cruelty to animals when dozens of dogs and cats were found living in filth, was selling puppies from Russia for as much as \$1,900 each on the Internet.

Irresponsible Breeders

Breeders are no really better. Their concern is their bottom line—not the animals' well being. Like puppy mills, breeders breed animals to conform to “breed standards” which promote “desirable” physical traits that often cause a variety of health problems.

Many breeders support tail docking, ear cropping, debarking, and other painful, unnecessary procedures.

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) states that “ear cropping and tail docking are not medically indicated nor of benefit to the patient. These procedures cause pain and distress, and, as with all surgical procedures, are accompanied by inherent risks of anesthesia, blood loss, and infection.” These procedures are so cruel that they are banned in many European countries. Many veterinarians also condemn debarking because it is superfluous, causes dogs a great deal of post-operative pain, and strips them of their natural means to communicate.

Every March, the Westminster Kennel Club parades dogs around like trophies and judges them based on appearance and appearance alone. Many of the poor dogs look like freaks of nature, but there is really nothing natural about them. Breeders have manipulated them to have an overabundance of wrinkles, an overly prominent bone structure, fur that drags on the floor, tight, set ears, a short, amputated tail, and other preferred characteristics.

In response to the tail-docking requirements for certain breeds in the annual dog show, PETA filed a complaint with New York officials against the club, alleging criminal violations of the state's anti-cruelty law, which prohibits unjustified mutilations of animals.

One former breeder of “champion” retrievers, John G. Boudiette, was charged with cruelty to animals for

keeping more than 100 dogs in squalid, rundown kennels, pens, and doghouses on a wooded lot in Suffolk, Va. When rain pounded the property, the dogs were forced to spend their days in dirty standing water without adequate shelter. When rescue workers from PETA and other groups waded through the grime and the muck to reach the cold, wet dogs, they found many of them were sick, malnourished, and infested with fleas and worms.

Sadly, there are many other breeders just like Boudiette, who raise animals as if they were raising turnips, with little thought to their wants and needs. But even so-called “responsible” breeders don’t fit the bill. Every animal they breed takes away a home from an animal in a shelter who must therefore be destroyed.

The Breeder in the Mirror

While puppy mills and breeders inflict immense pain and suffering on animals, anyone who allows their companion cat or dog to breed must also share in the blame. Every single stray cat, every neglected dog left to die on the streets came from an animal who wasn’t spayed or neutered.

Allowing animals to have “just one litter” or letting unaltered animals roam the streets unsupervised is not only dangerous for them, it can have tragic consequences for other animals. A fertile cat can produce three litters in one year. Each litter can consist of four to six kittens. The Humane Society of the United States estimates that in just seven years, it is possible for one female cat and her offspring to produce 420,000 cats. Likewise, a fertile dog can produce two litters in one year; each containing six to 10 puppies. In six years, a female dog and her offspring can theoretically produce 67,000 dogs.

The “lucky” ones will be euthanized in reputable animal shelters. Others will be stuck outside and will likely die of starvation, temperature extremes, be hit by cars, infected with lingering, debilitating diseases, stolen by laboratory dealers, used as bait by dogfighters, attacked by other animals, or tortured and/or killed by cruel people.

In one all too common example, a 17-year old Maryland boy allegedly used a shovel to bludgeon 10 5-week-old puppies to death before apparently shooting the dogs’ parents with a small-caliber rifle. In another instance, on February 17, 2004, three puppies were found tied up in a plastic garbage bag inside a trash dumpster. In still another case, a California man was convicted of killing eight puppies birthed by his brother’s dog, Stout, who was found to have been neglected. The list of cruelty cases goes on and on.

Members of PETA’s Community Animal Project (CAP) routinely comb the streets to help neglected and abused animals in the Tidewater, Va. area where PETA is headquartered. On a daily—and usually nightly—basis, the CAP team sees feral cats descended from abandoned, unaltered house cats who are now wild and infected with deadly, ravaging diseases like feline AIDS and leukemia; stray dogs so disfigured by mange that they are hardly recognizable as canines; litters of puppies, wracked with diarrhea and vomiting—literally dehydrating to death; backyard dogs who have known only chains, beatings, and neglect, and who have gone mad because of it, and more.

One such animal, Sophie, was found chained to the bumper of a car without food or water. She crouched in fear when a PETA staffer approached her. PETA persuaded her “owner” to give her up and a PETA employee adopted her. Sophie was so exhausted from living in constant fear on the end of a short chain that she slept a full 24 hours when brought to her new home. Now, still cautious, but sweet, energetic, and loving, Sophie goes for long walks and plays on the beach with her new guardian.

Another animal, Itty Bitty, lived outdoors in all weather extremes with other unaltered cats and dogs. PETA's CAP team trapped the cats and had them spayed or neutered. Itty Bitty was lucky; she now lives indoors with a former PETA staff member and her two other cherished cats.

But happy ending stories are few and far between. There are millions of stray and unwanted animals. PETA's staff—and other animal rescuers—certainly cannot adopt them all. No one can.

Too Much of a Good Thing

All too often, well-intentioned individuals try to “rescue” animals from a miserable life on the streets, but quickly become overwhelmed and wind up only making the problem far worse. Hoarders—also known as animal collectors—may truly think they are helping by keeping large numbers of animals in their homes, but the animals they “save” languish in filth and suffer from malnourishment, illness, inactivity, poor ventilation, and lack of human companionship.

PETA has found dogs and cats crowded in cages, crates, hutches, and even kitchen cabinets. Because hoarders usually can't afford to pay to spay and neuter all the animals they keep, their collection grows and grows until the filth, stench, and noise attract the attention of neighbors or health, sanitation, or humane officials.

For example, on November 16, 2003, authorities allegedly discovered up to 40 neglected and “sickly” cats—as well as the remains of six others—in a Massachusetts apartment. Officials were called to the feces-ridden residence after a downstairs neighbor reported seeing cat urine seeping from the ceiling. The hoarder, Debra Flint, had apparently already vacated the apartment and failed to arrange care for the cats, leaving them so starved that they were eating carpet and cannibalizing the remains of their dead companions.

In another case, authorities reportedly discovered 10 live animals and the stacked, frozen carcasses of 120 others in hoarder William Davis' feces-strewn residence in Murfreesboro, Tenn. Just two days later, officials evidently confiscated 31 neglected cats from similarly filthy conditions in Davis' mobile home in Christina, Tenn. Not surprisingly, Davis had apparently been the subject of similar investigations dating back at least five years.

Dan Paden, a cruelty caseworker in PETA's Domestic Animal Issues & Abuse Department, contacted the authorities in these and other similar cases and asked that the hoarders be required to undergo a psychological evaluation and mandatory counseling at their expense. Paden also requested that the hoarders be “prohibited from owning or harboring animals in the future.”

Paden is one of the compassionate individuals who volunteers to deliver free doghouses and check on dogs in North Carolina, where, as in other states, dogs are constantly left outside, often without adequate shelter, food, water, and medical attention. Paden and PETA's other volunteers replace the shoddy, dilapidated, or in many cases, nonexistent, doghouses, with sturdy, warmer ones that provide some shelter for animals whose “owners” refuse to let them inside.

The dogs, much like those kept by hoarders, are not viewed as members of the family. Some are used as guard dogs; many others are simply stuck outside and forgotten like old, discarded property. Paden believes that most, if not all, of the dogs were passed on from family members whose unaltered animals gave birth. Says Paden, “One pup's predicament has stayed with me since I met him last fall. He was tiny, maybe 15 pounds, and I found him chained to a broken down car. Repeated pleas with his custodians to bring him (and the other two dogs on the property) inside went ignored. As the months grew colder, my visits became more urgent, until

finally, in January, he was brought in. But his comfort probably won't be permanent. He'll grow big and before you know it, be tossed back outside, chained up like an old bike and given about the same amount of attention."

No Kill Shelters Are No Solution

Other well-meaning people try to help animals by setting up "no-kill" shelters. However, all too often, these people find themselves quickly overwhelmed with both work and expenses, and thus are unable to provide adequate care for the animals.

While no-kill shelters may assuage our consciences, they are rarely, if ever, in the animals' best interests. Animals at these shelters often spend years living in filthy cages with little or no human contact. They suffer the same boredom, loneliness, and stress as animals in puppy mills. They can become withdrawn, severely depressed, "unhousebroken," and acquire other anti-social behaviors that further decrease their chances of being adopted.

When I was younger, I volunteered at one such shelter, a converted old house, known by volunteers as "the cat house." It's hard to say if anyone knew for sure exactly how many cats lived at the cat house at any given time, but there were often so many cats crowding the floor that there was hardly anywhere to step.

Every Sunday morning for several months I would help the few other volunteers clean the smelly, urine-and-feces covered floors and cages, wash the dishes from the night before and dish out more food, give medicine to sick cats, and, when time allowed, which was seldom, play with and pet the cats. Unfortunately, they rarely got sufficient attention. There were just too many of them. And the volunteers had our own companions, our own lives. We thought we were helping, that "someone has to do it," but I know now that the cats would have been better off at a shelter that euthanizes animals.

One cat, Tequila, spent the vast majority of her time in the kitchen cabinet. We liked to think that she was keeping us company while we scooped out plate after plate of cat food, but really, she was just too fearful of all the other cats. She had been declawed before she ended up at the cattery, a traumatizing procedure that strips cats of their natural defenses, impedes their balance, and often even makes standing and scraping in the litterbox painful. She was so anxious she would sometimes lick her skin raw.

Tequila was still at the cat house when I moved away. I hope she was adopted—or finally euthanized—but I suspect that she spent the rest of her days in the kitchen cabinet, nervous and lonely.

Few cats were adopted compared to the numbers who were dropped off. The women who ran the "shelter" had to turn animals away. "No-kill" shelters are often "filled to capacity," which means they can't take new animals in. If the animals are lucky, they are taken to another shelter that does euthanize. If they are unlucky, they may be dumped by the roadside, only to die deaths far more gruesome and horrible than a painless injection of sodium pentobarbital. While a no-kill shelter can honestly say it did not kill the animals, that doesn't mean the animals were saved.

Spaying & Neutering is the Only Solution

But there is an easy, effective, ethical, and inexpensive solution. People can prevent animal overpopulation—and thus decrease the number of animals killed—simply by adopting from shelters instead of buying from pet stores, puppy mills, or breeders, and always having animals spayed or neutered.

Spaying and neutering is not only the best way to reduce animal overpopulation, it is also a good way to prevent certain health and behavioral problems in cats and dogs. Spaying reduces the stress and discomfort females endure during heat periods, eliminates the risk of uterine cancer, and greatly reduces the chance of mammary cancer. Neutering makes males much less likely to roam or fight, and helps prevent testicular cancer.

Female cats and dogs should be spayed soon after the age of eight weeks. Males should be neutered at eight weeks of age, but both spaying and neutering can be done safely through most of adulthood.

PETA's SNIP—Spay/Neuter Immediately Please—mobile provides low-cost spaying and neutering for low income individuals in the Tidewater, Va. area—SNIP altered 6,115 animals in 2003 alone. There are low cost spay/neuter services in nearly every area. SPAY-USA has a national hotline, 1-800-248-7729, listing numerous veterinary clinics, humane societies, and other services that offer discounted rates.

Millions of innocent animals die every year because of greed, vanity, and laziness. Their lives are in your hands. Please be a part of the solution for suffering—spay and neuter.