

An Investigation of the Stray-dog Problem in Taipei: What More Can Be Done?

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I. Introduction

I.1 Background

The close connection between pet animals and humans can be traced back to 2.6 million years ago (D'Costa, 2012) when the earliest pet animals were domesticated for household work. In the modern era, technology leads to more alienation among people; as a result, more and more people keep pet animals as their companions and treat them as family members. For many owners, pet dogs bring them happiness and are the most faithful companions; however, some owners abandon their pet dogs simply because they do not have fun in raising dogs any more. Given that animal welfares are gaining increasing importance (Her, 2014), pet/stray animal management has been a closely followed issue in recent years. For instance, some activists complained that Taiwan's public sectors do not actively enforce the Animal Protection Act (Sui, 2011). The issue of animal rights in Taiwan has also called attention from international animal protection organizations. In particular, an experienced volunteer with Animal Rescue Team once criticized in an interview with the BBC's reporter that people in Taiwan did not take proper care of stray dogs (Lee, 2013). The significance of stray-dog issues can never be overemphasized, for improper management of stray dogs may relate to other social problems such as hydrophobia in rabies or endemic animal diseases.

In the past, it is said that if the dogs at the shelters were not adopted, they would be euthanized. Is this still the ultimate solution for the stray dogs nowadays? If this is the case, we cannot turn a deaf ear to this cruel phenomenon for the sake of humanity. In one article we read in our English Reading class, Fillingham & Mckimm (2012) illustrates the contribution of the incredible sled dogs. These sled dogs have helped humans for thousands of years by carrying supplies and goods over the arctic area. When reading this article, our team started to reflect and discuss about how humans treat dogs in return for their support. In addition, a recent documentary *Twelve Nights* (Liu & Raye, 2013) uncovers the plight of animals in Taiwan's shelters and sparks a public discussion about the treatment of stray animals. As a developed country, is Taiwan making any progress in handling stray dogs? Anything further should be done? What is the proper way to solve the problems of stray dogs? What is the proper attitude a pet dog owner should have? To understand more about these issues, we are motivated to do this present research.

I.2 Purpose of the study & research questions

Previous research has examined the stray-dog issue from various perspectives, such as the practical discussions on public policies about stray dogs (孫意婷、曾芳如、廖宜君, 2009; 鄭詩滢、魏子雯、林彥銘, 2010), the sentimental remorse on ill-treated stray dogs (See, 2014), and the humanistic concerns about euthanasia (詹千儒, 2008). The present study, however, approaches this issue from the perspective of a public animal shelter. Due to the limited time and resources, we focused on the stray-dog problem in Taipei, because Taipei is the capital and the most developed city in Taiwan. To get a comprehensive view about this issue, we interviewed two representative organizations in the city. One is the governmental organization, the Animal Shelter and Adoption Sector of the Taipei City Animal Protection Office; the other is from the private sector, the Life Conservationist Association, a longtime Non-Government Organization (NGO) activist of animal rights. In addition, we gathered information from the public by means of questionnaires to learn about the public's understanding of the current stray-dog condition. Put together, through interviews and questionnaires, we examined the stray-dog problem in Taipei by addressing the following research questions:

- (1) What is the standard procedure for the public animal shelter to handle stray dogs in Taipei?
- (2) Is there any advancement in terms of humanity in treating stray dogs in the public animal shelter in recent years?
- (3) How do the NGO activists view the stray dog problems we are facing today?
- (4) What is citizens' understanding about the stray-dog situation and policies?

II. Methods

II.1 Participants

To get insights from different perspectives, we gathered information from organizations and individuals. Regarding the organizations, we interviewed experts from one public sector, the Animal Shelter and Adoption Section of the Taipei City Animal Protection Office (**TAS**), and from the NGO sector, the Life Conservationist Association (**LCA**). As for individuals, 100 participants were included in the study.

II.2 Materials and Data Analysis

The interviews with the experts were based on preplanned lists of questions (Appendixes A and B). Qualitative analysis was then applied to the content of the interviews. In addition, we used questionnaires (Appendix C) to examine the public's knowledge about the stray-dog issue. Through this, quantitative data were collected and proportions of correct and incorrect answers were calculated.

III. Results

III.1 Interview

Regarding the first research question, we learned from the interview that TAS has a standard operation procedure (SOP) to handle stray dogs. As shown in Figure 1, once a stray dog is sent to TAS, the staff will firstly note down the dog's breed, the location where it is found, and its arrival date when entering TAS. Then, the staff will scan the dog to know whether it has the microchip implanted from which the TAS staff can identify its owner. If no owner can be identified, the staff will give the dog health examination and provide necessary vaccinations. Finally, the dog will be sent to the proper shelter cage corresponding to its gender, body size, and health condition.

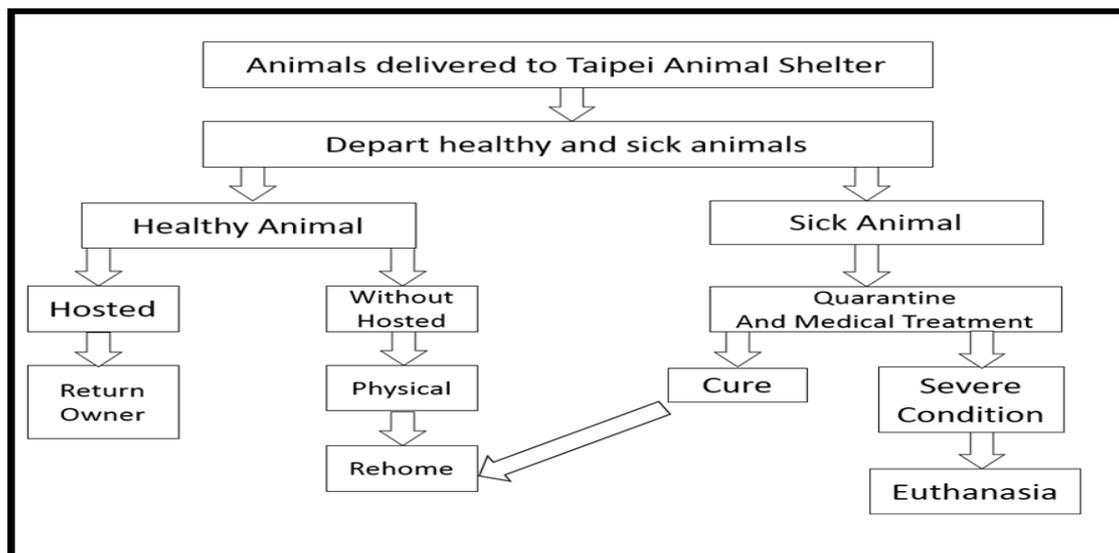


Figure 1. Taipei Animal Shelter's standard procedure for handling stray dogs

In addition to assisting owners to reclaim their pets with microchips, TAS tries best to rehome sheltered animals. If pets are not adopted in a specific period of time, TAS would seek for assistance from private animal protection organizations in order to rehome these animals. Only if the sheltered animals are with devastating illness, injuries, old age, or other severe health concerns will they be euthanized. Finally, for people who need a pet-dog companion, TAS advocates that adopting as a substitute for purchasing one's own dog. For this, various promotional events and adoption measures have been implemented to increase pet adoption rate.

The second research question addresses the concern that whether there is any advancement in terms of humanity in handling stray dogs in the public animal shelter recently. According to TAS, the number of euthanized animals has decreased annually in recent years. As shown in Table 1, the euthanized rate in TAS is 11.88% in 2012; this rate decreases down to 2.48% in 2014 (COA, 2012, 2013, 2014a). This indicates that euthanasia is no longer the prior method for handling stray dogs in Taipei's public animal shelter. On the other hand, the adoption rate for sheltered animals in the public shelter has increased from 61.8% in 2012 up to 73.83% in 2014 (COA, 2012, 2013, 2014a). In recent years, the major achievements of TAS include not only substantially decreasing the number of euthanized animals but also effectively increasing animal adoption numbers. More importantly, as mentioned in the interview, TAS's has made great efforts to educate the public to care about life with the ultimate goal to establish a harmonious and ethical relationship between humans and animals.

Table 1. Data for management of stray animals in the public shelter in Taipei

Year	Sheltered total (No.)	Adoption (No.)	Adoption rate (%)	Euthanasia (No.)	Euthanasia rate (%)
2012	6,843	4,235	61.89	813	11.88
2013	6,062	3,964	65.39	273	4.50
2014	363	268	73.83	9	2.48

Source: COA. 2012-2014 Annual reports of public animal shelters.

The third research question attempts to view the stray dog problem from the perspective of LCA, the NGO activist. Like TAS, LCA also values the importance of educating responsible pet-ownership. In addition, LCA considers adoption in place of purchasing pet dogs, and neutering in substitute for killing as the major steps for

effective stray animal control. LCA has acknowledged the recent efforts made by TAS in handling stray dogs in Taipei. According to LCA, Taipei, together with two other cities Tainan and Yilan, has performed significantly better than other cities on the island in handling stray dogs. Even so, LCA highlights that there are more to be done to ensure a better shelter environment. As LCA points out, euthanasia does not need to be the only solution. They suggest that Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is the most humane and effective approach to monitor the stray-dog population of an area and they have initiated autonomous funding to promote the TNR project.

Both TAS and LCA highlight the importance of responsible pet ownership and public education. According to them, the decision to become a pet owner should come after extensive planning. Responsible pet owners should take personal responsibility for one's pet and manage it in ways that are in the best interests of the local community. The public also needs to be educated a wide range of issues. For instance, to enhance the public's knowledge about the Animal Protection Act, about pet registration/sterilization/adoption, and about use of animal shelters. In particular, the public should learn that adopting from a shelter is both cost effective and an act of kindness for the adopted dog. Moreover, promotional events should be made to promote the TNR project to effectively control the stray dog population.

III.2 Questionnaire

The result of each question is presented below.

(1) Do you know that Taiwan is the first Asian country that makes the law to prohibit dog slaying?

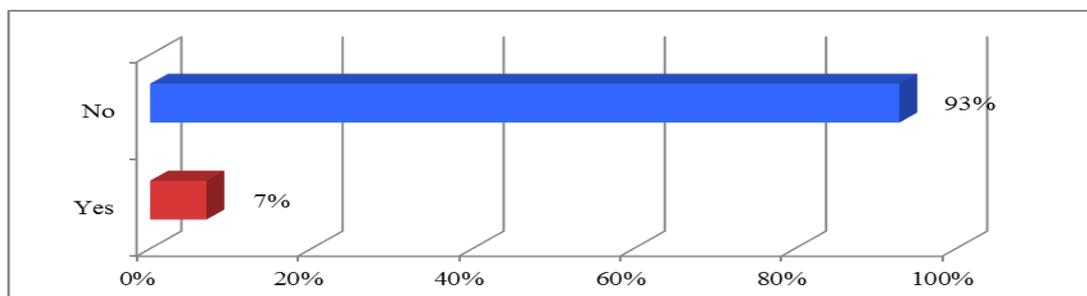


Figure 2. The results of Question 1 of the questionnaire

In 2001, an improved Animal Protection Act was announced to avoid improper slaughtering, which makes Taiwan the first Asian country to declare laws against dog slaughtering (COA, 2001). However, 93% of our respondents failed to know Taiwan's progress in this regard, while only 7% of them know about this (Figure 2).

(2) Have you ever heard about the TNR approach for stray animals?

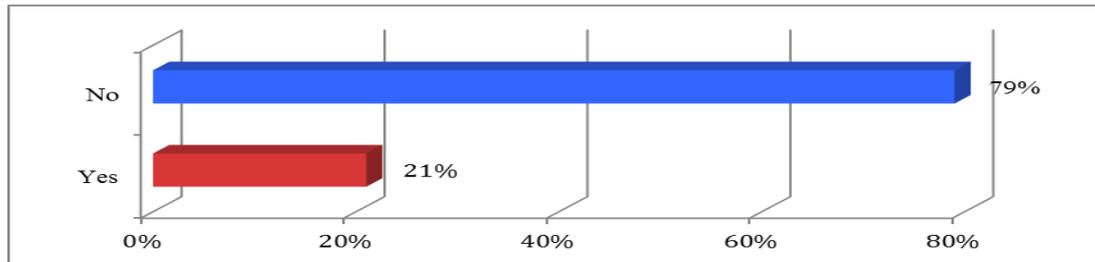


Figure 3. The results of Question 2 of the questionnaire

TNR has been proposed to be an effective and economic method to control stray animals in an area. According to Figure 3, however, only 21% have heard about this method, while up to 79% of the respondents have never heard about TNR.

(3) Does Taiwan have regulations for pet dog registration?

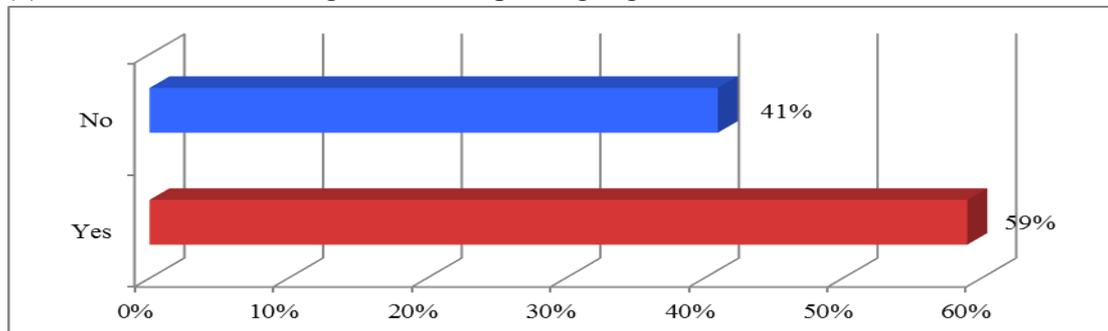


Figure 4. The results of question 3 of the questionnaire

Figure 4 shows that 59% of the respondents know that Taiwan has such regulation, while 41% of the respondents have no idea about this. Actually, the pet registration policy has been implemented in 1999. With this regulation, pet owners are less likely to abandon their pets and hence learn to respect lives.

(4) Can the dogs which pet owners do not want to keep anymore be sent to public animal shelters?

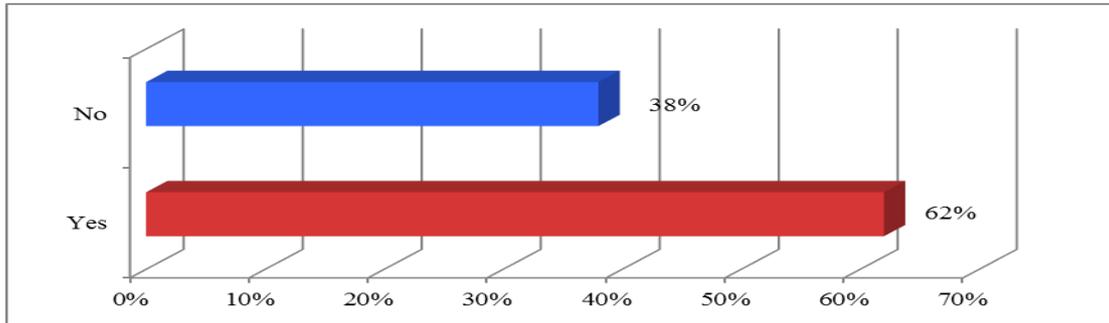


Figure 5. The results of Question 4 of the questionnaire

62 % of the respondents know that pet-owners can send their pet dogs directly to the shelter if they do not want to keep the dogs anymore, while 38 % do not think so (Figure 5). In accordance with Article 5 of Animal Protection Act implemented in 2014, unwanted pets shall be sent to designated animal shelters but not be abandoned.

(5) What is the standard way to handle stray dogs in the public animal shelter?

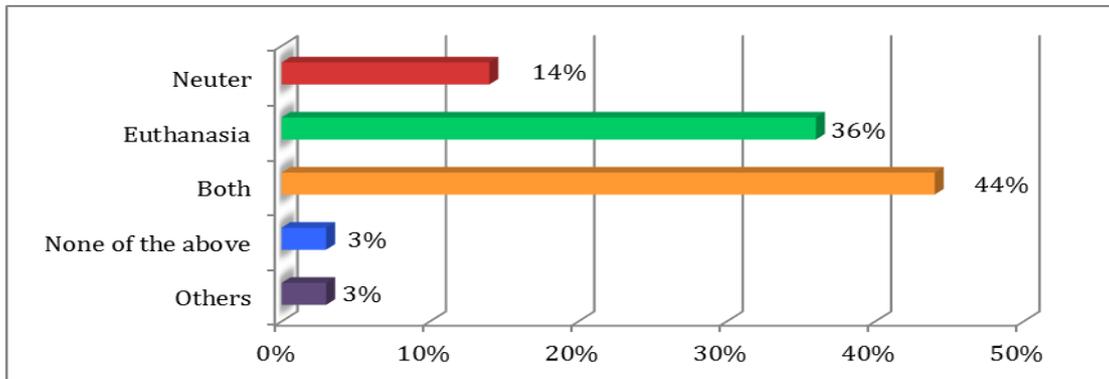


Figure 6. The results of Question 5 of the questionnaire

As shown in Figure 6, 14 % of the respondents believe neutering to be the solution, while 36 % of the respondents consider that euthanasia is the prior solution. In addition to these, 44 % of the respondents believe both ways are likely; 3% of the people think that neither is possible. Finally, 3% of the respondents consider there are ways other than neutering and euthanasia. In fact, for TAS, euthanasia is no longer the prior method for handling stray dogs. Only if the sheltered animals are with severe health concerns will they be euthanized.

IV. Discussion & Conclusion

The present study aims to understand the current stray-dog issue we are facing in Taipei by means of interviews and questionnaires. From the visit to TAS, we observed that it provides a better shelter environment for stray dogs than what was expected. With the improvements of hardware and software, TAS is actually doing a proper job in taking care of stray dogs by following an SOP in this regard. Moreover, TAS achieves its goals in increasing the number of animals reclaimed and adopted, with substantial increases in adoption rate from 61.89% in 2012 to 73.83% in 2014 (Table 1). In response to the ill-treatment accusation claimed by the BBC report (Lee, 2013), we found that the number of euthanized animals in Taipei has decreased from 11.88% to 2.48% in recent years (Table 1). This statistical data shows TAS's recent efforts for the sake of humane treatment. Relevant to this, one recent development is that, on Dec. 24, 2014, the multi-party groups in Legislative Yuan reached consensus regarding the amendment draft of Animal Protection Act which ensures that the humane euthanasia of sheltered animals would come to an end within two years (AOC, 2014b). In addition to this, we learned that, following the "Social Development Project—enhancement of administrative efficiency on animal protection", Council of Agriculture will offer full assistance to not only Taipei but all local governments in Taiwan on the implementation of necessary animal protection measures and to ensure better management and quality of animal shelters (AOC, 2014b).

Despite TAS's recent improvements, on the other hand, the NGO activist LCA suggests that the public sectors need to do more to create an animal-friendly environment. In particular, both organizations, TAS and LCA, agree that TNR is one important project to promote. As LCA suggests, TNR is a crucial method to avoid euthanasia. Actually, western studies have proven the effectiveness of TNR in control of stray animal population. For instance, in 1994, because of the serious stray dog problem, a famous project was launched by the Italsider Steel Company in Taranto area of Italy. TNR successfully helped to reduce dog population in the Italside area between 1994 and 1998. The case of Italsider Steel Company shows that TNR is an effective way to control stray dog population and it is less expensive than other methods (Friz, 2003).

Given that western studies have proven the usefulness of TNR, the Animal Protection Office in Taipei began to work with NGO animal protection organizations to implement Taiwan's first TNR project in 2006. The project covered Daan, Shihlin and Wenshan Districts of Taipei. Residents in these areas felt that the TNR project

effectively improved quality of life and harmony within the community. With this successful experience, maybe the Animal Protection Office can expand this project to deal with dog population in Taipei, as proposed by LCA.

In addition to promoting TNR projects, both TAS and LCA highlight the importance of responsible pet ownership and public education. Similarly, our results from questionnaires indicate the necessity of proper public education. Though the public have some general understanding about veterinary treatment in shelters and the existence of Animal Protection Act, they are still in lack of knowledge about the current situations in Taipei. For instance, the public wrongly perceives euthanasia as the prior method for handling stray dogs in the public animal shelter. Moreover, the public lacks of knowledge about the TNR approach and its benefits. These misunderstandings reflect the necessity of further public education. For the purpose of public education and enhancing animal welfare, actually, the Animal Adoption Platform has been launched in 2013, and this public platform uses “why buy when we can adopt” as a slogan to promote adoption of sheltered animals (動物認養平台, 2013).

To summarize, the present study shows that the public animal shelter in Taipei has substantial improvements in handling stray dogs. More importantly, euthanasia is no longer the only solution in Taipei. Even so, there are still more to be done to ensure an animal friendly environment. As the capital city of the country, Taipei should act as an example to thrive for the best possible ways to improve animal welfare and rights. To this end, responsible pet ownership, adoption, and TNR will be important projects to be promoted in the future.

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Appendixes

Appendix A. List of Questions for Interview with the Taipei Animal Shelter (TAS)

1. 請問貴單位收養的流浪狗都是哪裡來的呢? 總容量可收容多少?
2. 目前貴單位所收進來的流浪狗有無標準處理程序? 程序為何?

3. 貴單位是否在特定情況下會對犬隻施以「人道安樂死」?
4. 其他各縣市的收容所對犬隻「人道安樂死」的規範是否跟貴單位一樣?
5. 請問貴單位認為流浪狗的問題, 政府還可以採取甚麼措施?
6. 貴單位認為近五年來台灣在流浪狗處理方面有什麼明顯進步?

Appendix B. List of Questions for Interview with Life Conservationist Association (LCA)

1. 請問就貴協會所瞭解, 台北市對流浪狗的處理有哪些需要改善的地方?
2. 台北市近年對犬隻「人道安樂死」的規範有無進步? 有沒有需要改善的地方?
3. 請問目前其他縣市對流浪狗的處理狀況是否與台北市類似?
4. 請問貴協會是否認為台灣應設立處理流浪狗的專門機構?
5. 請問貴協會認為流浪狗的問題, 政府還可以採取甚麼措施?
6. 請問貴協會認為近五年來台灣在流浪狗處理方面有什麼明顯進步?

Appendix C. Questionnaire

1. Do you know that Taiwan is the first Asian country that makes the law to prohibit dog slaying?
Yes No
2. Have you ever heard about the TNR approach for stray animals?
Yes, I have. No, I haven't.
3. Does Taiwan have regulations for pet dog registration?
Yes No
4. The dogs which pet owners do not want to keep anymore can be sent to public animal shelters?
Yes No
5. What is the standard way to handle stray dogs in the public animal shelter?
Neuter Euthanasia Both ways
None of the above ways Other way _____