DANGEROUS DOGS REVISITED

Six years ago The HSUS was among the first organizations to recognize and respond to growing concern about dog attacks and the problems posed by irresponsible owners of dangerous dogs (see the Winter 1986 HSUS News). At that time we noted that many dogs were being bred and sold with little or no regard for their temperament. Dogfighting continued to be widespread, and fighting breeds, including but not limited to pit-bull-type dogs, were increasingly popular among owners who were unable or unwilling to handle them responsibly. Existing animal-control laws in most areas had been designed to control rabies but not to deal with the human problems of irresponsible ownership.

The year that followed was one that saw vicious-dog hysteria in the media, as well as in state and local governments. The HSUS responded to thousands of requests for information from the press, legislators, and the general public. More than five thousand copies of the HSUS Guidelines for Regulating Dangerous or Vicious Dogs were distributed. That publication urged communities to assess the nature of dog-bite problems in their areas and determine the weaknesses of their current laws. The HSUS advocated—and continues to advocate—strong, well-enforced, non-breed-specific dangerous-dog laws that hold pet owners responsible for the actions of their dogs. We also urged increased efforts to stamp out dogfighting. Finally, we called on everyone who provides pets to the community, including breeders and animal shelters, to recognize their responsibility to provide safe and healthy companions to responsible owners.

Where do we stand six years later? How far have communities progressed toward solving the problem of dangerous dogs? Clearly the issue is still one of great public concern. A front-page story of the May 7, 1992, Washington Post carried the headline “Dangerous Dogs Are New Fear on the Block.” Dog attacks continue to be a serious problem. There is no nationwide tracking of dog bites, but various experts, extrapolating from emergency-room admissions or from statistics provided by communities with good record keeping, estimate that 500,000 to one million dog bites are reported to health authorities each year, the same figure that has been reported annually for the last decade.

The HSUS has worked with the Centers for Disease Control to carefully track fatal dog attacks since 1986. In 1981 there were thirteen such attacks, only one fewer than in 1986. In 1990 there were twenty-four deaths in the United States from dog attacks, an all-time high. What has changed in the last few years is the nature of the dogs involved. In 1987, 82 percent of the dogs implicated in human fatalities were pit bulls or pit-bull mixes, but by 1991 that percentage had fallen to less than 10 percent. In contrast, we have seen an increase in the number of Siberian huskies, malamutes, chows, rottweilers, and wolf-dog hybrids involved in fatal attacks.

Today many communities are trying better to understand their dangerous-dog problems through more precise tracking of bite incidents. For example the Palm Beach County, Florida, Animal Regulation Division has analyzed animal bite reports each year since 1986 and recorded important information, such as the breed, sex, and spay/neuter status of the animals involved. Their records show that severe dog bites in that community have increased 25 percent since 1986, with bites from chows and rottweilers having tripled and those involving pit bulls having fallen by 32 percent.

After 1986 the growing public concern about dog bites was reflected in widespread legislative action. The HSUS called for tougher laws against dogfighting; since 1986 thirteen more states have made dogfighting a felony, bringing the total to forty-two. In addition twenty-five states now have vicious- or dangerous-dog laws. Twenty of these have been passed since 1986, many of them based on suggestions from HSUS guidelines. Only one state law, in Ohio, has breed-specific provisions.

Local dangerous-dog ordinances have also proliferated. According to the American Kennel Club, 154 municipalities have enacted breed-specific dangerous-dog laws, most of them targeting pit bulls. An additional 137 communities considered breed-specific laws but chose to pass generic dangerous-dog laws instead. Forty-five cities had breed-specific regulations overturned or killed before passage. Some of these regulations would have restricted ownership of chows, Akitas, German shepherds, or rottweilers, in addition to pit bulls. Many other areas have passed new dangerous-dog regulations without considering controversial breed-specific provisions.

Despite this flood of dangerous-dog legislation, very little effort has been made accurately to assess the impact of such laws. One of the few areas to have evaluated carefully its response to the dangerous-dog problem is Multnomah County, Oregon. In 1986 the killing of a five-year-old boy by a pit bull in Portland led to a toughening of the county’s dangerous-dog laws. A task force of veterinarians, health officials, dog clubs, and animal-control officials made recommendations to the county commissioners. The resulting generic ordinance set up procedures whereby incidents involving potentially dangerous dogs could be investigated and restrictions could be imposed on owners of such dogs.

According to Mike Oswald, director of Multnomah County Animal Control, a powerful measure of the effectiveness of law-enforcement programs is the recidivism rate, the proportion of people who are repeatedly found guilty of simil...
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Perhaps the main reason why progress has been limited is that animal-control agencies and local humane societies, with sparse and often diminishing resources, are attempting to deal with dangerous-dog problems that have grown out of control.

The underlying causes are the ways people breed, raise, train, socialize, and supervise their animals. It is time to look at what individuals, rather than governments, can do to end dog-bite epidemics.

Puppy mills and many other breeders continue to engage in widespread breeding of dogs without concern for their inborn temperament. As more people have acquired dogs primarily for protection, there has been a rapid rise in the number of questionable animals from guarding and fighting breeds finding their way into naïve or irresponsible hands. The result has been an increase in problems associated with protective breeds such as chows and rottweilers that have traditionally been used for protection. Many of these animals have been abandoned or impounded as a result of a bite incident. If shelters cannot provide these resources, they can assist in contacting people in the community who can provide puppy, kindergartners and other basic obedience training, and animal-behavior counseling.

Animal-protection and animal-control groups can work together to fair dangerous-dog legislation with strong enforcement that is designed not simply to respond to dangerous-dog problems, but also to educate the public about responsible pet ownership.

At a time when stories of dog attacks continue to fill the media, it is often easy to forget that most of our more than 50 million dogs never bite anyone. However, the problems caused by the highly visible minority of animals and their owners have far-reaching consequences for all of us who care about the special relationship between people and dogs. Each of us must re-examine our commitment to seeing that safe and healthy animals share their lives with understanding and responsible owners.

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Several recent developments in genetic engineering show how the new industry applies biotechnology to agriculture and medicine. The value of these new developments in terms of real progress in improving agricultural practices and human health remains to be seen. The following example will reveal the “New Creation,” a new world order of the biotechnology industry, is far from any utopian dream of a world made perfect for humankind.

One can read between the lines of new patent applications, news releases, and scientific reports concerning the latest feats of genetic engineering and glimpse the near future. The wonder-world of New Creation is not quite here today, but it may be upon us sooner than we expect. A whole new generation of generically engineered, or transgenic, animals is on the way, animals carrying genes transplanted from humans and other species. In the world of commerce, transgenic animals will be regarded as “new” species, the patentable commodities of a new world order.

Transgenic Animals

Scientists in the United States, Canada, Japan, Europe, and Australia have created a number of transgenic animals: pigs, lambs, calves, and fish who contain the growth-hormone genes of other species, including those of humans. To date, an estimated ten thousand varieties of transgenic mice have been created. However, gene-slicing success rates are extremely low, and the entire process is time-consuming and costly. Much of the future for this research comes from the public via tax revenues.