Reducing Unmonitored Population Density of Stray Animals in Istanbul

Preventing Disease and Exponential Population Growth by way of Limiting Random Feeding of Cats and Encouraging Adoption of Unowned Animals

Tag Words: outdoor cats; outdoor dogs; population control; disease control; animal health; adoption; stray animal; Istanbul; TNR; Trap Neuter Release; indoor cats; indoor dogs

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Summary: In Istanbul, Turkey there are countless stray cats and dogs lacking basic shelter and medical care. Though fed by food and water left out, these can becomes areas of disease and injuries. A possible way to prevent this is to ban food left out by those who do bring in animals to be treated, as well as further encouraging the adoption of stray animals. By contacting a major Turkish animal rights group on this proposed solution, we hope to encourage change in that region to improve the lives of cats and dogs.

Video Link: https://youtu.be/dkGHEd5cKSw

Istanbul is Overrun with Stray Cats and Dogs
There is a large population of strays in multiple pocket populations with rough estimations of over 100,000 as of 2014 in Istanbul (1). That would be around 1 unowned animal per 140 people. Of course these estimations have large margins of error due to the nature of free roaming animals with little human control. Even with this lack of statistical accuracy in counting the population, the sheer numbers of strays are often noted in articles and on the streets especially in parks.

The unowned animals are usually tolerated by and large due to various social reasons that culminate into Istanbul being called a “heaven for cats”. Historically speaking, the role of animals in Istanbul as with many other cities is acting as vermin control, an issue that was common in previous centuries. This attitude of the helpfulness of animals is still more or less ingrained in the city.

Also to be considered is the main religion of the area, as before WWI Istanbul was the much larger Ottoman Empire, a major Islamic power (2). Modern day turkey is still has a population that is ~98 percent Muslim, though a secular nation at heart. In Islam, a wide spread respect for all species is expected, all animal are held worthy to lead the live they wish. Cats in particular are revered as clean companions to be looked after. Dogs, while not seen as highly as cats, are still included in the humanitarian scope and have their own groups and territories as well.

Strays and the people who love them
Due to the urban layout of the area, strays can scavenge for food left over by humans, and cats in particular can hunt vermin. Residents and businesses of the city also leave food and water out for outdoor cats and dogs. Sometimes colonies can be supported by groups of people together who pool resources to look after local strays. Though unowned, a good number of these stray are
amiable to humans, not completely losing the trusting attitudes that first domesticated them years ago. Some residents view these stray animals roaming freely in their city as a way to gain exposure to an animal companion without taking on the larger responsibilities expected of a pet owner, such as medical care, spaying and neutering and protection from harm.

So Many Litters, So Little Time
While not as prolific as rabbits, cats and dogs are able to quickly multiple a population. Once entering a heat, a female will almost always become pregnant if around males of their species. Female cats can have 1 to 8 kittens 2 to 3 times a year with 2 to 24 new cats if all reach maturity (3). A dog can have 6 to 10 puppies on average 2 times a year with 12 to 20 dogs should all reach maturity (4). These numbers make it difficult to control a population of species who have multiples. Litter sizes are in part due to how much energy an animal will devote to their young, that there is an expectation that some will die and that a sign of future fitness would be the quick development. While pregnant and nursing a female cat or dog has to share the energy gained by food, which would become detrimental to a malnourished animal. There are also the dangers of having to protect the young during a vulnerable early stage.

Hidden Dangers
There are many diseases that exist in cats and dogs, varying of severity, how it’s spread, and also whether it can be spread to other species like humans. For cats, Feline leukemia, Feline Immunodeficiency virus, rabies, and feline panleukopenia can be spread among unprotected populations. They can be protected against, but can difficult to treat even when caught in time, which is rare with stray cats. Feline leukemia virus, for example, is a long term immunological disease that suppresses immunity to cause multiple types of system infections as well as cancer. It can be spread by saliva urine and nasal discharge so sharing food and water bowls is a common way to spread the disease when active (5). A study done in Turkey examined a group of 37 cats with no symptoms the result were that “(3.8%) of cats had FeLV antigens… (7.5%) of cats had FeLV antibodies” (6). Dogs can get many types of skin infections, digestive problems, and rabies (7). Heartworms, a parasite that infects respiratory and heart tissue can and will cause death in those infected. In two Turkish cities studied infection ranged from 2.98% to 9.3% (8). A large concern for animal control is rabies, as it can be spread to humans through a bite. In Turkey there are a still deaths from rabies infections, continuing the call for animal control (9). So rabies vaccinations are seen as especially important. Also a problem is the injuries and consequential infections that come from these animals fighting for resources or territories. These can affect how an animal can care for itself and its young in terms of getting food or defense.

Large Hazards in a Large City
Beyond biological harm that can come to these animals, one must consider that with so many animals in so many territories, some must be forced into unsafe parts of the city. In March 2014 it was reported that a major blackout on a local election day was caused by an outdoor cat wandering into an electrical plant (10). More common are stories like animals stuck in pits made during construction and needing to be rescued and hospitalized(11). Or vehicular incidents that are common all over the world or even, animals that are struck by cars, or even stuck within them as they seek shelter from the elements (12).
Finally, everyone must recognize the dangers that humans themselves can cause animal by way of abuse. Though the city has an air of tolerance, there are still those who would take the chance to harm a street animal under assumption that no one will seek justice. From beatings to rock throwing to even killing unowned cats and dogs (13). Domestic animals are species that have altered their behavior so that they may live with early humans and all of us today, and so have become dependent on our care. With these hazards, many people have taken up the responsibility of helping these animals on multiple levels.

**Overpopulation Problems**
Midway through the 19th century, English settlers brought rabbits to Australia for hunting. 24 were brought over originally but by the 1920’s there were around 10 billion. Both conventional and biological controls have been used in Australia in order to solve this problem of overpopulation and neither have worked (14). They tried poisoning and burning rabbit burrows which did not work as it was too costly and rabbits were able to breed faster than they were wiped out. Then they introduced what was known as the “Myxoma virus” which initially reduced the rabbit populations up to 99% in certain areas but was not effective in others. Eventually the rabbits grew genetically resistant to the virus and the virus itself changed as well. Australia even built a “rabbit-proof fence” to protect crops and land from the rabbits. But to no avail, none of these solutions helped with the overpopulation of rabbits (15). There are many other problems around the world that deal with overpopulation of animals and many countries have tried using their own methods to fix the problem. In New Jersey there was a problem with deer, in Shanghai they had a problem with too many dogs, in North and West Africa there was a problem with a locust outbreak. These problems introduced methods that failed and succeeded to control overpopulation.

**Trap Neuter Release**
Turkey introduced an animal protection law in 2004, and state policy is to catch, neuter and release or find a home for street animals. However funds for these projects are limited. This method of Trap Neuter Release (TNR) includes taking in strays from the streets, spaying/neutering them, treating them for injuries and vaccinations, and putting them up for adoption. If after a certain amount of time they are not adopted they are released back into the area they were taken from.

There are many reasons why TNR should be promoted. First off, it helps stabilize colonies of feral cats (16). Studies around the world proved this method to work with great promise. On the campus of Texas A&M, a study in its first year, took in 123 stray cats. The next year, there were no new litters of kittens around campus, and on top of that, 20% of the cats were found to be socialized and were quickly adopted (17). Another reason why TNR is promoted is because it improves the lives of cats. The TNR programs give a chance for animals to be taken off the street while keeping them healthy. After cats are trapped, they are vaccinated for rabies which keeps them from being susceptible to other infectious diseases. Studies have also shown that cats tend to stray much less after being neutered which results in less harm to the cat (17). The Trap Neuter Release program has answered the needs of the community in Istanbul. Once the program was adopted, residents embraced the idea of TNR. Many individuals even created their own little cat homes in their backyard in order to catch strays. TNR is easily the most humane way in dealing with cat populations.
This Trap Neuter Release method is much better than the others that attempt to control the overpopulation of cats. One of these methods is the “Catch and Kill” which while completely inhumane, has been found to be more expensive and also ineffective (17). Even adoption has been found extremely ineffective. Some cats may enjoy a transition into living indoors with a new friend and caregiver. However, there are millions of cats who are unable to make this transition to living with people in homes. Adoption is also a very time-consuming project and has a low rate of success. Then there is the method of relocation, which can seem like a good method but it endangers cats’ lives and can cause them unwanted stress and suffering (17). One of the last methods that has been popping up in Istanbul involves the creating of cat sanctuaries. This is a place set up for cats to provide food and shelter to strays on the street and is very well-meaning. However, this method does nothing to help stabilize the cat population. On top of that, these places can even cause some cats who have spent almost all of their life to suffer from stress and disease (17). So all while these methods have been proved to fail, Trap Neuter Release is the one that shows the most promise.

Solutions for Population and Disease

It is obvious that many in Istanbul love being in a city that is considered a paradise for animals. Being able to meet friendly animals in the street that become one’s feline or canine friend for a time until one leaves and another comes by seems ideal. With that, a little food and water is the least they can do to do their part to help. But people also must consider the harm their care can do and the dangers the cats and dogs can face when they are no longer in sight.

The proposed solution is to discourage those who feed the stray cats and dogs indiscriminately. For example, those who leave bowls of food and water out without plans to trap them to be altered and vaccinated. These feedings can turn the bowls into vectors for diseases spread by body fluids, such as feline leukemia and others. They can also lead to fights for the resources, that can also spread diseases like rabies. They are also likely places where a female could become pregnant depending on her season. Another option is for these charitable individuals to take in a stray animal that they have grown close to through the feedings. Instead of leaving the constant bowls of food and water outdoors for multiple strays, focus resources on taking in an unowned animal to spay/neuter, vaccinate, and house them. This would greatly improve the lives of the cats and dogs taken in, outdoor cats and dogs have shorter lifespans compared to their indoor counterpart. Indoor cats can live for over fifteen years if kept in good health (18), dogs range from eight to sixteen years, with considerations to breed longevity. Strays live one or two years (19), if they survive to maturity at all. As if this bleak situation is not convincing enough there are many studies of how owning pets can improve the lives of their humans. Having a dog live in the home can to some extent, reduce a child’s likelihood of developing allergies and asthma. Pets can reduces stress levels, which in the long term can lower chances of developing heart disease. Pet owners with existing heart problems may live longer and have less signs of heart disease like cholesterol. Holistically, they promote social interactions, all while being a non-judgmental companion (20). The lives of cats and dogs in the streets are threatened by injury from humans, vehicles and other manmade structures, as well as other animals and disease. This solution is to be done with the current TNR program in place in Turkey and the individual programs that funds procedures, and not to be done as an alternative.
Taking away unmonitored bowls will reduce the high density areas that lead to an uncontrollable amount strays, remove vectors for disease that can spread not only to other strays but to humans, such as rabies. If one cannot take in an animal they could use the money typically used for food to support the organizations throughout the city that do take in animals to be vaccinated altered, and put up for adoption to find homes that want to provide permanent care.

**Community Action: Letter of Animal Rights Organization to Encourage Political Change**

Haytap Animal Rights Federation is a large environmental protection and animal rights groups that is the product of multiple other groups merging. It has a broad reaching national influence and has power to persuade individuals in protests against violations and promote legislation that can protect animals and the environment. Haytap creates campaigns to educate a large amount of people on issues related to their philosophy, to strive to create a broader impact. By contacting Haytap and presenting them with this problem and the solution we think we will change it, we hope to spur a new campaign that can turn into legislature with their support.

Dear Haytap,

As you are well aware, Istanbul is near famous for the numerous domestic cats and dogs that roam the streets, mingling with the human residents. For the most part, the city responds positively to the cohabitants. In the news one can find stories of rescues from dangerous areas, or the justice pursued for animals mistreated. Public opinion takes not only the protection of these animals as a priority, but also their general well-being. Your organization in particular stands above in the scope and diversity of the issues pursued regarding the rights and protections that should be inherent in all animals.

We have reviewed various aspects of lives of stray animals, with a geographical focus on the strays of Istanbul. From there, we brainstormed ways to change and improve an aspect of their lives that seem to be previously lacking. One issue that we felt we could address was the unintentional harm that humans can create when they provide food and water to strays. It can be assumed that since medical care must be provided when the animals are brought in, that a large portion of cats and dogs receive no care due to the sheer number of strays. By leaving bowls out for cats and dogs, the congregation of animals can create a dense area for the propagation of infection. The bowls themselves can become vectors of disease so that ailing animals can spread chronic infections of feline leukemia to animals feeding later. These gatherings can also facilitate female cats to become pregnant, which contributes to an uncontrollable population. Ultimately, our group feels that mass feeding of outdoor cats and dogs can create harmful situations that outweigh the good it can provide.

Our solution is to prevent bowls being left out for animals by those without intentions to provide medical care to any of them. Banning random feedings of animals and enforcing it with fines could discourage people and allow them to consider alternative ways of providing for these cats and dogs. For example adoption of even a single stray cat or dog would be better than unknowingly causing the death of multiple cats and dogs which they set out to help. It is known that indoor cats and dogs lead longer and healthier lives with fewer complications when altered and kept indoors. Many of the causes of death to cats and dogs drop significantly once they are
no longer exposed to other feral animals, car and ill-intentioned people. Also, any problems that do come up can be addressed quickly if they are not spending time away from human monitoring. For even more encouragement, humans that live with pets can also lead healthier lives; from simple stress relief of a friend to studies that show comparably less signs of heart disease. In some studies, pet owners that already had heart disease were statistically more likely to live longer than those without pets. We believe that this solution can be incorporated into future campaigns as a way to further protect the vulnerable population of cats and dogs that had to make their home on the streets of Istanbul.

References:

Letters to the Editor

To Hurriyet Daily News: Managing Editor Özgür Korkmaz at ozgur.korkmaz@hurriyet.com.tr

Dear Editor,

There is no argument that Istanbul has a stray animal problem, the city is very nearly famous for these furry residents. A cursory glance makes it seem like the animals are in the best city for their free roaming existence. The general public has a positive attitude towards strays, considering them to be pets that one doesn’t have to spend so many resources on. There is also a powerful animal rights group that has successfully pushed for an animal protection law that bans the euthanasia of strays for population control, promoting Trap Neuter Release programs, and punishes animal abuse. But look a little deeper and the suffering these animals face in their lifetime become obvious. Diseases can spread quickly through dense cat colonies and dog packs. Feline leukemia can spread by exposure to bodily fluids such as saliva, turning food bowls into disease vectors. Parasites and infections and parasites are common in untreated dogs. Not to mention the spread of rabies that can spread from domesticated animals to humans. Manmade issues can come from everywhere in a city from vehicular collisions to trapped animals. Abuse of these animals are also reported on various news outlets. All this together shows that stray cats and dogs need the help of humans, especially in dense urban areas. More can be done in addition to the TNR policy and residents providing alterations and vaccinations on their own.

The main focus was the problems surrounding unmonitored food and water bowls. To unvaccinated animals they can be sources of disease; also as they are a place where animals congregate, they can be a site for fighting, and pregnancies that multiply populations in a generation. These factors increase the suffering of animals and decrease their life expectancy by years. The solution proposed is to prohibit the random feeding of stray animals, instead encouraging the adoption of animals and providing medical care to them. This could be enforced with a fine to those who leave out food, but do not bring in animals to be treated. People must be aware of the damage that can be done by this seemingly charitable act. Not only will this make nearby animals less likely to infect others uncontrollably, it would greatly improve the lives of animals taken in. Cats and dogs sometimes only live for a year or two outdoors that is if they survive to maturity. For the people, animals are shown to improve several aspects of their human’s health. Research has shown decreased rates of asthma and allergies in children, lower stress, and is even linked to improved heart health. So in the end, everyone involved would win.

Sincerely,

Savannah Mattson

To Today’s Zaman: editor@todayszaman.com
Dear Editor,

As you know, there is a serious problem in Istanbul with stray cats. There is a rough estimate of over 100,000 strays and with a human population of 14 million that is 1 unowned animal per 140 people. Even though the Istanbul is considered a “Haven for cats”, there are many problems that come with a high population of strays. Having so many strays around in the city poses not only a problem for the animals, but to humans as well. Many business owners leave bowls of food out for strays and these unmonitored bowls are one of the biggest pathways that spread diseases from animal-to-animal. Taking away unmonitored bowls will reduce the high density areas that lead to an uncontrollable amount strays and remove vectors for disease that can spread not only to other strays but to humans, such as rabies. There are some programs in-place already to help control the overpopulation of cats. One is the Trap-Neuter-Release (TNR) method. Although this method of trapping stray cats, getting them spayed and neutered, and then releasing them into the wild has yielded some good results, it is too costly and time consuming. Many of these programs that focus on this method have shut down due to lack of funding.

In Chapter 1, Article 6 of the Animal Protection Law, it mentions how it is illegal to kill ownerless animals. If it were to be illegal to feed unowned animals it will help in the overpopulation of stray cats. This will force those who want to feed the cats to bring them in and take them as their own, in which they can be properly cared for. If these people who want to feed the cats were to adopt them, it would take stray cats off the streets and into homes which will significantly lower the chances for diseases. It will also keep them from having kittens because in order to adopt them it will require the owner to spay or neuter them. Studies have also shown that pets in homes lead to lower stress levels in humans. So this solution of adopting the cats in order to feed them will have benefits for all parties.

Sincerely,
Ryan Szajdecki