

Expanding Community Support for Effective Cat and Dog Programs in NT

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Animal health and management programs have been undertaken in many remote Aboriginal communities across Australia in one form or another over recent years. Many communities, unfortunately, miss out on receiving any support or resources to enable the numbers, health and welfare of people's companion animals to be managed and/or their health to be improved. Animal management programs in Queensland (QLD) and Western Australia (WA) have been provided by animal management workers and/or environmental health workers employed by local councils and shires, Aboriginal health service providers and other stakeholders. Predominantly they have been funded by Environmental Health departments through Qld and WA Departments of Health and delivered in partnership with Shires and councils. Whilst they may be inadequately funded and resourced to achieve all aspects of a best practice model they have been an example for other states and territories to aspire to. The NT, however, does not have local animal management worker programs due to a range of reasons, placing it many years behind the other states.

Background

AMRRIC believes that dogs remain integral to the fabric of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community's culture. The health and treatment of animals is intrinsically linked to community health and well-being. Ongoing cultural significance and traditional law relating to animals in Aboriginal communities cannot be overlooked when considering compliance, partnership and appropriateness of any animal welfare and control plans being developed with the community (Hardaker 2008)ⁱ

In Aboriginal communities in particular, animal health, welfare and control tactics dictated by external forces using non negotiated methodologies have been uniformly unsuccessful and unsustainable.ⁱⁱ Imposition of welfare and control measures, in the absence of adequate capacity building and two-way education and awareness programs has resulted in unnecessary ongoing expenditure on pure service delivery, both veterinary and law enforcement, and has also been demonstrated to be a completely unsustainable model.

AMRRIC has long aspired to implementing its nationally recognized best practice guidelines in programs for the NT, similar to those delivered in QLD and WA. Building sustainable, culturally respectful models to achieve international human rights standards of ownership, respect and consensual programs to improve the health of remote community pets has underpinned AMRRIC's model over many years.

A vision

AMRRIC, as do others, want to see rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that are healthy and safe for people and their animals to live in and grow up in. In very practical terms this means there will be fewer owned animals that are on whole healthier, more valued and better behaved animals. The objective of an animal welfare and control program is the improvement of the health and control of animals within the community, undertaken in partnership in a culturally sensitive and sustainable way to improve the overall health of the community. Community based management, care and control of the animal populations and delivery of animal health programs undertaken in conjunction with veterinary professionals is the way forward.

The Shires in the NT (funded through the Department of Local Government) have a core legislative responsibility for animal welfare and control. Many Shires are struggling financially, under-resourced and/or inexperienced in undertaking animal welfare and control programs. Some are providing veterinary programs only, a few of the nine have an animal welfare control strategy in place, and some are more visionary and trying to take steps towards a best practice model, despite the glaring gaps in resources. AMRRIC has developed fully consultative animal welfare and control frameworks for a few of those Shires.

AMRRIC's approach

Respecting the cultural traditions of individual communities and the right of the community to manage their animals and animal programs is imperative to undertaking any work in improving their health and welfare outcomes. Recognizing that dogs are integral to the fabric of remote communities and the health of the dogs is intrinsically linked to the health and well-being of the community therefore requires a wholistic, 'one health' ⁱⁱⁱ approach to achieve real change in improvements in health and control of animals.

AMRRIC builds awareness of animal management problems and pet ownership for effective management within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and government at the local, regional and national level. Sustainability is only possible with strong community support, engagement and ownership. Local communities are assisted to identify their needs and source training and other resources. Building a scientific evidence base for human and animal health in remote Indigenous communities results in the benchmarking of best practice guidelines set by AMRRIC.

AMRRIC proactively supports and encourages community employment opportunities where possible. Animal health and welfare programs are designed to function continuously with decreasing reliance on external resources. Utilising available resources to meet immediate needs generally requires compromise, flexibility, creativity and negotiation. AMRRIC assists with sourcing, supporting and enabling professional veterinary services should shires or communities ask for assistance in this area.

Purposefully building partnerships with all stakeholders e.g. local Indigenous councils, Shires , public health bodies, animal welfare groups, universities and commercial interests etc has enabled AMRRIC to focus on establishing respectful partnerships across the spectrum of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative groups including coordination centres, land councils, land management groups and community government councils. Creating strong networks, building a knowledge and resource base and promoting our work to generate movement and investment has resulted in the Aboriginal Benefits Account (ABA) making a major investment in AMRRIC to undertake a major initiative across four NT Shires.

A major step forward

Frustrated with development and progress of best practice models for the NT, AMRRIC made a recent application to the ABA, which has been successful. Rollout of this Project, based on AMRRIC's model, in partnership with four Shires, and a number of other stakeholders will be undertaken over the next three years.

Achieving the desired outcomes requires significant changes to traditional attitudes to animal welfare and animal management in the NT, by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Such change will only be achieved with employment and training of local community animal management workers, community education and awareness programs and co-operation between all stakeholders and long term patient commitment.

Demonstrated need for the Project

Veterinarians, who work in remote WA and QLD communities with environmental health workers (EHWs), understand the value of having trained local people working alongside them to deliver animal management and health programs. Their contribution to animal management programs means vets don't need to undertake all the groundwork in establishing the program as the EHWs are well known and trusted by their community, resulting in an efficient program. EHWs are also trained in 'skills such as packing and sterilising surgical kits, which greatly expedites surgery'.^{iv} "Some of the greatest challenges in providing veterinary services to remote communities", stated Dr Emma Kennedy, East Arnhem Shire, 'centre on lack of understanding regarding the service and lack of trust. Education and developing a trusting relationship with community members is the key to success, but often there are barriers, [including] language and cultural'. Local animal management workers can be a wealth of knowledge and provide vital language translation when required. They ensure that vets and other external staff are informed of cultural differences that they may otherwise be unaware of. "EHWs are pretty handy when you're there: they're even handier when you're not there," Dr Robert Irving explains, "they ring you up and let you know what's going on. It makes continuity of programs better if you have someone in-house. You can go backwards very quickly in these places if you don't have the right help."^v

Appropriate education and training to AMWs and EHWs enables them to deliver parasite control programs and injectable temporary sterilisation of animals. They can provide feedback and statistical information to AMRRIC/Shire for national and local data collection and assist the Shire and the local community advisory group with strategic planning.

Issues to be addressed

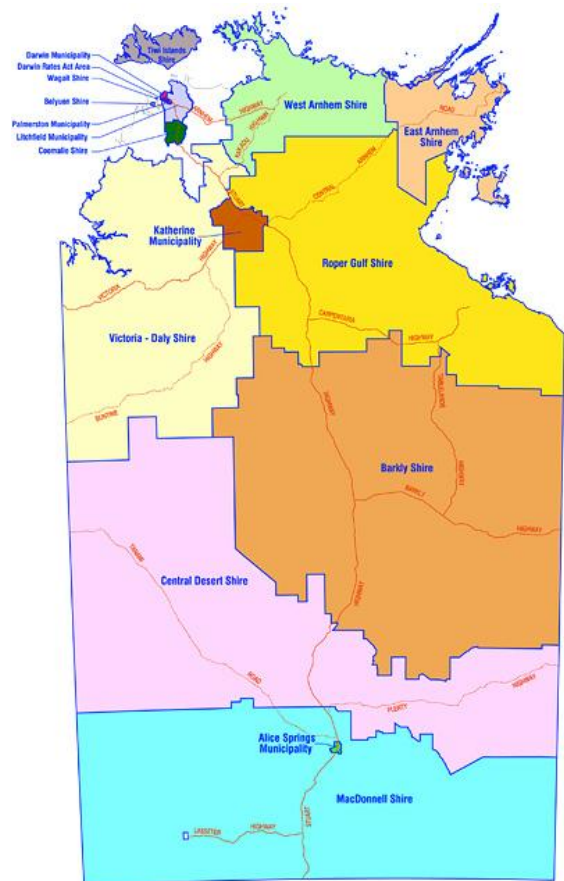
Many communities have not had regular veterinary services or animal management workers to control breeding, resulting in unwanted/unowned and large numbers of dogs. Zoonoses (diseases that pass from dogs to humans) add to burden of disease for the whole community. Noise associated with barking, fighting or mating, mess from scavenging for food e.g. overturned bins, scraps, faeces etc, dogs biting or attacking children are commonplace. Dogs chasing vehicles, and exhibiting pack behaviour create community safety issues as seen in many communities. Sick, undernourished, and dying animals results in community grief expressed in terms like 'sad for dog' and 'shamed' over sick or dying dogs and it lowers community self-respect and feeling of wellbeing. Physical abuse e.g. dogs used for spear practice by young males or suffering from water scalding is often observed. Uncontrolled or abandoned animals roaming from communities contribute to feral animal populations. Roaming wild dogs threaten the existence of the Australian Dingo as a species and impact on pastoral enterprises. Feral cats, pigs, donkeys etc also have a significant negative impact on the local environment.

The NT's Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) has delivered Environmental Health training for several years. However there has been a frustrating bottleneck in terms of the jobs available. BIITE staff member, Michael Spry, recognises that dedicated positions "managing dog health, whether as an Environmental Health Worker or an Animal Management Worker, benefits the worker, the community, veterinarians and of course the dogs." ^{vi} AMRRIC's ABA funded project will provide opportunities for AMWs who have already completed BIITE training or to engage and support unskilled workers in BIITE studies.

The project

The Project will employ ten Animal Management Workers in 3 shires, West Arnhem, East Arnhem and MacDonnell Shires and support 9 EHW/AMWs in the Tiwi Islands (see map R).^{vii}

AMRRIC will work to achieve its aims ^{viii} and objectives ^{ix}



by building the capacity of Indigenous communities to sustainably manage their own animal health and welfare issues by providing the skills base for the AMWs to undertake the project and beyond it. By building awareness, capability and standards we can achieve greater engagement in desexing and animal health programs.

The Project will highlight that dogs are the responsibility of the owners not just the Shire, and that a range of stakeholders will need to work together to support the long term change needed to achieve this outcome.

The Project will ultimately build safer communities and develop community pride, wellbeing and employment opportunities. The establishment of local community advisory groups (CAG) and animal control plans in each community to drive their own program will require culturally sensitive communication with significant community figures (Donelan 2007)^x. AMRRIC recognises the complex nature of distributing information within a community. In traditional communities the education and awareness process must start with the elders and be directed through the right channels, especially in areas where dog dreaming is involved. Good coordination, a strong community committee and endorsement by powerful key persons (CAG) dictates the success of the DHP in each community (Wilkes (2006),^{xi} facilitates 'knowledge transfer' and achieves long term attitudinal change towards the care and management of dogs in the community. This approach shifts the reliance on 'white fellas', shires and vets to the community over the long term. Working with the community, not against it, is key to achieving outcomes. This approach increases compliance with animal control by decreasing the climate of mistrust (born from 'white', top down, dictatorial and brutal methods in the past).

Employing the AMW to undertake a range of roles in the community ultimately reduces the overall cost of programs. They undertake the parasite control program, prepare the community for the veterinary visit, organise a 'surgery suite', develop a surgical desexing list in preparation for the visit and work alongside the veterinarian. They can talk with community members about unwanted, sick or injured dogs and also prepare a list of dogs for consensual euthanasia.

Through the facilitation and provision of a range of culturally sensitive and professionally accountable education and training programs and conferences for Environmental/Public health workers, Indigenous community members and community employees and vets we can achieve real outcomes. Critical to the success of the Project are effective education advisory services and targeted training programs delivered by the AMWs, AMRRIC and other stakeholders. The provision of appropriate advice, education and training needs to occur in a variety of forms aimed at a range of stakeholders and program participants within the community and the Shire. Some occasions offer informal and often experiential learning opportunities to be utilised as the appropriate situation to educate and advise. Some occasions need to be more formally structured to foster suitable education and training opportunities.

In complex social and cultural contexts such as the implementation of this Project in the NT communities, each occasion offers a learning opportunity for someone. All participants and stakeholders at one time or another have something to teach or something to learn. A successful program fosters an

easy and culturally appropriate learning environment where taking advantage of informal training situations (eg in schools, door to door and alongside the veterinary service) is equally as important as offering effective structured education and training program delivery.

AMRRIC recognises the correlation between maximising appropriate teaching and learning experiences and achieving excellent Project outcomes within each community and region. In order to maximise appropriate teaching and learning outcomes the Project requires skilled and experienced staff who can capitalise upon appropriate informal learning scenarios as well as identifying, developing and facilitating a formal set of suitable and effective education and training programs. This role will be undertaken by AMRRIC's Project Officer and Education Officer in partnership with the AMWs.

Operating effectively in a cross cultural environment and seeing the world from another social and cultural perspective is vital to project success. Targeted education and training programs will enable community people to appreciate what the Project is about and why the NTG and regional Shires are implementing animal management programs in their communities. Developing an understanding of the relevant legislative requirements through education and training programs will enhance the capacity of communities to benefit from the implementation of the Project. Enabling local residents to understand the process will foster effective and appropriate long term change for better care of and reduced numbers of animals in their community.

Education and training programs will enable non Aboriginal stakeholders to appreciate the kinds of barriers that impede immediate long term change in essential areas of animal management. Through the application of targeted education and training programs, non Aboriginal stakeholders have an opportunity to learn to work effectively in an Aboriginal context and develop useful strategies that fit the local context.^{xii}

Providing pet care education across a range of services in their community such as schools, clinics, aged care facilities etc is a key role for the AMW in improving the overall health and care of dogs in their community. This approach empowers aboriginal communities to achieve animal health and welfare standards comparable to those acceptable in the wider Australian community (Donelan 2007).^{xiii}

School based education will focus on children's relationships with pets; general aspects of caring for pets, zoonotic diseases, hygiene and dog bite prevention. Specific Aboriginal education resources have been developed by AMRRIC. It is planned, through funding from the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (AAWS) that dog health concepts will be integrated into existing curriculum elements such as science and health for zoonotic disease and hygiene for the AMRRIC 'Be a friend to your dog' school strategy. This requires a participatory design process so that teaching and learning methods are culturally appropriate and affirmative and are designed in conjunction with parents and teachers. Resources such as illustrated stories, colouring in sheets, activities (such as dog bite prevention games) developed by the AMRRIC Education Officer will be trialed during this program in partnership with the major Project across East Arnhem Schools.

The Project will encourage all stakeholders to play a role in building this sustainable model. AMRRIC recognises that linkages between agencies (health, environmental health, department local government, housing, etc) at commonwealth, state, territory and community government levels need to be explored and engaged as it not just up to shires to address the issues. Partnerships with health boards and clinics and other stakeholders establishes the precedent that impact of and responsibility for animals and their health and welfare lies across many areas as well as the dogs' owners.

The Project takes the view to long term 'user pay' systems where people accept full responsibility and are adequately resourced to care for their animals, compliance around by laws is achieved, local stores keep pet products and appropriate dog behaviour is accepted as a social responsibility (biting, noise, mating, etc). People see that it will help the dogs if they are well and behaved (e.g. be safe from retribution for bad behaviour; desexed dogs less likely to fight and harm themselves and others). Through the effective implementation of the Project community members can gain a greater understanding of animal health and welfare legislation to highlight their own obligations and responsibilities as companion animal owners.

As can be seen, the employment of local people is without doubt the primary link in the development of sustainable models to improve outcomes for animals and communities.

Sustainability

To ensure the benefits of this Project are sustainable, AMRRIC will be undertaking strategic work with the Regional Operation Centres, communities and Federal and State governments to build these Animal Management Worker positions into all strategies for those communities' futures. This way we ensure that the issues of overpopulation of dogs and cats and their health and welfare status becomes a manageable issue into the future, born from understanding, cooperation and education.

References

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