



ABSTRACT

Situation of companion animals in Finland

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Country overview

It is estimated that there are about 600 000 dogs and 800 000-1 300 000 cats in Finland. There are virtually no stray dogs in Finland, stray cats are a problem on certain areas. It is estimated that about 8 500 dogs end up in municipal shelters every year but more than 90 % of these dogs are later collected by their owners. In comparison about 9 000 cats end up in shelters yearly and only about 10 % are collected by their owners. Free roaming cats do not end up in shelters very often, so the real number of cats without an owner may be much higher.

Legislation and competent authorities

The general rules on animal welfare are laid down in Animal Welfare Act (247/1996). The Act is accompanied with the Animal Welfare Degree (396/1996). Specific rules for keeping companion animals and species specific requirements are laid down in Decree for the protection of companion animals (674/2010). Cruelty against animals is described as a crime in Criminal Code (39/1889). There is no dangerous dogs legislation in Finland.

Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is the supreme authority in animal welfare issues in Finland. Finnish Food Safety Authority is the central governmental authority steering and controlling the enforcement and compliance of animal welfare legislation. Regional State Administrative Agencies take care of these tasks on their respective regions. Locally the municipal veterinarians, police and health protection officers act as competent authorities.

Registration and identification of companion animals

There is no legal obligation to register or identify companion animals. There are voluntary registers for purebred animals maintained by different private organisations like Suomen Kennelliitto (Finnish Kennel Club) and Suomen Kissaliitto (Finnish Cat Club). These organisations also maintain a database for identified pet dogs and cats that are not registered as purebred animals. There is also a private database for all companion animal species invented by SEY.



Trends and developments

The amount of companion animals is rising and more and more animals are kept in an urban environment.

Many pet owners are willing to pay substantial amounts of money to take care of their pets. On the other hand knowledge about the needs and welfare of the pet is often insufficient. Problems arise also when the owners have financial or other personal problems and can't take proper care of their animals any more.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is starting the total reformation of the Animal Welfare Act this year. Taking care of stray animals and pet identification and registration are issues that are going to be looked into during the process. Following this also the species specific decrees must be revisited. Advisory Board for Hobby- and Companion Animals has just been constituted to work as an expert group aiding the Ministry in issues and policy making concerning the welfare of companion animals. Board has 12 members who represent different cat, dog and horse organisations, veterinary profession, animal retailers, research on animal welfare, ethics etc.

Enforcement

The Duty of law enforcement is included in the law in a satisfactory way. Veterinary staff undertaking the enforcement consists mainly of well-trained professionals. Inadequate number of specialized law enforcement authorities causes problems. Especially there is a lack of educated staff among the police in legislation, enforcement and criminal investigation in AW cases. Despite many recent improvements, there also is a lack of full-time veterinary authorities around the country.

In a grassroots level the general nature of the legislation causes problems. Enforcement depending on the authority's personal opinion on how to define e.g. "sufficient" or "appropriate" is too common.

Co-operation between authorities and NGO's in law enforcement cases has recently been getting difficult. After the revision of constitutional privacy subsections there is a lack of unambiguous regulations about the use of NGO's expertise.

Solution strategies

Problem: Some retailers house animals in inadequate conditions for an unlimited period of time. AW law is ineffective.

Solution: The Certificate Program for Ethical Pet Shops (CPEPS) is an extensive collaborative project with the aim to create a Quality Management System for retailers selling pet animals complying with ISO 9001 standards. The aim is to create standards to keep and sell animals in a shop as well as to strengthen the expertise and know-how of the staff and to educate pet buyers and owners about the species-typical requirements of pet animals. Certificate will be launched in 2012.

Problem: There's no identification and registration database aimed at all animal species but several species specific databases with limited office hour access.

Solution: Turvasiru.fi - "Safety Chip" is a voluntary, browser based animal identification and registration database established as a response to the need for reliable and accessible identification system for all companion animals. Turvasiru.fi is invented by SEY and is now a joint project with two other NGO's and a business partner.

Problems: Children often lack pet skills before buying one. There is no AW education in schools. Pet licence is often suggested as a solution.

Solution: Pet Education "Ellu" is a 16-hour course for children and adolescents. It's created to educate children about the proper treatment of pets, pet animals' right to express species-typical

behaviour and pet owners' possibilities to fulfil their pets' needs. Attendees get a "pet license", a certificate that proves awareness of the basics of responsible pet ownership. The education is voluntary but there have been discussions about adopting a similar program to primary schools' educational programs.

What should be done to improve the condition of companion animals in Finland?

SEY focuses its efforts on the revision of the animal welfare law. The main points on the wish list show that the challenges in Finland are similar to many European countries. Contrary to common beliefs there are several countries in Europe with a clearly advanced AW law.

- Transfer of Animal Welfare issues from Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Environment
- Animal Welfare Ombudsman
- Animal welfare education programs in schools
- Responsible pet ownership education programs
- Animals should not be defined as goods – they should have an own legal status
- Animals to be recognized as sentient beings
- Strategy to prevent illegal puppy trade
- Mandatory chipping and public registration at least for dogs and cats
- Strategy to prevent cat overpopulation
- Stricter regulations for municipal shelters
- Companion animal issues to EU agenda