



The truth about cats and dogs is that their care, control can vary wildly

Of culture and pets

By Kim Lamb Gregory
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Growing up in Chihuahua, Mexico, Trini Estrada did not give much thought to the dogs and cats who wandered freely through the streets.

"There is a different mentality with people from Mexico — also the same case with all the Latino communities, such as Central and South America," said Estrada, a Pomona woman who went on to found a canine rescue organization called Dogs Latino Rescue.

"We don't have the same humanity toward animals" in those cultures, she said. "Over there, it's the survival of people, of children; we don't have the time and means to take care of an animal. Kids don't learn it from their parents."

In fact, Estrada said, she grew up believing animal cruelty was acceptable.

"Over there in Mexico, it was very common for children to pour gasoline on cats and just light a match on their tail," Estrada said. "I'm ashamed to say I participated in that. For me, it was normal."

A year ago, Estrada — who came to America at age 12 — formed her rescue organization to invite people of her culture to learn about a different way to treat animals.

Her organization offers bilingual information on spaying, neutering and vaccinations and finds foster homes for dogs until she can locate permanent homes.

Estrada, 40, is among a growing list of people trying to address the culture clash that exists in America regarding the care of cats and dogs.

As is true with many social mores, what works in one culture may not work in another. Here in the U.S., pets often are treated as family members. In Mexico, they often run free.

The way animals are viewed in Mexican culture is of special concern to local animal welfare workers because of the high number of Mexicans who immigrate to Southern California.

According to the Pew Hispanic Research Center, in 2007, of the 20.9 million people in the seven-county area known as Southern California, 8.8 million are Latino; more than 2.8 million of them were born in Mexico.

Animal control officers at agencies throughout Southern California say they have noticed the largest numbers of homeless pets come from areas with the highest numbers of Latinos and low-income residents.

"I think it's a combination of cultural and socioeconomic problems," said Ventura County Animal Regulation director Kathy Jenks.

The numbers

According to Jenks, the number of stray dogs and cats in Oxnard is higher per capita than in any other city in the county. Oxnard, with a population of about 184,000, is more than 66 percent Latino; the average household income is \$59,706.

In 2006, animal regulation took in 1,783 dogs and 1,453 cats from Oxnard, Jenks said. Of the dogs, 1,195 were strays and 372 were reclaimed by owners; 1,621 dogs and 2,675 cats were euthanized.

Compare that to Simi Valley, with a population of 121,000, about 17 percent Latino and with an average household income level of \$88,882. "From Simi Valley, we took in a total of 829 dogs; 564 were strays. That's less than half of what we took in from Oxnard," Jenks said.

In Kern County, with a population of more than 780,000, animal regulation takes in almost 500 unwanted pets a week.

In the 2005-2006 fiscal year, it took in an average of 203 cats and 257 dogs a week; about 70 pets a week are euthanized.

"That's just Kern County," explained Denise Haynes, division chief of Kern County Animal Control. "We have a lower socioeconomic population. We have a high Hispanic population with a lower education level."

Half the residents of Kern County are white; 38 percent are Latino; 6 percent are black; 3 percent are Asian; nearly half its residents — 44 percent — live below the federal poverty level.

Homeless animals are a hazard to humans and the animals themselves, Jenks said. Besides the fact that it's against state law for animals to be off a leash if they're off the owner's property, unvaccinated animals roaming free pose a public health risk.

"We don't want animals of unknown origin to expose our adults or children to potential rabies," Jenks said. "We don't want animals out there being hit by cars and being abused by unscrupulous people."

Animal advocates agree the best way to control the pet population is spaying and neutering, but those in lower socioeconomic brackets often can't afford to alter or vaccinate their pets.

In Latino and other ethnic communities, animal welfare officials say, the information about spaying and neutering as a means of pet birth control has still not fully penetrated language and cultural boundaries.

"Many members of the Hispanic population have not ever heard of the concept of spay/neuter," Haynes said. "It's not something they were brought up with. Many are uneducated.

"That's not a judgment," she said, "it's just a statement."

Charles Macune, Mexican and Latin American history professor at CSU Northridge, says animals are viewed differently in Mexico, largely because it is not a wealthy nation. "People can't afford to give the kind of care that middle-class people in this country can," Macune said. "In a country where many people are poor, it's a harder life. That applies to people as well as their animals."

Macune, who has lived in and visited Mexico many times over the past 40 years, said leash and vaccination laws that exist in the U.S. do not, to his knowledge, exist in Mexico. "You do see lots of stray dogs, especially in rural or small-town Mexico," he said. "There is a sense that, That's the way life is. You'd rather let the animal run free than put it down."

Inside observations

Animal control officers and those immersed in local Latino culture say they believe that people born in Mexico, or who may have deep roots in Mexico, may not be familiar with the different attitude toward pets that the U.S. culture has, so education is necessary.

Jesus Ortiz, a veterinary technician at Mercy Crusade's Spay & Neuter Clinic in Oxnard, said that some Latino families in his Oxnard neighborhood will not vaccinate or alter their cats or dogs because they don't fully understand the advantages. He said he would like to see more Spanish speakers on veterinary office staffs and more information in Spanish.

He agreed that animals have a different life in Mexico than they tend to have in the U.S.

"Tijuana is full of animals," Ortiz said of the depressed border town. "They are skinny or on three legs."

Puerto Rican-born actor and animal activist Esai Morales said he also believes that the way animals are treated in many Latino societies could be viewed as neglect in the U.S. "I don't want to beat up on my own people, but I can't lie about a trend that I myself see," Morales said in a telephone interview this month. "It can't become a racial thing, because that would be unfair," he added, "but as poverty goes along racial lines, so does mistreatment (of animals)."

The actor, who has just taped appearances in the CBS series "Jericho" and is starring in the new film "American Fusion," frequently lends his celebrity to animal causes and said he would be happy to do public-service announcements in English and Spanish to encourage people to spay and neuter their pets.

Against the odds

One Bakersfield elementary school teacher learned about the cultural disparity firsthand; in order to get a grant to write a book about pet care, animal advocate Robin Slocum last year surveyed the approximately 60 third- and fourth-graders she teaches at Leo G. Pauly Elementary School in Bakersfield.

The school, she said, serves a group of very low-income kids, with 98 percent who qualify for free lunch. About 80 percent are Latino, 15 percent are black and 5 percent are white, she said.

"Zero percent even know what it was to have their dogs and cats spayed or neutered," she said. "Zero."

But, once these families are educated, they do want to alter their pets, she said, if they can afford it.

There is no free or low-cost spay/neuter clinic in Kern County, so the Bakersfield no-kill dog shelter

Slocum works with — Alpha Canine Sanctuary — sponsored two free spay/neuter days last year.

"There were so many people who wanted to do it but couldn't afford it," Slocum said. "My heart just broke. We had over 300 people on the waiting list for each free spay/neuter day."

Pets as luxury

The way animals are viewed in an agrarian society — which exists in many parts of Mexico — may be a key element to animal treatment in some Latino societies in America.

"Many of these people are coming from communities deeply rooted in an agricultural way of life," said CSUN anthropology professor Sabina Magliocco. "They are not used to thinking of animals as pets."

In agricultural communities, animals are seen as working resources, not as family members. Cats earn their keep by keeping rats at bay. Dogs may help with herding. They are not leashed or altered. That value still exists in farming communities of rural America, she said. The doggie sweaters pop out as you move into the suburbs and cities.

"If you think of this anthropologically, we as middle-class urbanized Westerners, we essentially infantilize the animals," Magliocco said. "Some people buy them clothing or other products similar to those we have for children."

The U.S. culture's concept of animals as pets is grounded in the social welfare movements that grew with the rise of the middle class in the 1800s, Magliocco said. The luxury of seeing animals as pets is directly proportionate to higher socioeconomic status, she said.

In the wealthier or middle-class regions of Mexico, you're likely to see the same "animals as family" values as you do in the more affluent parts of the U.S., she said.

"For the most part, the Mexicans with whom we come into contact, they are not the elite. They are not the middle class who already have access to the good life," she said. "This is true for all of the immigrant groups who came to the U.S. These people are desperate to better their economic conditions."

A guy thing?

Macune stressed that his observations are purely anecdotal, but when he was living south of the border, he noticed a reluctance to have pets altered, especially male pets. "Most families there don't favor neutering the male," he said. "It's, 'You want them to have some fun, don't you?' They believe that God equipped them with sex organs and it's not natural (to alter pets)."

Dr. Sherry Grisham, a veterinarian at the Mercy Crusade clinic, said she believes the reluctance to neuter has more to do with the Y chromosome than with culture and socioeconomics. "I've been practicing for 20 years and I've found it to be very gender-specific," she said.

"Men will bring in their male dogs to be neutered, then come back and get them right before the operation. Those men are usually Caucasian men."

Public education

Oxnard co-compliance manager Dirk Voss, who oversees the city's animal safety operations, says the

city is doing its best to stay on top of the situation. "Even though we have a high level of incidents, we're responding proactively," he said. "We try to go into these neighborhoods where it can be heavily influenced by these cultural systems and educate them."

Voss has personal experience with the effect culture can have on animal treatment. He used to work in Long Beach when there was a large influx of Cambodian immigrants. His animal control officers often encountered Cambodian immigrants killing and eating dogs and cats for dinner. It was simply a social norm the immigrants brought with them, he said.

"Folks come into our country and don't know the standards of living; our goal is to educate them," Voss said.

If Oxnard residents need help or information, Voss encouraged them to call animal control. "It's OK to get ahold of animal safety," he said. "We're not here to harm; we're here to help."

