

Is the Italian strategy to face the problem of stray dogs sustainable? A case study of two small municipalities in central Italy

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Abstract

The Italian law for pet animal protection and prevention of stray dogs (L. 281/91) requires municipalities to solve the problem of stray dogs. According to this regulation the municipalities are obliged to capture free dogs which have to be put in adequate kennels. As a priority, the animals should be housed in public kennels, if they do not exist, also private kennels are acceptable. If the legitimate owner is not identified, the municipalities are obliged to maintain the animal lifelong. Large part of small Italian municipalities are not able to build and manage public kennels. In compliance with the law they are forced to enter into agreements with private facilities and to cover the costs. Currently the average cost for maintaining a dog in a kennel is approximately € 3.50/head/day, for an annual cost of € 1,250.00/head. In the present study we evaluated the economic sustainability of the law in two small municipalities of central Italy. Under the hypothesis that all stray dogs would be housed in the kennel the total expense would be € 19,493.00/year. It is interesting to note that this amount corresponds to the sum of the costs arising from the annual fees for human welfare (indigents support € 5,532, school meals € 6,780, support for elderly € 7,497).

Keywords: kennel, municipality budget, Rieti, small municipalities, stray dog

Introduction

The problem of stray dogs is present worldwide (Butcher, 1999). In Italy it is very important and well known since ancient times (Cassina and Fico, 1990; Virga, 1991). It is difficult to define and update quantitative data of the phenomenon because of its peculiar characteristics (Beck, 1973) and different ways of manifestation (Coman and Robinson, 1989) in different areas of the country. Studies performed in Italy in the last three decades show that of a total of 2,762,862 dogs present, about 220,140 were stray dogs (7.96% of total) and 79,112 feral dogs (2.86% of total) (Boitani and Fabbri, 1984; Boitani, 1992). In the same studies stray dogs were divided into four different categories, depending on the relationships with humans, from which directly or indirectly they depend. In this study, the term includes all the stray dogs that wander in uncontrolled human settlements, with or without a master. The existing law provides that if the Government fails or neglects to adopt measures and/ or precautions that tend to remove and eliminate the potential danger posed by stray dogs, it is liable for damages caused by stray dogs (Beck, 1975; Vučinić et al., 2008). This implements the general principle of “*neminem laedere*” art. 2043 of the Civil Code. Therefore, the municipalities should be an active part in the actions of identifying, capturing and housing stray dogs in suitable kennels (Blanchard, 2009; Butcher, 2009) by the burden of maintenance lifetime. In this regard the Italian law for pet animals protection and prevention of stray dogs (L. 281/91), also enacted to prevent, control and eradicate the phenomenon of stray dog; in paragraph 1 of Art. 4 it imposes that “municipalities, individually or associated, ensure the rehabilitation of existing municipal kennels and build kennels for dogs in accordance with the criteria established by regional law and using the contributions for that purpose from the region”. Nowadays 1,650 Italian municipalities (of 8,094 in 2010) are not equipped with their own kennels and must draw agreements with private ones. In the present study we evaluated the economic viability of the law 281/91 in small towns. We investigated the budget of two municipalities in the province of Rieti (central Italy) in order to compare public expense for human welfare and stray dog housing.

Materials and methods

During the period between March 1 and December 31 2010, a survey was conducted to count stray dogs present in those municipalities (Boscagli et al., 2010). We counted only the dogs present inside the town (Santamaria et al., 1990; Natoli et al., 2009). These animals should not exist on the basis of the Italian

law 281/91. The municipalities' budget, including the expenses for stray dog housing, and the daily cost per dogs was recorded in the administrative offices of the municipalities on the basis of the agreement with kennels. Human welfare expenditures were also recorded (support for indigents, sea stays for elderly peoples).

Results

Both municipalities were not equipped with a kennel, public or private. In the municipality A (20 villages with less than a total of 2,000 residents) were counted 17 stray/wandering dogs. In town B (69 villages with a total of about 4,000 residents) 43 stray/wandering dogs were counted. In January 1999, the municipality A subscribed to an agreement with a private kennel, updated several times for the economic aspects. Nowadays the municipality pay a fix fee € 8,000/year to house up to a maximum of 8 dogs. For any unit in excess a daily rate of € 3.50 (VAT included) is applied, for an annual fee of € 1,277/head. If the 17 stray dogs were caught and housed in conformity with the law the municipality should pay an annual cost of € 11,493 and a total expense of € 19,493/year. It is interesting to note that this amount corresponds to the sum of the costs arising from the annual fees for human welfare such as indigents support (€ 5,532), meat for school meals (€ 6,780) and sea stays for elderly and two assistants (€ 7,497). The municipality B subscribed an agreement with a private kennel. Nowadays the municipality pays a price of € 3.50/head/day (VAT included), for an annual fee of € 1,277/head. If the 43 stray dogs were caught and housed in conformity with the law the municipality should pay an annual cost of € 54,932.50/year. This amount is twice the costs arising from the annual fees for human welfare (€ 7,581 for indigents support, € 9,567 for meat for school meals, € 11,532 for sea stays for elderly and two assistants).

Discussion

The presence of stray dogs shows the failure of municipalities in the application of law 280/91. The analysis of the overall economic status of these institutions indicates, however, the real impossibility to fulfil the constraints of the law. The scarcity of economic resources induces the institutions to omit the application of the law not to overcharge their budget. So the law cannot achieve the aim to solve the problem of stray dogs because small municipalities are unable to finance facilities and dog support.

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