

A Note on the Cause of the Nuisance of Barking at Night on New Providence, The Bahamas

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ABSTRACT

Barking dogs, both roaming and owned, are regarded as a nuisance throughout New Providence. With most dogs being owned for protection, either as watch or guard dogs, it is apparent that many people keep dogs specifically to bark. This observational study of 551 dogs, in 14 areas of greater Nassau, showed that confined, barking dogs constituted the single largest group of dogs (37.6%) observed at night. A smaller percentage of unconfined (48.6%) than confined dogs (68.5%) barked at night. Almost half (45.2%) of the dogs observed were unconfined. The study indicates that confined dogs constitute the majority of barking dogs and so are the major cause of the nuisance of barking at night.

INTRODUCTION

Dogs were officially described as a “nuisance” in 1841 (Fielding, Mather & Isaacs, 2005) and a 2006 study found that dogs, and in particular their barking at night, was the most commonly reported neighbourhood nuisance (Adderley, 2008). It is also known that most dogs are kept for their guarding or watching functions (Fielding & Plumridge, 2005), even though the ability of dogs to provide “protection” has been questioned in The Bahamas (Fielding & Plumridge, 2004) and elsewhere (Hakim, Rengert & Shachmurove, 2000). Consequently it is not difficult to suppose that many dogs are kept in order to bark, particularly at strangers (Goodloe & Borchelt, 1998), and so that it is cared-for dogs which are responsible for the noise at night which most people consider a nuisance and given rise to dogs being regarded as a “cared for nuisance” (Fielding, 2007).

This project was undertaken to determine if “owned” or “stray” dogs are the cause of the

night-time nuisance of barking.

METHOD

Due to the way dogs are kept, with many owned dogs allowed to roam, it should be noted that the roaming dog population consists of both owned and unowned dogs. Few dogs are licensed and dogs with collars merely indicate that the dog was once owned and nothing of its present status (Fielding & Mather, 2000). Therefore, it is not possible to be sure which roaming dogs are owned or unowned. Clearly, confined dogs are owned, consequently, the only distinction which can be made with much certainty is between confined (owned) and unconfined dogs (which may or may not be owned). A dog was defined to be confined if it were determined that it could not get on the street. A dog which was in a yard which allowed the animal access to the street was classified as roaming, even if it were not currently on the street.

In March 2007, streets in selected residential areas

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of greater Nassau (situated on New Providence) were watched as four groups of College of The Bahamas students walked through neighbourhoods after dark and the number of confined and unconfined dogs, counted. In some areas, several counts were made and so the total number of dogs from the multiple counts is reported. In addition, the number of the dogs which were seen to bark was also recorded.

RESULTS

A total of 551 dogs, both confined and roaming were observed by the student groups in 14 locations in greater Nassau with the majority of dogs (54.8%) being confined, but there were neighbourhood differences in the relative numbers of confined and roaming dogs. (See Table 1) Of the total number of dogs, 59.5% barked. It was noted that in many instances, dogs barked in response to the approach of the observer, particularly in the case of confined dogs.

Table 1: Number of Dogs by location, ability to roam and barking behaviour, New Providence.

Location	Confined dogs (n=302)		Roaming dogs (n=249)	
	Barking	Silent	Barking	Silent
Carmichael	32	25	42	15
East Sub	25	6	0	3
Sear's Hill	22	8	2	1
Sans Souci	21	3	3	7
Shirley Street	20	13	0	8
Flamingo Gardens	19	6	2	5
West Grove	14	2	3	9
Fox Hill	11	4	22	23
Chippingham	10	4	31	1
South Beach	9	9	3	5
Delaporte	9	9	5	1
Winton	7	0	2	5
Yellow Elder	4	5	3	33
Kemp Road	4	1	3	12
% of all dogs	37.6%	17.2%	22.0%	23.2%

Barking dogs were observed in all study neighbourhoods. Of the confined dogs, 68.5% (n=302) barked compared with 48.6% (n=249) of

roaming dogs. Consequently, it is clear that overall, roaming dogs were more likely to bark than confined dogs (Fisher's exact test, n=551) p<0.001).

Observers noted that most dogs seen roaming were potcakes, but no systematic data on this aspect were collected.

DISCUSSION

It should be noted that the actual numbers in Table 1 are of less importance than the relative numbers in each classification. Many factors can influence the numbers of dogs seen (Beck, 1973) and this study was not intended to estimate the size of the dog population which can, in small areas, appear to be dynamic and so may not be helpful (Fielding, 2003).

The results indicate that the majority of the dogs seen barked, and so indicate that a large number of dogs contribute to the major neighbourhood nuisance in Nassau. Barking dogs were observed in all the neighbourhoods visited, which confirms that the nuisance of barking dogs is ubiquitous (Adderley, 2008). The present study confirms survey data reported by Fielding, et al. (2005) and Fielding and Plumridge (2005) which indicated that about 40% of owned dogs in New Providence are allowed to roam. The triangulation of these studies could suggest that all dogs in residential areas have caregivers and so the "stray dog problem" is one which results from lack of confinement. Typically, potcakes are less likely to be confined (Fielding, 2007), and so they would be expected to make up the majority of the roaming population, and this explains why potcakes are commonly associated with or "causing" the "stray dog problem".

The fact that the roaming dog population is probably predominantly composed of dogs that have caregivers (and so a home) may influence the number of roaming dogs which bark. My observations of dogs at Arawak Cay, a dog population in a non-residential area, has shown that roaming dogs are typically mute so that they do not attract attention to themselves, which may result in them being harmed. Further, when vocal watchdogs with caregivers stray from their caregiver's territory, they typically become silent

and only growl or bark if they feel threatened. Consequently, when residents complain of “dangerous” roaming “stray” dogs (Campbell-Rolle, 2005), they are probably, inadvertently, complaining about the behaviour of an unrecognized dog of a neighbour.

The spatial variations in the number and barking activity of roaming dogs could arise for a number of reasons; these include the presence of a female on heat or the inability (due to economic reasons) of or unwillingness (due to perceptions that it is cruel to confine dogs) (Fielding, et al., 2005) of caregivers to confine their dogs. The latter explanations indicate the importance of caregivers becoming aware that it is in the best interest of the

dog, as well as society, to be confined (Fielding & Plumridge, 2005).

This study shows that confined dogs are the primary source of barking at night. As other studies have shown that the majority of households do not keep dogs (Fielding, et al., 2005), a minority of households are responsible for subjecting the majority of residents to the irritation of night-time barking. It would appear that until laws are passed which address the issue of dog barking and confinement (for example, the Companion Animals Act of 1998 in New South Wales, Australia) or unless there is a shift in dog keeping patterns, this longstanding neighbourhood nuisance will remain and cause conflict in society.

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