

# Establishing a Typology for Dogs in the English-Speaking Caribbean

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## ABSTRACT

There is currently confusion in animal welfare circles in The Bahamas and the Caribbean with regard to terminology in connection with dog populations. Speakers and writers use the same words to describe dogs receiving different levels of care and training: these two aspects are key when considering a domesticated animal. This leads to confusion when reading papers or comparing results from studies conducted in different countries or even different reports from within the same country. At its worst, the incorrect use of words can lead to acts of violence against dogs. This paper puts forward a typology for dogs which is based upon the level of care offered to dogs as well as the interaction of dogs with humans.

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## INTRODUCTION

Only in recent years (probably since about 2002 when the Humane Society International and Humane Society of the United States and other sponsors put on a conference concerning animal welfare in small island states, Humane Society International, 2002) has there been much discussion or study on dogs in the Caribbean. Follow-up conferences (in 2004, 2006 and 2008; Pegasus Foundation, 2008) have resulted in much sharing of knowledge and best practices among those involved in animal welfare, in particular that of dogs.

Dogs have been a long-standing “nuisance” in many Caribbean territories and in the case of The Bahamas since 1841 (Fielding, Mather & Isaacs, 2005) and one that continues today (Fielding, 2008). Only recently have dog-specific studies been undertaken as a result of dogs being a nuisance (as opposed to veterinary studies on dog health). These studies have included The

Bahamas (Fielding et al., 2005), Barbados (World Health Organization, 1979; Heath & Grannum, 2008), Dominica (Alie, Davis, Fielding, & Maldonado, 2007; Davis, Alie, Fielding, Morters & Galindo, 2007), Providenciales, Turks & Caicos Islands (Fielding, 2004a) and St. Maarten (Romney, 2004).

Despite there being many animal issues in common across the territories (Fielding, 2004b), the dialogue at regional conferences has indicated that there is much variance in the use of the words to describe important subgroups of the dog population. While this is not unique to the Caribbean (for example see Matter & Daniels, 2000), it makes discussion on the attributes and characteristics of different groups of dogs difficult. (This problem has already been recognised with the vague term, “animal abuse” and led to a typology which makes usage of the term clearer; Vermeulen & Odendaal, 1993). The discrepancy in the use of words describing dogs is evident in the media where words such as “wild”

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**Acknowledgments:** The author is grateful to Prof. Alan Beck who provided input on the starting point for this typology.

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**How to cite this article in APA (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) style:** Fielding, W. J. (2008). Establishing a typology for dogs in the English-speaking Caribbean. *The College of The Bahamas Research Journal*, 14, 13-18. Retrieved from <http://researchjournal.cob.edu.bs>

have been applied to roaming dogs in The Bahamas. Such reports can induce worries in the public about “wild” dogs (“Packs of Wild Dogs,” 2000) as there is the implication that such dogs will attack humans, and so can encourage violent acts towards the animals (“Our Pets,” 2001).

This paper attempts to provide a typology for dogs appropriate to the Caribbean to assist in the discussion on dogs.

We purposefully refer to caregivers as “owners” as any debate about or differences between owners and guardians (Carlisle-Frank & Frank, 2006) is inappropriate since the majority of caregivers would probably regard themselves as owners and the laws of the Caribbean relate to owners. Further, the focus of improved animal welfare tends to be on “responsible animal ownership”; hence, education initiatives focus on owners.

Two aspects are probably important to defining how a particular dog is perceived. The first is whether it receives care from a person and the second is its reaction to humans, or training. Two broad categories of ownership have been proposed which appear appropriate to the Caribbean; these focus on “active” and “passive” ownership (Alie et al., 2007). The term “active” ownership is used to indicate that there is interaction between the owner and animal, whereas “passive” ownership indicates little or no interaction. Active ownership is associated with owners who view their animals more as “companions” and positively interact with them: they take them for walks, play with them or train them. The “passive” owner extends minimal care (usually limited to food and water, which may not always be provided regularly) and minimal interaction, for example the owner may not even “discipline” the dog if it does something “wrong”, and in extreme cases, the dog may not even respond to its name, if it has one. A cared-for dog can seem unsocialized depending upon how it has been treated, or indeed “trained” (we can think of an abused pit bull as an extreme example of a form of training which may give cause for concern), while other dogs can seem shy, with a short flight distance, even if they appear to be uncared for. We feel that “trained” is a better concept to use rather than “tamed” as it implies an interactive

relationship (part of active ownership) which is required for each dog; in other words, training is not inherited. Consequently, while this typology is based on these two aspects (level of care and behaviour) it is fundamentally underpinned by “active” and “passive” ownership.

We consider all dogs in the Caribbean to be essentially domesticated. In the Caribbean dogs have lived in the company of man from the time of the native Indians (Schwartz, 1997) and given the hostile environment which the Caribbean offers dogs (Fielding & Plumridge, 2005; Davis et al., 2007), and in common with observations elsewhere (Boitani, Francisci, Ciucci & Andreoli, 1995), we feel that dogs cannot thrive without interaction with man. For these reasons, we view all dogs as being domesticated, and so not wild or feral. Following the premise that wolves evolved into dogs as they took advantage of a food niche provided by man (Coppinger & Coppinger, 2002) we feel that the “wild” state of the dog is in fact to live in proximity with man. Even if “feralization” is viewed as “de-domestication”, the “context of human-animal relationships” is important (Daniels & Bekoff, 1989, p. 84). The response of untrained dogs to humans can give them the appearance of being “wild” if they are unsocialized and the action may be considered as threatening—such a dog could represent an extreme on the active-passive ownership continuum. If the same dog appeared to be unthreatening, it might be thought of as being merely skittish or wary or shy. As always, humans are the final arbiter (sometimes irrespective of justification) of whether the actions of dogs are classified as “wild”, “stray” etc. even if they do not always understand why a dog displays a particular habit.

Figure 1 attempts to show how the dog population is made up of a series of overlapping subpopulations. It can then be seen that a particular dog can be viewed as simultaneously belonging to more than one subgroup of the dog population. Indeed, during the course of its life a dog can move from one population to another and a specific dog may fall into more than one class, as determined by its level of care (Figure 1).

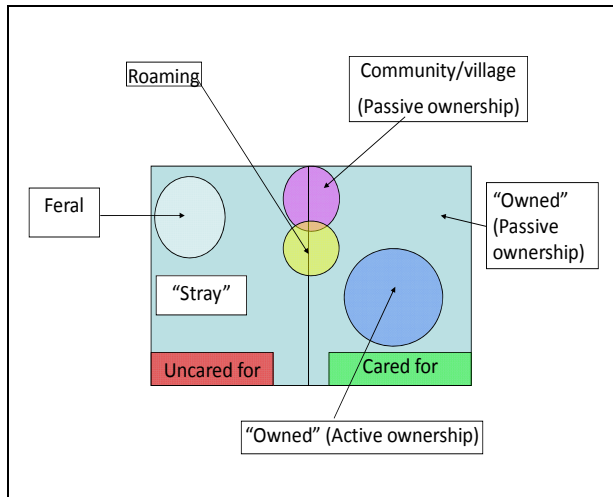


Figure 1: Classes of dogs in a Caribbean dog population based upon the level of care they receive

Dogs can also be viewed by their behaviour and this is illustrated in Figure 2.

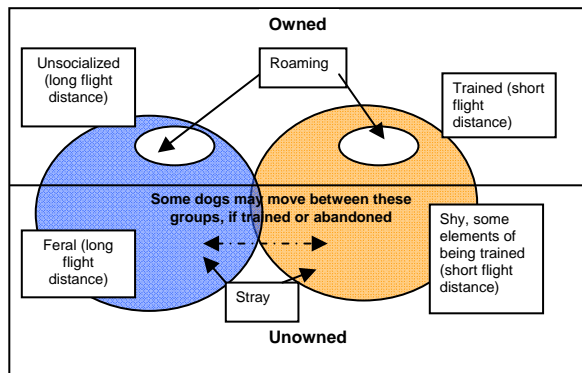


Figure 2: Classes of dogs in a Caribbean dog population based upon the reaction of dogs to humans.

Many dogs in the Caribbean receive care, even if the caregiver does not claim ownership. The difference between a cared-for and an owned dog is probably the provision of health care. Caregivers who claim ownership are more likely to expend resources on health care than caregivers of a community-owned dog. This differentiation in care can even be seen by the level of care offered to different classes (“breed”, “mixed”, mongrel, or “potcake”; Fielding, 2007). Within each of the classes (cared for, owned etc.), there are important differences in the behaviour of dogs. Some uncared-for dogs or “stray” dogs can appear more “friendly”, or socialized, than owned dogs, so within each group there are important gradients

of behaviour which can be detected.

In common with elsewhere, the status of a dog can vary if it is “owned” and confined but later abandoned and becomes unconfined. Therefore, we must be aware that a given dog may not be a permanent member of any one sub-population. Other variations in status, such as “owned” is usually defined in law but with territories having varying laws, the meaning of “owned” may not be uniform. As noted above, just because a dog is “owned” does not guarantee a set level of care. We can all think of cases where owned dogs suffer neglect through lack of care. Therefore, this typology attempts to use simple words which allow for local variations, while being mindful of “active” or “passive” ownership, but at the same time establish a common usage for describing members of the dog population across the region.

Consequently, we propose the following terms which we feel will allow for better communication between those involved with dog care in the Caribbean. Where appropriate these terms are based on standard definitions, with qualifications and examples where necessary to make their usage clearer in relation to Caribbean dog populations. Clearly there will be exceptions to all the examples used here, but we feel that for the “average” dog, these descriptions will allow for more consistency in describing dogs in the Caribbean.

## A TYPOLOGY

### Domesticated

At its simplest, domesticated animals are those which have lost their fear of humans (Clutton-Brock, 2007). The dog is a classic example of man’s ability to domesticate a wild animal (the wolf). Man’s interaction with wolves created the animal we now call “dog”. Selected traits are inherited, as typified by pure-bred dogs (Derr, 2007). We view all dogs as being domesticated.

### Feral

Animals which have returned to an untrained state from domestication are feral (Daniels & Bekoff, 1989). They are now no longer under human control, are self-perpetuating and give the appearance of surviving without interaction with man. They have a large flight distance from man. We view this term as inappropriate for dogs in the

Caribbean as apparently self-perpetuating populations of dogs are usually found to be dependent upon man for its survival, as in cases where they forage in trash. Possible exceptions may be dogs which survive on uninhabited islands.

### **Flight distance**

This is the distance to which a dog will retreat in the company of humans. A trained or socialized dog will have a zero flight distance and will tolerate the presence of humans in very close proximity. Unsocialized or feral dogs will have a longer flight distance and not tolerate humans close to them.

### **Cared for dogs**

A cared-for dog has a caregiver who may or may not deny ownership. The dog would be given food, water and (possibly) access to shelter. This type of dog may receive health care, and more than one household or person may offer care to the dog. Actively and passively owned dogs represent the extremes of the cared-for dog continuum.

### **Caregiver**

A person who provides at least basic care for a dog, namely food, water and (possibly) shelter. Caregivers provide care on a regular (if not always reliable) basis and show at least a passing interest in the dog, and so are distinguished from persons who erratically feed roaming dogs.

### **Community/village dogs**

These dogs are cared for by more than one household. While no one household would accept responsibility for the actions of the dogs, the dogs are regarded as being a rightful member of that community; in other words, their presence is tolerated and even encouraged by the community. The lack of clear ownership by one caregiver probably results in minimal care being offered and probably no health care for the animals. These dogs will almost certainly be passively owned and roam.

### **Owned**

A dog having an owner is an owned dog. Such dogs would be cared for (receive food and water and have access to shelter) and is the most likely dog to receive health care from the owner, but not all owned dogs will receive health care. It may or

may not be confined. Depending upon the local law, the law would consider the dog as owned (even if the caregiver does not claim ownership) because the dog spends most of its time around the household, even if the legal owner denies ownership. While not all owned dogs will be cared for actively, dogs which people claim to own will, in most cases, be the only ones that are actively owned.

### **Owner**

An owner is a caregiver who claims ownership of a dog and therefore assumes responsibility for its welfare. In territories in which the law confers ownership the word is confusing as legal owners may deny ownership and lack of identification tags may make the legal proof of ownership difficult. Due to the confusion on this issue, we consider "ownership" as something which is claimed by the caregiver, not conferred by law.

### **Unowned**

Any dog which does not have a caregiver (or group of care-givers) who claims ownership.

### **Unsocialized**

Unsocialized dogs are those which do not obey human commands and may not wish to be touched, i.e. the epitome of an untrained dog. Probably these dogs have little or no direct contact with humans, but survive by living close enough to homes or rubbish dumps in order to access food and water. They would find it difficult to survive without keeping close to humans. They have a long flight distance from man. Owned dogs can be unsocialized as a result of training which would give cause for concern; then they would appear aggressive and hard to control. An unsocialized dog represents an extreme on the trained-untrained continuum.

### **Roaming**

A dog that spends some time without direct owner supervision is a roaming or loose dog. Many roaming dogs are cared for and may also be owned. Community-owned dogs would be expected to be also roaming dogs. Allowing a dog to roam would suggest that the dog is passively owned. Studies in the Caribbean suggest that most dogs seen on the street are roaming dogs which have at least one caregiver.

### Shy

Shy dogs are usually roaming dogs with a short flight distance. They will come in close proximity to man, but always keep their distance. They may have a caregiver. Their behaviour probably results from passive ownership at some time in their life.

### Stray

These are dogs which are uncared for and so are unsocialized. While they are not community dogs, they might be fed by or obtain left-over food from people and attach themselves to a community. Typically, these dogs would frequent places where people have food and are given the leftovers. On days when they cannot get fed this way, they have to survive by accessing garbage bins. Depending on their behaviour they might be termed “wild” or “feral” by the media. Depending on their status before joining the stray dog population, these dogs may have short flight distances and so appear shy or exhibit behaviour which may suggest limited training.

### Trained

Wild animals that have learned to accept the presence of humans have shorter flight distances because they associate humans with food or

because their behaviour has been modified by training (punishment or reward). Each individual and generation has to learn this behaviour; it is not inherited. A trained dog would be actively owned and a well-trained “working” dog would represent an extreme on the unsocialized-trained dog continuum. As noted above, some “training” can be considered abuse, as in the example of “training” dogs to fight each other.

### Wild (never domesticated)

“A wild animal is usually thought of as one that is fearful of humans and runs away if it can” (Clutton-Brock, 2007, p. 639). But when this term is used in relation to dogs, the press seems to suggest that the fear of humans which “wild” dogs exhibit would lead them to attack humans. Consequently, an association has been made between “wild” and “threatening”. Wild might be considered at the opposite of socialized or tamed (Clutton-Brock, 2007) but the animals we call dogs would not be dogs without dependence upon man (and so taming), so we do not consider “wild” an appropriate word to use to describe dogs in the Caribbean where the usually limited land areas result in dogs and man generally living in close proximity to each other.

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