Greedy industry breeds unwanted pets

SAHABAT Alam Malaysia (SAM) notes with grave concern the culling of dogs due to the onset of rabies from infected ones, which are mostly strays. While attention is focused on Penang, animal groups should also pay attention to Perlis and Kedah to see how strays are put down.

SAM has yet to read of protests or statements condemning other states' decision to cull dogs suspected to have rabies. It would be interesting to note how dogs in other states are put down, whether in a humane or inhumane manner.

The rabies outbreak brings into focus an issue that the country's administration has failed to address for a long time, except via periodic shooting, and that is, of the stray population. Stray dogs, as well as stray cats, have been a major problem not because of the animals' fault, but because of irresponsible pet owners. The question that needs to be addressed is the proliferation of unwanted cats and dogs.

People acquire pets without considering the lifetime commitment that caring for the animals requires. Usually, such people turn their backs on their loyal companions when the latter become too "inconvenient" or when they find it bothersome to have the animals neutered or spayed.

Then, there are breeders, pet shops and puppy mills that fuel the "companion animal" overpopulation crisis by bringing more animals into a world already bursting at the seams with unwanted ones. Every puppy or kitten from these sources means there is one less home for a dog or cat awaiting adoption in an animal shelter or roaming the streets.

Breeders run the gamut, from "professionals", who continuously produce "pedigree" puppies and kittens in hopes of winning show titles and making money off the animals' offspring, to "backyard breeders", who mate animals indiscriminately to make a quick buck. They contribute to animal homelessness and suffering.

Pet shops acquire most of the animals from puppy mills. The puppies are taken from their mothers at an early age, packed into crates and trucked for days or flown hundreds of miles to dealers and, then, pet shops, often without adequate food, water or ventilation. Pet shops sell animals to anyone who can afford them, often sending animals home with unprepared, incompetent or abusive "guardians". Many animals bought from pet shops are abandoned when the owners tire of them.

Puppy mills treat dogs like breeding machines. Mothers are kept in tiny cages and hutches, and are bred repeatedly until they can no longer give birth. Then, they are usually auctioned off to the highest bidders or killed, without ever getting to experience a kind word, a gentle touch or simple pleasures, like the sun on their backs and grass under their paws.

People continue to source for animals from breeders or pet shops (thereby, supporting puppy mills) instead of adopting homeless animals.

In addition, there is a proliferation of dogs kept at building and construction sites, storage yards and warehouses. These animals are dumped when projects are completed, closed down or relocated.

Taxpayers' monies are spent to cope with problems caused by the failure of people to spay and neuter their pets. The one-time cost of spaying or neutering is far lower than the expenses involved in rounding up strays, feeding and housing abandoned animals, and euthanising those that could not be homed.

*Owners' **refusal to spay and neuter their pets** contributes to the large number of strays in the country.*

Rabies can be combated through long-term humane solutions, including sterilising pets to prevent unwanted births, conducting mass vaccination campaigns to prevent outbreaks, providing rabies-infected animals with humane euthanasia and establishing humane-education programmes in schools to teach children about responsible pet ownership.

Until the overpopulation of dogs and cats is brought under control through spaying and neutering, we must prevent the suffering of unwanted animals in the most responsible and humane way.

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