WHAT WE DO, AND HOW WE DO IT

As I can’t attend this year, I am very grateful to Sue Barker of Dog Rescue Newcastle, for reading this paper on my behalf.

Hunter Animal Watch is a registered charity and was formed in 1998 in response to the huge number of unwanted companion animals killed in pounds and shelters. We aimed to do what we could to stem the tide in our area by offering subsidised pet desexing. Our target group is pensioners and the unemployed.

NSW has lifetime registration for both dogs and cats. The fees are:

- $150 for an undesexed dog or cat
- $40 for a desexed dog or cat
- $15 for a desexed dog or cat owned by a pensioner

So you can see that for a pensioner or low income/unemployed person, it is very worthwhile to have pets desexed.

We work in the Lower Hunter of NSW in five council areas. The estimated human population of these five areas is five hundred
thousand. Most of the animals we deal with come from three of these council areas, and far fewer from the other two. Although we regularly ask local councils for assistance, very little comes our way from that source.

Our funds come from our charity shop which is situated on a busy city street and is well stocked with ever-changing bric a brac, pictures, lamps, books, a few clothes, pet accessories etc. The shop is small and very friendly. Dogs who know about our treats will not pass our door without a visit.

Extra services we offer in our shop are $2 pet ID discs. This is often the quickest way to reunite pet and owner. Two of our volunteers are now accredited to microchip.

Commonly we give help to desex 150-180 companion animals each month. Very frequently the number of cats exceeds the number of dogs. Since 1998 we have given financial help to spay/neuter over twenty two thousand animals.

As far as vets are concerned, when we first began we approached vet clinics to see if they would give us a discount, but now we find it is the other way round, and vets often approach us. Around 35 vets participate in our programme, so owners can be assured that there will be a vet conveniently located for them.

Our vets, on average, give us a 30% or more discount on AVA prices.

A typical scenario would be that an owner would call us between 10am and 3pm on a Monday or a Friday (although in fact they ring outside these hours all the time!) The owner is verified as a pensioner or low income/unemployed. Details of the animal are taken, a suitably located vet is selected, or a vet of the owner’s choosing. Finance is then discussed and the amount the owner would be asked to pay is established.
A time is organised with an appropriate vet clinic, and the owner is asked to arrive at the designated time, with their animal, and with the amount of money they have agreed to pay towards the surgery.

We are seldom faced with an owner who has no way of getting their pet to the vet clinic. In dire straits we would help out, but most people without transport can ask a relative or friend.

Occasionally we fund the entire cost of desexing ourselves, as desexing of the animal is paramount. Occasionally, also, we pay for a vet consult for a sick animal, and only wish we could pay the whole bill, but this is beyond our means.

At the end of each month each vet clinic bills us for the balance for each spay/neuter undertaken under our programme, and this is paid straightaway. The vets appreciate that they incur no bad debts in our programme, and we are happy to maintain good and close relationships with the clinics. As I said, roughly 35 vets are involved in our programme and some of them get more of our work than others, as their prices are extra-affordable for us.

We do very little advertising, as we really don’t need to. We are quite well known, because of our shop and our van which has eye-catching signage. Our flyers and posters are displayed in vet clinics, council offices, libraries and so on. Council rangers are very helpful and give our flyers to owners who they believe could use our service.

Apart from the usual officers as required by law for a registered charity, we have around 25 loyal volunteers who work in our shop for varying lengths of time – sometimes half a day, sometimes more than one day per week. Our shop is tiny, and full of ever-changing stock. Our customers like that. Our volunteers are friendly and accepting. They do not give advice on animal ailments or issues. Our Treasurer manages our shop and organises
rosters. She knows what sells. We receive many donations, and we are very fortunate that next door there is a St. Vincent de Paul shop. They are happy to take the items we don’t have space for.

So that’s all good, but there are many issues unaddressed and/or beyond the scope of a very small organisation. For instance,

- Outside the five council areas in which we work, there are no specific desex services such as ours, apart from the RSPCA shelter which desexes animals which are sold to be rehomed.

- Kill statistics for pounds and shelters are not easily accessible.

- Animals can be re-homed from council pounds undesexed.

- There remains community ignorance of what is needed to be a responsible owner.

- The shocking annual kill rate in NSW is estimated to be 60,000 unwanted but healthy animals killed. We believe it is time governments, state and local, required mandatory pet desexing.

- There is a pressing need for local government to enforce the NSW Companion Animal Act. There is no point having an Act which is meant for the benefit of animals, their owners and the community generally if it is not applied by those empowered to administer it.

There are rescue groups in our area and their members re-home pound animals. I hope Sue will tell you about hers – Dog Rescue Newcastle.

Olga Parkes
July 2011