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Rehoming Animals from Animal Rescue Shelters in New Zealand

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of

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Abstract

A few studies in the UK and USA have investigated the reasons why animals are surrendered to animal rescue shelters and how successful adoptions from such shelters are. There are no data available from New Zealand animal shelters and this research project was undertaken to determine how successful adoptions from three shelters in the North Island were, and why dogs were surrendered to one of these shelters.

In a pilot study 98% of people (n = 45) who had adopted a cat from one SPCA shelter believed that the adoption was successful. 73% of the cats were still with their new owner and none were returned to the shelter. Fewer (78%) people who adopted dogs (n =28) believed that the adoption was successful and 61% of the dogs were still with their owners while 21% had been returned to the shelter. Failure was primarily due to the dog's behaviour being inappropriate and the problem behaviours were hyperactivity, aggression towards humans and regularly running away.

In a larger study, contact was made with 103 of 354 persons who had adopted a dog from one of three shelters between January 2001 and April 2002. 90% of the persons interviewed stated that the adoption had been a success. There was no difference in success rates between the three shelters despite them having quite different protocols to identify persons suitable to adopt a dog and to match the dog with a potential adopter. Dogs were rejected before they reached 18 months of age. Inappropriate behaviour was closely related to the fate of the adopted dog and aggression and running away were common problems. The reason for adopting a dog influenced its subsequent fate. Dogs were most commonly adopted 'for the children' but dogs were also adopted to act as company and replace an old dog.

The reason why a dog was surrendered to a shelter was determined for 967 dogs surrendered between January 1999 and December 2001. The greatest number (30%) were strays followed by unwanted puppies (26%). A smaller percent were surrendered as unwanted (14%) or, because of behaviour problems (7%) or the owner was moving (9%). The most common behaviour problems were running away (24%) and hyperactivity (19%). More than half the dogs entering a shelter were less than 6 months of age and if the strays are excluded, because they are usually sent to the local authority pound, then about half the surrendered dogs were either euthanased or adopted.

The inability in 2002, to contact more than 70% of the persons who had adopted a dog in the previous 18 months suggests that much of the pre-adoption checking of properties and persons might not be effective in identifying stable households. The majority of these people could not be contacted because they had either given an inappropriate telephone number to the shelter or had moved. The fact that 9% of dogs were surrendered because the owners were moving suggests that the dog adopters who could not be contacted, might not have the adoption success rate seen in those who were contacted.

To Katie, who passed away during the writing

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