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Hunting a Home: The Abandonment and Neglect of Hunting Dogs

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Introduction

Hailed as an Old Dominion tradition reaching back to the English roots of the Virginia Colony, hunting with dogs seems to be as popular today as it was when George Washington participated in the 18th Century. Rabbit, fox, racoon and pheasant, to name a few, are easiest to catch or kill with the assistance of man's best friend and her magnificent nose, and over the years deer hunting with dogs climbed to the top of the popularity list for canine sportsmen. While many lament the fate of the quarry, there exists a victim nearer to the hunter than even the deer: his dogs. Mistreatment of these working animals has been widely reported in the media (Telvock, 2013), but rarely studied in academic circles. What can be done to improve the lot of the Virginia hunting hound without squeezing the rights of the humane hunters which traditionally reach all the way back to England? Ironically, England may hold the key. Last year, a law went into effect spanning the entire United Kingdom which requires the mandatory use of microchip implants in an effort to stem an epidemic of stray dogs across the British Isles (Holmes, 2013, p. 364). This legislation could be an effective way to hold hunters accountable for the welfare of their packs and lead authorities to the people who ultimately failed in their responsibility for their working animals.

Background

Not at issue here are the larger concerns of the perceived cruelty of hunting or the mistreatment of animals across a broader spectrum (animal testing, dogfighting, puppy mills, etc.). This research is focused on the neglect, abandonment and abuse of hunting dogs as a matter of course and even personal policy. This specific issue mostly goes without notice except in local circles or following particularly heinous incidents surrounded by publicity, but it promises to emerge dynamically into the public consciousness if left unchecked.

Hunting with hounds is a sport encompassing its own culture and which has a history spanning centuries. It was crafted into a skilled sport in England and France during the Renaissance, with particular focus on fox hunting from horseback. But in 2004, the hunting of all mammals with dogs was banned in England, amid uproarious protest from hunters (Hunting Act of 2004). Fearing the same sort of response from American legislators, Virginia hound hunters are now more protective of their hunting rights than ever. According to a 2016 Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries report, 29% of deer hunters in Virginia hunt deer using dogs (VGIF, 2016, p. 2). Any criticism of dog hunting is considered a serious threat by this demographic and it is met with scathing contempt for "city-dwellers" and "tree-huggers." Finding a creditable hunter willing to go on record to discuss the neglect of these hounds is difficult under such circumstances.

James T. “Jay” Lowe is the ultimate outdoorsman, but he still agreed to discuss this issue (personal communication, 2017). An avid hunter, crabber, oysterman, fisherman and trapper, he makes most of his living tromping through the woods and fields of Virginia’s Northern Neck as the chief of a land surveying party. Lowe is the vice president of the Big Buck Hunting Club in Coles Point, Va. Lowe has six dogs for hunting. Five of them are Treeing Walker Coonhounds and one is a Blue Tick-Foxhound mix. Lowe said he knows someone from just about every hunting club in or around Westmoreland County and said that he has known several hunters (even a couple of relatives) in his lifetime who have been less than kind to their dogs. Lowe explained that it is not mere sentiment, however, that elicits his contempt for abusive dog owners. “They make us look bad,” Lowe said, adding that he does know of hunters who starve their dogs to make them hunt better and knows at least two hunters nearby who have killed their dogs at the end of a hunting season to save money. There are a few who he strongly suspects have turned their dogs loose in neighboring counties, but he has no way of proving it (personal communication, 2017). Thus, is the dilemma of accountability.

Lowe said hunters do take steps to police their own kind, but rarely involve authorities when a violator of any kind is identified. Notwithstanding their reluctance to report hunters to authorities for violations of animal cruelty or hunting statutes, they are not powerless to enforce their code of humane treatment. “We don’t let anybody into this hunting club until we’ve hunted with them for at least a whole season and see how they act,” Lowe said. He added that every hunting club he knows of has similar policies and without club membership, dog hunting just isn’t possible (personal communication, 2017). Still, rejecting unethical hunters does not stop them from owning dogs.

Root Causes

The causes of maltreatment of hunting dogs appear to stem from financial considerations, but only in part. When considering the abandonment and euthanasia of hunting dogs at the conclusion of the season, the consensus is that these acts are committed to avoid having to feed the dogs during the off-season. But, according to Conservation Police Officer Alan Hatmaker (personal communication, 2017), of Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, one cannot expect to see this type of mistreatment by owners who have the means to care for the dogs year-round.

Hatmaker cited his experience with the hounds once used by late Fredericksburg businessman Carl D. Silver and his sons. Hatmaker said that each time he encountered the Silver family on a hunt, every dog was well cared-for, groomed and microchipped. Landowner rights were always respected and no one left the hunt until all hounds were accounted for. Conversely, those hunters who

rely on deer season to provide venison to feed the family for the better part of the year take a different approach. From a strictly pragmatic standpoint, it makes fiscal sense to eliminate the overhead of feeding a hunting pack during the off-season and picking up new dogs as the season approaches. “Deer hunters are the worst, in my opinion,” said Hatmaker, referring to the treatment of their hounds.

This seemingly inhumane detachment from the plight of the animals introduces another factor into the root of the problem which is generational. Most hunters will tell you that hunting dogs aren’t part of the family as most dogs eventually become. These dogs are kept in kennels year-round with only each other for company (Carson, 2015, para. 9). Hatmaker also confirmed Lowe’s assertion about hunters starving their dogs. This absence of emotional attachment to the dogs makes it easier for owners to abandon or terminate the dogs without sentiment, just as they would a deer or raccoon.

Enforcement of Virginia animal cruelty statutes is difficult due to the wording of the law and the inability of law enforcement to prove who was responsible for the care of the dogs when they have been abandoned or found to be in unhealthy conditions (Hatmaker, personal communication, 2017). Furthermore, with many judges being avid hunters, the tradition of hunting is being jealously guarded by judges who likely treat their dogs with gentlemanly compassion. One other contributing factor within the scope of the financial aspect of this issue is the price of tracking collars. The collars and the modules used to maintain contact with the collars can cost an initial output of upwards of \$500. Deer hunters concerned about the cost of feeding dogs in the off-season must surely balk at such an expense while most hunters consider such outlays as the cost of hunting.

Consequences

The proliferation of negative outcomes from these neglects and abuses are obviously suffered by the animals, themselves. Some are left to wander starving in the wild, avoiding contact with humans out of an understandable mistrust until they either succumb to starvation, are struck by a car or are rescued by resourceful animal advocates. Still others die from a bullet fired by their owner. These circumstances aside, a further burden arises for those kind hearts who take it upon themselves to offer refuge from wayward and abandoned hounds. In animal rescues across Virginia and North Carolina, the end of the hunting season sometimes finds a marked increase in hunting dogs being dropped off at shelter facilities. These facilities are often nonprofit, but take on the responsibility for medical care and feeding of these animals, many of which are grossly undernourished upon their arrival. From there, the challenge becomes finding new homes for dogs which have never been socialized beyond a pack mentality (Carson, 2015, para. 13). It can take years to acclimate a hound to a caring, safe environment.

Surprisingly, these are the more manageable cases. For example, in May, 2016 a sick beagle was found dumped in a ditch in Virginia Beach. In this case, the owner was later charged with animal cruelty and abandonment (Associated Press, 2016, para. 1, 3). In one of the more heartbreaking cases, 12 starving Walker hounds were found feeding on a deceased Walker hound after having been dumped at a shelter in Kinston, N.C. in 2010. There was no feasible way for police to track down who was responsible for the dogs (Brown, 2010, para. 17, 18). This inability to hold owners accountable cuts to the heart of the abuse and neglect issue.

Solutions

Part of the solution to this problem is already in play, as attested to by Lowe. Increasingly, hunters are policing their own and expelling hunters who don't live up to the code of ethics adopted by the clubs. While this may bring the concept of shame and ostracism into play for those who may be deterred by such things, it is by no means an end-all solution to the problem. From England, however, came more canine legislation last year which, if implemented in the United States, has the theoretical potential to make a significant dent in the number of abuse and neglect cases surrounding hunting dogs. Microchip implants, surgically inserted beneath the skin of a dog, can provide authorities with all the information needed to return lost dogs to their owners (Scott, Hack & Heneghan, 2015, p. 347). Using a wand designed to read the chips when waved over the body of the animal, a readout refers the operator to the appropriate third-party commercial database which maintains records about the dog and its owner. This legislation became mandatory for all dog-owners across the United Kingdom in 2016 in response to an epidemic of stray dogs.

Many pet owners already choose to have their veterinarians implant the chips in their pets as a safeguard against lost animals and even theft. Generally, the procedure costs less than \$100 and includes the first year's subscription to the commercial database entity for free. After that, the owner must pay a reasonable fee annually to remain a part of the database. Animal control officers and rescue facilities nationwide are already equipped with wands to read the chips and reunite the pets with their owners. If this system were to become mandatory—not for all dogs, but for dogs engaged in hunting—this could give game wardens and animal advocates the evidence they need to track down those responsible for hounds found in distressing conditions and hold them responsible according to the law. A step in the right direction was taken in 2007 when it became illegal to remove a hunting dog's collar—the one item applied to the dogs which is equipped with a GPS tracking device. This was done in an attempt to deter the theft of hunting dogs and to prevent landowners from separating the dogs from hunters lawfully encroaching on their property without permission (Champion, 2007, para. 1, 2).

Alternative View

There can be no question that the disposable dog mentality is present in only a small minority of the dog-hunting community (Telvock, 2008, para. 31). Presenting an acceptable, civilized argument for the mistreatment of working animals for economic convenience or even for cruelty's sake is an insurmountable task, but there are some who believe that sympathy for hunting hounds is symptomatic of a softening of human emotion in today's society. Often, the argument spins immediately away from the quality of life of the hunting dogs and back to the legitimacy of hunting as a sport, itself (Nils, 2004, p. 311).

The issue at hand, however isn't to question the alleged inhumanities of sport hunting, but the responsibility of a working dog owner to provide for and care for the dogs he or she lawfully owns. Undoubtedly, the ability to kill an animal is learned behavior in humans and it takes a special mindset to do it. The ability to recognize right from wrong, however, should never be trumped by either convenience or financial concerns. Most hunters, indeed, are average citizens, spanning the entire spectrum of society, as evidenced by the participation of the aforementioned and affluent Silver family (Hatmaker, personal communication, 2017). One must also keep in mind that hounds are animals of astounding skill in wild country and if a dog sets its mind to run free, little can the owner do to recover the dog or change its mind.

But for all the statements made by dog hunting advocates about humane treatment of the animals, such a legislative proposal as mandatory microchipping would not receive a warm welcome. The outrage expressed in England by pet owners at large should serve as just a sample of the unpopularity that would meet such legislation here in the U.S. from the hunting community that already views itself as under siege by animal rights activists and landowners. These hunters see themselves as the custodians of a tradition which goes back centuries and to be forced by the state to incur further cost due to the irresponsible or criminal actions of what is admittedly the minority of the lot is more than some hunters are willing to bear. Add to this the fact that this proposal mimics that of English law, and the obvious response will refer you to the American Revolution.

While Officer Hatmaker agrees that microchipped dogs could make it easier to find owners of stray hounds, he also cautioned that some hunters who would normally abandon or turn out their dogs might make the small leap to killing the dogs outright (personal communication, 2017). This is only speculation, but given the inherent lack of compassion that exists in the cases which continue to emerge, there is merit to this argument. Jay Lowe agrees, stating that he believes hunting is already overregulated. "As it is, there are too many laws for every nitpicking problem that somebody can find," Lowe stated, adding that legislators could find

themselves out of work in areas where dog hunting is prevalent if they support any more intrusion on hunters' rights (personal communication, 2017).

Conclusion

No matter what side of the hunting issue, or even the issue of using dogs to hunt, one finds himself on, it should be made clear who the victim really is in these cases of abuse and neglect. These are working animals. They are the same breeds of hounds who helped feed and clothe millions of American settlers over the decades. They are the same hounds who have tracked down countless criminals, wandering dementia patients and lost children. They possess the most talented and well-developed noses of any companion animal known to man.

The microchip policy in England could very well be applied to the hunting dog population here in Virginia, but its effectiveness cannot be predicted with any accuracy. That said, it is not being proposed as an idea for a bill in the next General Assembly, but with an eye toward resources being applied to researching the feasibility and effectiveness that such a mandate might produce. To continue to ignore the problem will not only invite suffering and neglect to continue for the hounds, but it could result in further deterioration of hunters' rights and possibly lead to the demise of dog hunting in Virginia altogether. The hunters don't want that and more than likely that these animals who were born, bred and live to hunt probably don't want that, either.

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