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Understanding camp dogs: the relationship between Aboriginal culture and western welfare

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Abstract

This article examines how rising concern for animal welfare in Australia is manifested in increased media coverage of these topics, including growing coverage of animal sentience, rights, and welfare. In Australia, canine existence is often determined by their positioning within cultural frames. Dogs have been integral to Aboriginal social, family, and environmental relationships for generations; however, colonisation brought fundamental changes to these established relationships, with ramifications that have prompted welfare concerns about camp dog populations. The goal of this article is to review existing research discourses and epistemological positioning of the supposed camp dog problem. We are not assessing individual programmes or reporting on fieldwork conducted with communities. Instead, this initial paper reviews some of the current literature to identify ways forward in facilitating Aboriginal self-determining of camp dog interactions in communities.

Keywords

Aboriginal, camp dogs, colonisation, welfare

Introduction

Dogs who have human owners in many Aboriginal communities across Australia are often free to roam and are referred to as camp dogs (Gosford, 2020). Camp dogs differ from household dogs as no one person owns a camp dog, rather they are connected to the community and are free to come and go. Their presence relies on the established relationship with the community. Camp dogs are like children where adults give them skin identities, personal names, food, and shelter (Rose, 1992). Camp dog populations are typically found in remote communities and comprise domestic breeds, dingoes, and dog–dingo hybrids (Smith et al., 2019). The term remote community is defined in line with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002). The authors acknowledge that Aboriginal communities thrive and have relationships with canine companions in multiple areas, including metropolitan centres. Canid overpopulation and lack of veterinary services and financial resources have prompted concerns over camp dog welfare (Ma et al., 2020). In addition, there are concerns for human health through the risk of zoonotic disease transmitted between dogs and humans (Gaskin et al., 2007; Meloni et al., 1993; Rusdi et al., 2018), dog bites, and potential rabies epidemics (Brookes et al., 2020; Degeling et al., 2018; Hudson et al., 2017; Riley et al., 2020). Feral, roaming, or wild dogs, such as dingoes, are often regarded as *pests* that pose a danger to livestock and native wildlife, as well as humans (New South Wales Department of Primary Industries, 2021). In Australia, local council laws regulate the keeping and control of pets on private property, in public places, and in State National Parks. Local councils do so in the interests of maintaining public safety and hygiene and preserving native wildlife. These municipal laws determine the spaces in which pets can enter and under what conditions—such as whether dogs are required to be on a leash (Dogs Victoria, n.d.). Unlike native wildlife, who belong in reserves and national parks, domestic animals are the responsibility of private citizens and must be registered, de-sexed, vaccinated and provided with identifying information using microchips or collars. Laws that apply to the management of domestic animals are described as being in place to encourage responsible pet ownership (Dogs Victoria, n.d.).

However, as roaming animals that are also a part of the human communities they frequent, camp dogs transgress the boundaries between pest, pet, and wildlife and pose a conundrum for non-Indigenous strategies of containment. As we will show, the complex communal and cultural

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relationships that exist between Indigenous communities and animals who roam exceed and disrupt the assumption of individual responsibility in the western colonial model of private pet ownership. The concept of responsible pet ownership is historically rooted in western understandings of private dog ownership and management. Such western notions of animals as owned can cause misunderstanding of the relationships people have with them in Aboriginal communities and construct camp dogs as an outcome of Indigenous irresponsibility. We do not deny the problems that free-roaming dogs might present – including bites or related aggressive or nuisance behaviours like barking and pack formations, over-reproduction, faecal contamination, and disease. But we do want to question the persistent tendency in media reportage and bioresearch to regard camp dogs as only a problem, and a problem emerging from Indigenous ways of living and being, and, indeed, as a threat to the White settler order.

There is growing concern for animal welfare in Australian society and academia (Archer-Lean et al., 2013), a concern reflected in increased media coverage of the health of camp dogs in rural Aboriginal communities. The tone can be hostile and accusatory towards Aboriginal peoples (Kim & Hartley, 2018). And while most dog management programmes now purport to be culturally sensitive, many can largely reinforce the idea of Aboriginal deficit (Brookes et al., 2020; Constable et al., 2013). The discursive frames that contain and define camp dog existence are diverse and multidisciplinary. For the most part, camp dogs, like many aspects of life in Aboriginal communities, are treated as a problem to be solved. There has been to date significant research surveying the diverse forms of publications with evidence of "principles governing dog health education in remote Aboriginal communities" (Willis & Ross, 2019, p. 4).

This article seeks to develop and nuance this form of review through considering aspects of positionality and systemic discipline assumptions existing in diverse forms of research on camp dogs and even interrogate the assumption of camp dog as a problem. Like the Indigenous communities they live among and alongside, camp dogs are positioned by the White settler state as subjects of surveillance and framed within "racialised deficit assumptions" (Povey & Trudgett, 2019, p. 61). We argue that the representation of camp dogs and neglectful owners as a two-sided problem requires a more nuanced approach that recognises the unique socio-cultural positioning of camp dogs in Indigenous communities. This article critiques the colonial implications of the research positions on camp dogs to acknowledge the importance and value of the relationship between camp dogs and their communities, and to introduce a decolonising research lens on the study of human–nonhuman-animal relationships.

Methodology

Positionality statement

This research emerges from the speaking positions of the authors. This research began as a conversation between an Aboriginal social work researcher practitioner, with interest in the human–animal bond and implications for Aboriginal wellbeing and a non-Indigenous critical animal studies researcher, with experience in communication strategies around dangerous animal management. The approach was, then, from the outset informed acknowledgement of researcher positionality and what is said and by whom is central to this article's initial approach.

Methods

From these foundations, we conducted a preliminary search for references to the relationships between humans and dogs in the context of rural Aboriginal communities in Australia. The scope intended to be epistemological and thus focused on meta-analysis of bioresearch in the spaces of public health and veterinary science. While the research does not aim to address specific animal management processes in the field or individual feral dog programmes, occasional inclusions of these materials were made as they provided some insight into the nature of relationships between owners and dogs in Aboriginal communities and served as potentially useful further reading. These insights are valuable as there is currently little available literature that aims to explore these unique relationships.

This search was conducted through two databases, Scopus and ProQuest, as well as Google and Google Scholar. The results were narrowed to Australia or to Indigenous-specific research in human–animal interaction, years of publication to the last decade and open-access material. The results were sorted by peer review and relevance. If the search returned more than 1,000 results, the first 100 results were included for review. This method produced 408 articles for review based on title and abstract. After title and abstract evaluation, 367 sources were excluded. Exclusions were made for the following: (1) duplicates and (2) irrelevant material such as studies on urban dog ownership, biomedical studies on infectious diseases, feral dog programmes.

Decolonial and anticolonial methodological theoretical frameworks

A decolonising approach means centralising the speaking positions, and attendant knowledge bases and assumptions, of all parties involved. This requires meaningful collaboration on solutions that are specific to communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have long and continuing histories of being excluded from managing wildlife areas (Howitt, Suchet-Pearson, 2006) paralleled by the historical and present pathologising and interventionist policies in domestic lives. A decolonising, in Smith's terms, approach recognises the complex ways in which research itself has been imbricated into the academy and, in turn, colonial and governmental power. This is why this article focuses on reviewing the framing of the camp dog in academic epistemology. Research is dependent on ideas of specialisation by people who have been "trained and socialized into ways of thinking, of defining, and of making sense of the known and unknown"

(Smith, 2012, p. 213). Decolonising methodology as a theoretical frame for viewing literature in this article does, overall, focus on social justice for Indigenous peoples founded in self-determination (Tuck & Yang, 2021). In this article, acknowledging overtly the positionality of the authors, collaboration between a Gamilaraay social work scholar and a White critical animal studies scholar, and the relative affordances and conclusions this produce is crucial. We also want to model that nothing about Aboriginal Peoples should be undertaken with them, in more than a tokenistic way showing sovereignty, self-determination, and strengths. In our approach, it means acknowledging the epistemological bias that may be in place in the research reviewed, and looking for sites where self-determined and culturally specific research is occurring. We would also like to provide a caveat on decolonising as a term, and its limits. Decolonisation has the potential to become the discursive panacea that reconciliation became in Australian public policy, and arguably still is. Contemporary movements towards truth telling are more productive in that they suggest process over arrival. Decolonising and decolonisation can suggest a kind of arrival and forgetting of colonisation, a symbol or metaphor, as Tuck and Yang (2021) suggest, functioning to ameliorate White guilt if not constitutive of literal land repatriation. Given the limits of decoloniality suggested, we prefer the term anticolonial as a frame to read various epistemological positions of the camp dog. Our goal is that an anticolonial approach may intimate new ways of responding to the material lives of camp dogs through meaningful community driven solutions; while acknowledging that colonising frames are continuously at work in assumptions around correct ways for human beings to interact with other species; and finally, exposing some of the complex historical reasons for some situations.

After the exclusions, 41 sources were included for annotation, and 20 annotations were written, comprising the following: journal articles (11); newspaper articles (5); non-government organisation (NGO) webpages (4); and a PowerPoint presentation by an NGO (1). We also consulted some monograph material with high citations in the space of Indigenous community and dog relations. The search and selection process revealed limited literature specifically exploring relationships between Aboriginal communities and their dogs, or roles that the dogs hold within the community. This explains the small sample size. Due to the limited literature an extra search inclusive of "animal welfare" and "Indigenous" was conducted with a further 10 articles found in this search.

History of camp dogs and Aboriginal kinship in Australia

A deeper understanding of Aboriginal history in Australia is vital if we are to comprehend the relationship between Aboriginal people and camp dogs today. The positioning of camp dogs in contemporary times is founded in the pre-contact richness and diversity of Aboriginal cultures that evolved and thrived across the continent. Animals played an intrinsic role in the daily life of Aboriginal peoples, be it for occasional hunting, sourcing food, or companionship. The important roles animals held in these communities earned them prominent places in the Dreaming and kinship systems (Blythe & Wightman, 2003).

Animals help to shape both earthly and spiritual realms and are intrinsically connected to the thinking, being, and doing of Aboriginal cultures (Yunkaporta, 2019). Developing an understanding of the relationship between Aboriginal people and camp dogs today demands a deeper exploration of the culture, stories, and Dreaming of the communities who are being researched. For instance, the place of the dingo in Aboriginal cultures is very different to its place in the western scientific taxonomies that separate dingoes from domestic or crossbreeds. These systems of naming and sorting influence legislation on the status of the dingo as a protected species when it occupies lands designated as a national park, or a pest when it wanders onto private property or agricultural land (Bamford, 2018; New South Wales Department of Primary Industries, 2021, n.d.; Northern Territory Government, 2015; Queensland Government, 2022; Victorian Government, 2019). In many Indigenous communities, however, canids are not organised by species, but by human kinship groupings. Sonia Smallacombe (2020), the social affairs officer for the United Nations forum on Indigenous issues, explains, in these communities, "there is no distinction between dingoes and introduced dogs when applying beliefs and laws about dogs. Some dogs are given skin-names, a name that indicates bloodline, how generations are linked and how they interact)" (paras. 6–7).

The arrival of the dingo to Australia has been heavily debated. Archaeological evidence in the caves on the Nullarbor Plain, Western Australia suggests the dingo arrived at least 3,500 years ago (Milham & Thompson, 1976). A 2011 study found the dingo arrived from South-East Asia between 5,000 and 10,000 years ago (Oskarsson et al., 2012). A further study from 2012 suggests the arrival occurred through New Guinea (Ardalan et al., 2012). After the dingo arrived in Australia, not only did it successfully integrate into the daily lives of many Aboriginal communities, but it also changed the way these communities operate. In many communities, it became an occasional hunting partner, social companion, and source of warmth and was used to source and kill food (Smith & Litchfield, 2009). This is not to say that the dingo was not, at times, a pest or undesired; it is to say that its arrival was momentous.

Dingo packs have one dominant female who has one litter annually, making the population stable and the relationship with humans sustainable. Restraint and population management have, therefore, not usually been practised. Ballard and Wilson (2019) explain that the dingo mostly held the companion role in daily life. In contrast to dingoes, domestic dogs breed more often. Once introduced to Aboriginal communities, lack of restraint and population management allowed for their prolific breeding (Aussie Desert Dogs, n.d.; Shipman, 2020). Most companion dogs recognised as dingoes in these communities are now hybrids, itself a colonial term, with domestic dogs (Brookes et al., 2020). This notion of species purity of dingoes is linked to colonial discourses and has been exploited to

enact widespread culling and eradication programmes (Probyn-Rapsey, 2015).

As an important companion animal, the dingo became a part of the Dreaming (Ballard & Wilson, 2019) and Dreamtime stories. To become part of the Dreaming, an animal is not necessarily a celebrated, well-loved, and respected icon; the animal *is* significant enough to be invited from the earthly to the spiritual plane and plays an important role in Aboriginal cultures' understanding of creation. While the animal is a powerful figure in the Dreaming, the dingo is described with conflicting characteristics. The dingo, as a trickster institutes the Laws, but also breaks them—an aggressive entity that acts as a connecting point between the physical and spiritual realms while representing the importance of moderating individual and group behaviour. The dingo was also believed to be able to sense spirits—confirming the animal's place in between realms. These diverse representations point to a relationship of well-functioning coexistence, but also conflict; they show that the relationship was complex and rich, making it that much more fascinating for further investigation (Maher et al., 2019).

When dingoes became part of the Dreaming, they also became part of the kinship system. Dingoes were treated as *members of the family*, rather than personal property:

> The dingo, as a species, held an extraordinary place in the Aboriginal world, as one who could live in both the human (social), animal (natural) and spiritual worlds. Aboriginal people recognised this by allowing the tame "pet/kin" to return to the natural (and spiritual) world rather than being "kept" within the confines of human society. (Gunn et al., 2010, p. 15)

This leads to a deeper understanding of the importance of camp dogs for social wellbeing (Cumming, 2018). The community members in the participatory study by Chris Degeling et al., (2018) explained that camp dogs often become members of extended kinship systems and are awarded skin-names. It is also not uncommon for a dog to wander off and become adopted by another community member (Degeling et al., 2018).

As part of the family, dogs may also be buried in the same ways as humans. This indicates respect for the animal and acknowledgement of their ability for unconditional friendship, as well as the ability to share in the afterlife. Burial locations at the edge of the camp indicate a protective role from the human to the animal continued in the spirit world (Rose, 1992). Dogs are often seen as individuals with their own unique preferences and wellbeing (Brookes et al., 2020) and are seen as a totem animal (Degeling et al., 2018), further cementing kinship relationships. Warlpiri, sometimes referred to as Yapa, are a group of Aboriginal Australians defined by their language, and Yolngu, are an aggregation of Aboriginal Australian people inhabiting north-eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, believe that the bodies of all animals were once human bodies (Constable et al., 2010), and the cultural practice of pay-back for wrong-doing included wrong-doing directed at dogs in all communities, even the most westernised (Constable et al., 2010).

Aboriginal peoples have a kind of coexistence with the camp dog. Lives of people and animals flow parallel to one another, touching at points where necessary—be it for survival, joy, or conflict. But these dogs are not dependents, as is often the case in contemporary western communities and their pet dogs. Lives of some Aboriginal peoples in rural communities and dogs are intertwined but also have elements of independence, resulting in strong emotional bonds, but also the ability to detach. Aboriginal peoples did not selectively breed dingoes. Rather, human communities interacted with canines as individuals, who interacted with humans in a process of early care, relative taming and then, often, return to wild, autonomous lives upon sexual maturity, an event not resisted by humans or animals (Shipman, 2020; Smith et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, the overpopulation of domestic dog breeds in Aboriginal communities has resulted in proliferation of human and dog health issues, amplified by the remoteness of some of these communities and difficulty in accessing medical and veterinary services (Brookes et al., 2020; Smout et al., 2017). It is also important to understand that the role of dogs and perspectives on the roles of dogs in Aboriginal communities is diverse and non-uniform. In some communities, they are seen as sacred and part of the kinship system. In others, they are seen as a high health risk. In some communities, both these views are present.

Western welfare

In thinking about the position of the camp dog in Aboriginal communities, the focus of this article is to consider the ways in which different discursive regimes and cultural approaches are continually at work. Unacknowledged epistemological bias can direct knowledge and thus, outcomes on the ground, no matter how well-intentioned those individual programmes are. Much of the existing discourse in academic research swings between human welfare and animal welfare.

Animal-welfare approaches are influenced by the discipline of veterinary medicine and prioritise the animal's health, but, largely, do not consider the question of the interpenetration of human and animal societies. The literature on camp dogs in veterinary medicine primarily focuses on attempts to conduct adult education into camp dog welfare (Willis & Ross, 2019)—that is, to cultivate responsibility among human caretakers, which can reinforce rhetoric of blame and deficit.

The major themes around human health include the view that Aboriginal communities must be educated on dog health, particularly when dogs are being either a health hazard or a safety risk to individuals and communities. Westernised ways of viewing and describing dog ownership are intrinsic to the continuation of racialised discourses that administratively and politically discount the impacts of settler colonial structures on the lives of Aboriginal people and their solutions. Harm continues, and the efficacy of solutions intended to redress the issues around canine and human health is diluted, when western understandings of camp dogs assume paternalistic ownership.

The veterinary perspective is principally found in grey literature: reports, pamphlets, and brochures. As Willis and Ross (2019) suggest, these forms of grey literature indicate an underappreciation of the complexities and nuances at work in communities where camp dogs live. Veterinary research is founded in welfarist discourses, where animal physical welfare is prioritised yet framed by human uses of animals. In welfarist discursive positions on camp dogs, there is a polarising of the dog as spiritual and therefore untouchable by public or animal health programmes, or as a vector of disease and therefore requiring the strongest interventions (Willis & Ross, 2019). These positions can over-determine approaches and stall the productive potential of collaborative partnerships between communities and veterinarians in community development programmes (Willis & Ross, 2019).

In Australia, animal welfare is a multivalent concept that can be used in fields of human industry that exploit animals, and in activist work that seeks to protect animals. For industries built on the exploitation of animals, animal welfare may simply mean that practices of control and management are a little less cruel. In egg-farming and meat-processing, for example, it might mean that chickens are free-range, rather than caged, or that the medical requirements to maximise reproductivity and meat quality in cattle and sheep are attended to before they are killed. Welfare discourse allows for the use, destruction, and containment of animal bodies in areas such as farming, hunting, and research experiments, if it is within legislative guidelines for best health in that context. In this usage, the animal is treated as an object whose best health and productivity is defined in relation to human needs. In environmentalist discourse, however, animal welfare may refer to the isolation and protection of native animals from domestic ones, or the prioritisation of specific elements of animal wellbeing above all else—an approach that may underestimate or misconstrue the complexities of animal–human interaction.

Welfarist approaches that make distinctions between protected and unwanted animals or pests do not apply equal rights to different species and are therefore less concerned with animal wellbeing than with what Kay Milton (2013) calls *boundary maintenance.* As Milton (2013) has argued, environmentalist animal-welfare philosophy operates by separating species into *native* and *alien*, creating spaces of species belonging. In this sense, welfarist approaches may not in fact prioritise an animal's intrinsic value in and for itself if it is perceived as upsetting ecological balance. At present, the language of camp dog welfare is concerned with strategies that contain numbers of dogs—through desexing or extermination—and restrict their movements, for example, as pets living on private properties. When camp dogs are regarded as a pest or a problem, it is because human welfare—and orderliness—is the implicit priority. This is an essentially anthropocentric response that fails to account for an animal's emotional and physical wellbeing as a thinking feeling individual, which includes accounting for human obligations to animal freedoms (Steiner, 2010; Milton, 2013).

Haritaworn (2015) argues that anthropocentrism, which places humans and their needs above those of animals, is a product of colonial discourse. Colonial modes of distinction-making, for instance, analogised races and species; in the colonial race sciences of the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, humanity was associated with Whiteness, while Blackness was linked to animality (Belcourt, 2015; Fausto-Sterling, 1995; Wiegman, 1995). Belcourt (2015) argues that speciesism in North America derives specifically from "settler colonialism and White supremacy as political machinations that require the simultaneous exploitation and/or erasure of animal and Indigenous bodies" (p. 1). In his view, it is therefore not possible to conceive of animal subjectivity without exposing anthropocentrism to decolonial critique. He further suggests that the distinction between the domesticated and the wild or feral animal is a colonial one that bestows upon domestic animals a special status in being recognised as belonging to White human civilisation. For Haritaworn (2015), the colonial project is defined by an imperative to subjugate land and Indigenous peoples and condemns such peoples' lack of proper distinctions between species. Decolonising, or rather anticolonising research in the Australian context, therefore must acknowledge "racialised deficit assumptions" in many interventions into Aboriginal communities (Povey & Trudgett, 2019, p. 61), which stems from a racialised bestial (Anderson, 2000) discourse that produces Indigenous communities themselves as wild, uncivilised, ungovernable, and irresponsible.

By contrast, nonhuman animal subjectivity is accounted for, and valued, in Indigenous traditions of thought, where animals are treated as independent beings, rather than owned, and tending to animal needs is more likely to be seen as the responsibility of the community, rather than of any individual. It is evident that in some Aboriginal communities there is a sense that dogs, as intrinsic and agentic members of complex interspecies communities, have a sense of their desires and needs. There is frequent *humbugging* the begging or stealing of food by dogs in some communities, which supplements or even substitutes regular meals provided by human companions. For some, it is understood that it is the free-roaming dogs' responsibility to find their food, not the owner's (Degeling et al., 2018). Dogs are perceived as being able and in fact should be permitted to fend for themselves. This key position of camp dog freedoms is often at loggerheads with the veterinary presumption of safe canine existence.

It is important to understand that dogs to human ratios are often denser in Aboriginal communities than they are in metropolitan centres and that the movements of camp dogs are often not routine or restricted and regulated by the community. This does not reflect a lack of value, warmth, or loving relations between human and dog. In urban areas, dogs are seen as having owners and being their owner's property, while in Aboriginal rural communities, free-roaming dogs are seen as having more agency and freedom to move in the community as they wish. Camp dogs promote a sense of interconnectedness in the whole community by paying visits to different people while roaming, while in urban areas, a free-roaming dog is considered feral and problematic (Degeling et al., 2018).

Dogs in colonial spaces

In settler colonial and European cultures of the Global North, where shelters and/or impoundment, fencing, leads, registration, and euthanasia are the norm, dog existence is defined by containment. As Anderson (2000) argues, the White colonial partitioning of space is an effort to exercise control over bestial nature. In Australian cities and towns, there are multiple sites where dogs are not permitted such as shops, eating areas, many parks and national parks, public transport, and many beaches, or permitted only on leash. In fact, the places where dogs are permitted to roam are so confined such as small dog beaches, fenced dog parks and fenced back yards as to strategically prohibit roaming. Many other urban centres internationally have a quite different attitude to dog movement and existence, including strata of dogs who may be legally owned but roaming, not owned but cared for and fed by community or unowned and uncared for (Willetts & Beck, 2020).

Roaming street dogs exist in places as far spread as the Bahamas, Samoa, India, Sri Lanka, Bali, Thailand, Bosnia, and Bhutan (Willetts & Beck, 2020), so much so that they can be seen as the norm globally. There are attitudinal and policy variants to this canine human unrestricted cohabitation with fear of rabies and loss of tourist dollars, combined with local religious belief systems and community care and investment in the animals resulting in activities from vigilante violence to vaccination, sterilisation, and feeding (Arluke & Atema, 2016). Culling as a response to roaming dogs and their associated human health problems is shown by repeated studies internationally to be ineffective due to intrinsic canine social behaviour such as high breeding rates and dogs moving into the vacuum left by those culled (Dalla Villa et al., 2010; Narayaran, 2017). The more successful approach has been what are termed capture-neuter-vaccinate-release programmes, the most recent and successful of which have been carried out in Bhutan, but also in India and Sri Lanka. Willetts and Beck (2020) found strong evidence to suggest that the success in Bhutan stemmed from Bhutan's position as a majority Buddhist country. Dogs were permitted to live, and local communities collectively cared for them (Willetts & Beck, 2020).

Such studies suggest positive outcomes occur when local cultural beliefs, an ethos of animal wellbeing, and public policy interconnect. This is easier in areas that are more uniform in cultural practices and beliefs, but the impetus to acknowledge cultural difference is even more pertinent in settler colonial contexts where centuries-old power imbalances and exploitation of human communities intersect with animal treatment. In the North American context, Jervis et al. (2018) have studied the free-roaming dogs who live within a northern plains First Nations community in ways that question Eurocentric bias surrounding such animals as problem strays. The authors centralise the colonial implications of conflating restriction with love and unpack the complex roles such animals may fulfil in a community, as well as the sources of the communities' attitudes. Drawing on the distinction between domestic and feral, they argue that human–dog relations are essentially a moral terrain that is informed by "cultural notions about canines, the formal and informal labor that dogs are expected to perform, and community norms and laws relating to hygiene and public safety" (Jervis et al., 2018, p. 298). As with Australia, the North American context includes the influence of both symbiotic pre-invasion canine relationships and contemporary ways of ordering these relationships stemming from colonial intervention. In North America, dogs were domesticated and fed to assist with hunting and hauling materials, including those for building. Cluster housing communities within urban areas, a product of reservation-building initiatives of public health authorities in the 1960s, have led to ghettoization and increases in density but not proximity of human and canine lives (Jervis et al., 2018). Dogs began to experience neglect. The initial response called for community dog populations to be culled by authorities or removed by non-Native humane societies. In such cases, there is a need to understand the complex causes of events. Colonial interventions such as cluster housing had changed the proximity and relational components of canine and human lives, while the resulting degradation of condition for both was then blamed on the community as part of media prejudice and racial profiling (Jervis et al., 2018). As Smith and Litchfield (2009) have noted, systemic colonial factors cause issues with camp dogs in communities. This includes the inaccessibility of veterinary care, which would redress not only dog illness but also the high reproductivity of domestic dogs, who breed far more frequently than dingoes. And as with the case of the Canadian reservation in Jervis et al.'s (2018) study, living in close, under-resourced quarters can result in canine health issues associated with "unnaturally high dog densities, poor diets, and inbreeding" (Smith & Litchfield, 2009, p. 118).

The health of the community is related to the health of the dogs in a reciprocal direction. Canine overpopulation is one area of public health concern. Overpopulation produces poor dog health, affecting human health due to zoonotic disease transmission (Smout et al., 2017). Human wellbeing is reflected in canine wellbeing, and issues in the community such as drugs, alcohol, and neglect—all a direct outcome of ongoing colonisation create situations where dogs might be mistreated as outlets for anger, confusion, sadness, powerlessness, and injustice (Jervis et al., 2018). Despite the rarity of such instances and the contribution of colonial systemic misgovernance as the cause of the malaise, it purports to diagnose, Indigenous communities are often identified as the source of the problem. Media representations present such issues as a symptom of community or individual dysfunction. Improvement in the health of dogs can also lead to improvement in the health of humans (RSPCA New South Wales, 2020), and state support is necessary to effect these changes. Poor health of some of these dogs has been taken to mean that the bonds between them and Aboriginal peoples are weak; this is patently not true. For example, there are multiple instances of the expression of closeness and care, and sadness after separation or death (Constable et al., 2010). Dogs are seen to be part of the family, and they are linked to age and status, with Elders owning more dogs both for safety and the deep spiritual connections dogs bring (Smallacombe,

2020; Smith & Litchfield, 2009). Dogs who become more vulnerable by the death of their owners are treated by surviving members of the community with greater care. Similarly, in North America, Indigenous communities disturbed by culling interventions collaborated with a no-kill tribally founded humane society, which argued that the "neglect of dogs was a result of cultural degradation and contributed to the serious racism directed at Native people by non-Natives" (Jervis et al., 2018, p. 299). The mobilisation of neglect stories themselves the product of far more complex systemic issues is instructive in the Australian context, where cases of animal cruelty are used by the media in the same way. Thus, Indigenous communities' relationships with dogs have become moral terrain onto which are projected notions of right behaviour (Jervis et al., 2018).

Discussion

As part of creating solutions to perceived welfare issues for both humans and dogs, Aboriginal community perspectives are rarely sought or integrated into dog management policy and practice (Brookes et al., 2020). There are emergent and isolated examples where it appears that community consultation and some employment of Aboriginal people redirects the strategic planning and approach to assisting communities with companion co-living (Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities [AMRRIC], 2021). Such isolated individual programmes are beyond the purview of this study until field work research has been published on them and community responses gauged. Willis and Ross (2019) point out, there is a dearth of peer-reviewed literature about the human aspects of welfare that draws on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous views on how to engage with Aboriginal people around camp dog health. Positive programmes will increase with developments in research approaches. In addition, even within individual programmes, colonial mindsets and public health concerns can limit the focus of intervention strategies to controlling the negative impacts of free-roaming dogs, while ignoring the beneficial effects of the relationships between dogs and people. This may undermine community-determined management and intra-species kinship connectivity.

Applying anti-colonising approach

It is important that Australia gains an appreciation of the complex social, familial, and spiritual roles canines fulfil. In many Aboriginal People's worldviews, dogs are partners who make their lives, for example, sourcing food easier. However, care and emotional connection persist, even if dogs' traditional tasks, such as assisting in herding and hunting, have been replaced by technology such as utilities and quad bikes.

There are different ways that Aboriginal peoples show their care for animals. Connection to dogs is enveloped in the deepest layers of a collective memory; dogs are treated as extended family. Therefore, mistreating a dog including confinement is to ask for repercussions. Being left to roam is not necessarily abandonment. Letting dogs roam is seen as common, accepted, and in some cases, viewed as essential. This can explain the lack of compliance to interventions and rules. Future solutions need to align with the dog's and Aboriginal people's wellbeing and culture (Aenishaenslin et al., 2019).

Caring for a dog can be seen as a joint effort—from both individual to family and community. Dog ownership and responsibility is diverse and complex in Aboriginal communities. Care is assumed, co-existential, and does not reflect the structure of western dog ownership and restriction. A dog can be loved without being owned. Dogs are seen as able to fend for themselves, even though shelter and food are often provided. There is a sense of dog-based responsibility for their welfare. In this way, we need to rethink ideas of ownership, responsibility, and custodianship of dogs in Aboriginal communities.

What can we do?

To change systems, we need to start understanding the *human* context of social inequality that dogs are shaped by and the harm and trauma that occurs from people. To improve dog treatment, we need genuine collaboration to embed dog programmes that are effective and accepted by the community in which they are to be based. This sentiment has been repeatedly articulated by humane management advocates internationally:

> We are aware that dog populations can vary significantly between and within countries, in response to variation in human attitudes and behaviour towards dogs, and hence there is no single intervention that will work for all situations. Following from this assumption, we advocate strongly the need for dog population assessments to allow for evidence-based program design, ensuring the design of the intervention is appropriate to the location and fit for purpose (can meet its stated objectives), followed by monitoring and evaluation to track progress, learn, adapt and therefore improve impact. (International Companion Animal Management Coalition, 2009, p. 6)

Dog health programmes embedded in the community are in their infancy. Programmes to date have mostly been developed outside of the community by so-called experts. However, Australian Public Health Research, reinforced by Indigenous education research, links efficacy to development and implementation "within the community's culture, to build capacity and support community networks and thus empower the community" (Constable et al., 2013, p. 323). There is increasing interest in addressing animal health care barriers and public health concerns in low-resourced settings using a One Health approach. One Health is a cross-disciplinary approach that considers the relationships between human, animal, and environmental health. A One Health Commission (2018) approach is a holistic approach to animal health and management, aligning with Aboriginal cultural and community contexts and connecting to Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing, and being. An advantage of One Health is the ability to

improve wellbeing and health at a community level, rather than just one aspect of society (Molyneux et al., 2011). Studies on dog management in First Nations communities internationally have concluded that strategies for addressing dog population management should involve community participation and consultation, fostering relationships, for support and engagement to be effective (Constable et al., 2013; Dhillon, 2017). This is vital in Australian Aboriginal communities where dogs have a "key role in cultural beliefs, families, and community life" (Riley et al., 2020, p. 2).

The importance of listening, building relationships, working together, and devolving responsibilities such as planning, organising, and implementing programmes onto community members is paramount. The joint nature of such an approach requires more time than a standard dog health programme. However, the benefits to the programme and the community were significant and ongoing using Indigenous methodologies (Constable et al., 2013; Riley et al., 2020). Evidence shows that knowledge of the efficacy and cultural appropriateness of these factors is emerging. It is encouraging to note that web facing publications, such as the strategic plan and the most recent annual report of the NGO Animal Management in Rural and Remote Communities organisation, for example, articulate community consultation, the need to shift to co-chair arrangements with the community and celebrates and fosters increases in Indigenous staff (AMRRIC, 2020, 2021). Future research into community responses to the activity of such organisations would extend on the work done here.

Finally, culturally appropriate services and funding are needed to remove the colonial blame game. These services need to be re-Indigenised. By this, we mean a culturally sensitive approach to interventions. It needs to include appropriate approaches to dog education and include community development and cultural awareness. These interventions ought to be based on community development and cultural awareness. Aboriginal communities are not stuck in time—they are evolving and changing, as do their views on relationships with their dogs.

Conclusion

Free-roaming dogs and unwanted canine behaviours can be an ongoing source of tension in many communities. Yet, there has been little formal study of the balance of these dog–human–environmental relationships. There are multiple issues in the historical tendency to identify this as an Aboriginal problem for external authorities to research and solve. Simple binaries of kinship versus pathology found in veterinary and public health discourses draw on reductive dichotomies of romanticisation and deficit projections endemic to the colonial project. In addition, solutions compounded by media hysteria often fail to recognise real health complexities as the outcome of systemic issues, not cultural practice. What is needed is greater nuanced discussion around what wellbeing means, for both humans and dogs, in the Aboriginal context, especially given the historical relationships with dingoes *and* negative interventions of colonial structures. Aboriginal People's cultural tendencies to collective responsibility grounded in relationships with nonhuman fellows are important to consider when aiming for programmes that encapsulate self-determined communities where humans and nonhumans lead healthful lives.

Western paradigms such as ownership and responsibilities and accountabilities do not always fit when considering Aboriginal communities and lived experiences. Decolonising means relinquishing a punitive moral attitude, where we project hegemonic notions of right behaviour onto communities (Smith, 2012). We call for decolonisation of programmes parallel with reflection on potential anthropocentrism in such programmes. Camp dogs are sentient beings. Eradication of Eurocentric assumptions and stereotypes marginalising dogs and Aboriginal communities is needed.

Authors' note

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Glossary

Warlpiri	a group of Aboriginal Australians, defined by their language, who inhabit north-eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia; also known as Yapa
Yapa	a group of Aboriginal Australians, defined by their language, who inhabit north-eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia; also known as Warlpiri
Yolngu	an aggregation of Aboriginal Australian people inhabiting north-eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia

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