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Cover Story

**REZ Dog Problem
Remains
Unresolved**

Features:

**Travels With Pets:
Death Valley National Park**

**Kitty Korner:
Cardboard Boxes and Cats:
The Mystery Is Solved!**

Training: And Baby Makes Four

Horsin' Around: Warm-Down

**Business Spotlight:
Golden Bone Pet Products**

**Celebration of Life:
Randy: A Life Well Spent**

**Doggie News:
Chasing Away the "Finals Blues"**

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Cover Story

REZ DOG PROBLEM REMAINS UNRESOLVED

By Jacqueline Vaughn

I had never heard the term “rez dog” until about 15 years ago, when my friend Deb Hill, who represented parts of the Navajo Nation as a member of the Coconino County Board of Supervisors, told me she had brought a pregnant dog back with her after a visit to her district. I was still learning about Navajo culture and politics at the time, and I wasn’t sure if the term was offensive or pejorative. Deb told me that “Sweetie” (her dog’s new name) was one of the many dogs running semi-wild in Indian Country. Most of them received no veterinary care, were not spayed or neutered, and often ended up killed by traffic or died of disease. There are very few cats on the Rez. Sweetie had her puppies (all easily found homes), was spayed, and now lives a quiet life with Deb and her husband Don in Montana.

Since that time, I’ve become more aware of the issues raised by the numbers of free roaming animals on the Reservation and how they affect not only communities in northern Arizona, but throughout the Four Corners area. Unfortunately, the extent of the problem is not well known, even by those living in Flagstaff and Sedona.



First, a word about the numbers. It’s virtually impossible to get an accurate census of dogs outside incorporated areas because there are no licensing requirements and the animals are not “owned” in the traditional sense of the word.

The numbers vary widely, and are perhaps under- or over-estimated. A 1986 study of dog bites on the Navajo Reservation found that 60 to 75 percent of all families provide shelter or food, or both, to at least one dog, while families in the more isolated sheep camps commonly have 5 dogs (Thomas J. Daniels, “A Study of Dog Bites on the Navajo Nation,” *Public Health Reports*, Vol. 101, No. 1: January-February 1986). One widely-used figure, estimated by Navajo Nation Animal Control Officer Kevin Gleason in 2011, is that there are four to five dogs in each of the nearly 90,000 Navajo households, or 360,000 to 450,000 within a geographical area about the size of West Virginia (Donald Jaramillo, “Child Dies from Wild Dogs’ Attack,” *Cibola Beacon*, January 1, 2013). Added to that estimate are an unknown number of animals dumped in communities near Indian Country, often by those unwilling or unable to find a home for an unwanted pet or a litter of puppies or kittens. There are no comparable figures for Hopi lands.

For those living on the Rez, the role of the dog is to guard the home and herd sheep, one reason why Heeler or Australian Cattle Dog breeds are often the predominant type found in the Southwest. Dogs also play an important role in Native American culture, with many tribe members believing that dogs are sacred and belong to the spirits, so humans should not interfere with their life cycle or kill them. Some Navajo families teach their children not to cuddle a dog or bury one when it dies. Dogs traditionally do not enter the home, and are expected to live outside, often without shelter from heat



or cold. They run freely, sometimes can be seen hanging out at convenience stores or gas stations, and reproduce copiously.

But it is more than just numbers that make rez dogs a problem for not only those living within the Navajo Nation, but also those in adjacent communities. As is the case in urban and

suburban areas, free-roaming and feral animals have led to a series of problems, ranging from bite cases and attacks on humans or livestock, to spreading disease, being hit by cars, and abuse. An estimated 3,000 people are treated each year on the Navajo Nation for animal bites and attacks, although those numbers may be too low because bites might not be treated or reported (Hannah Grover, “Shiprock Couple, Navajo Nation Animal Control Team Up to Help Injured Dog,” *Daily Times* (Farmington), April 12, 2014). Of growing importance are the diseases carried and transmitted by dogs and cats. In 2012, 14 dogs in Shiprock tested positive for Rocky Mountain spotted fever, likely spread by ticks on free-roaming dogs (Grover). Stray animals hit by vehicles present a safety and health concern, with other dogs and cats killed by predators such as hawks and coyotes. Diseases like distemper, known by some as the “reservation disease” and parvo are now common, along with sarcoptic mange and parasites that infect semi-domesticated animals. Rez dogs and cats rarely live past age 2.

Animals on the Navajo Reservation are managed by the Navajo Nation Animal Control Program, which employs five to six Animal Control Officers, operating four active shelters (Tuba City, Fort Defiance, Many Farms, AZ and Shiprock, NM) serving approximately 25,000 square miles within the Navajo Nation. In addition to a lack of official enforcement of Navajo animal control regulations, there is also a lack of veterinary care, from vaccinations to spay-and-neuter programs. Care is too expensive for most families when the poverty level remains so high. There is also reluctance among some Navajo who believe that castration negatively alters a dog’s behavior.

The rez dog problem is exacerbated by non-existent or tribal laws that are not enforced. For instance, Hopi Tribal Council officials in Arizona have been unable to finalize a draft Small Animal Control Ordinance, which would help the tribe to establish a Small Animal Control Program. Despite concerns about aggressive dogs, the transmission of Rocky Mountain spotted fever, and an estimated 140 cases of dog bites on the Hopi Reservation each year, the proposal has languished for years, primarily because of a lack of funding for either a facility or the staff to operate one (Madeline Sahneyah and Crystal Dee, “Public Health Compliance Officer and Team Work to Establish a Small Animal Control Ordinance for Tribe,” *Hopi Tutuveni*, September 1, 2015; George F. Carroll, “Showing Teeth: The Impact and Prevention of Dog Bites,” *Hopi Tutuveni*, September 1, 2015).

Commercial businesses must share in the blame, one critic argues. Gas stations and convenience stores regularly stock bags or cans of dog food



because they know that tourists will buy a bag to give to strays they see hanging out. Others stop for fast food and buy a bag of burgers to distribute, throwing them out of their cars as they drive by. Hotels do nothing, and tour buses that bring in the tourists do not bring up the topic (Susan R. Stoltz, "Kayenta Dogs Update," *Life with Dogs*, October 2, 2012).

Attempts at dealing with these problems have been sporadic and sometimes controversial. After a 2010 mauling death of a 55 year old man caused by dogs, Navajo National Animal Control conducted a six-month roundup of stray dogs, with 2,332 picked up. Of those, 313 were released back to their owners, 70 were adopted, and the remainder was euthanized. The stray roundups were later cancelled for lack of funding (Jeri Clausing, "Navajo Nation's Dogs Roam Unchecked; Dangerous for People, Livestock," *Huffington Post*, August 16, 2011).

There are only a handful of organizations actively serving this huge geographic area, partly because some tribe members perceive off-reservation groups as outsiders and intruders, sometimes due to the inability of otherwise well-meaning individuals or groups to deal with native culture and beliefs, but mostly due to a lack of awareness about the problem and a parallel lack of funding.

Perhaps the largest and most well funded of the external groups is a St. Louis, Missouri-based nonprofit, Soul Dog Rescue. In conjunction with the Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Children, Soul Dog schedules a series of spay and neuter clinics throughout the Reservation, as well as mobile clinic operations, primarily in New Mexico. In 2015, the volunteers conducted appointment-only clinics in Kayenta, Coppermine, and Chinle, Arizona. Unwanted animals are also surrendered to the group during these clinics, so Soul Dog Rescue funds the work of Izzy and Yvonne Todacheene, who operate a holding facility outside Shiprock for dogs being transferred to animal shelters and rescues in Colorado (Grover).



Interestingly, many of the rescues are based in Colorado, where there seems to be a steady demand for the rez dogs, despite the fact that urban areas, such as Denver, have stray dog issues of their own. Blackhat Humane Society, based out of Durango, is a non-profit that started its work on the Navajo reservation in 2000. Its small core of volunteers rescue dogs and cats brought to the Navajo Nation shelters, pick up injured or pregnant animals, find foster homes, and place others up for adoption. In its Fall 2015 newsletter, the group reported helping 323 animals since January 2015, spending \$13,306 on veterinary bills and medication in the previous 3 months, and currently fostering 28 animals. They primarily rely on small donations and a calendar they produce that showcases photographs of rez dogs. The "Dogs of the Navajo" calendar showcases animals that have been adopted through Blackhat.

Smaller groups such as Rez Dawg Rescue focus on "pulling" dogs and cats from municipal shelters in cities like Gallup, New Mexico's McKinley County Humane Society, where the facility takes in nearly 500 animals a month, most of them picked up from the reservation land that surrounds

the city. Rez Dawg started in 2012 with a mission of relocating and transferring dogs to Colorado. Operating primarily on donations and volunteers who drive the animals north to cities like Boulder, they also rescue from the Zuni Pueblos and recently brought street dogs from Tijuana, Mexico to Colorado.

The Friends of the Aspen Animal Shelter, another Colorado organization, has tried to "spay it forward" after a visit by two of the group's leaders to Window Rock, Arizona in February 2013. The group has conducted spay and neuter clinics on the Navajo Nation, and has taken in animals surrendered during its clinics, bringing them back to the Aspen area for adoption. "They would give us as many as we would take," said the group's executive director (Scott Condon, "Aspen Nonprofit Extends Spay-and Neuter Program to Navajo Nation," *Aspen Times*, August 9, 2013).

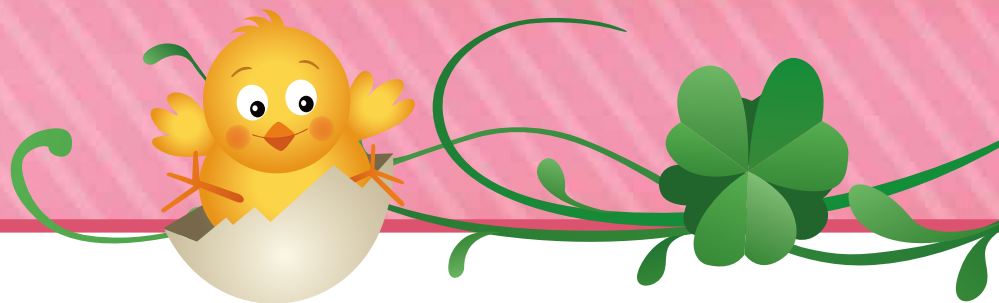
Utah also has a reputation for taking in out-of-state dogs, many from the Navajo Nation. Two groups, Rescue Rovers, based in Salt Lake City, and Positive Paws Rescue Transport, in Albuquerque, help identify dogs needing care that are already in overcrowded New Mexico shelters. Most facilities within the state do not charge rescues a fee for "pulling" them and transferring them elsewhere, so that keeps costs lower for rescues that would otherwise be required to adopt the dogs or pay for medical costs that have been incurred.



Notice that Arizona hasn't been mentioned thus far for its role in rescuing rez dogs, and that most have gone to Colorado and Utah? Many Arizona groups feel that they have more than their share of dogs and cats needing help within the state's borders, and have flatly opposed efforts to bring out-of-area dogs to their largely urban rescues, even when the dogs come from the Arizona portion of the Navajo Nation. There are a few exceptions, most of them recent converts to the need to help outside their immediate area. High Country Puppy Rescue, based in Flagstaff, is frequently called upon to help with puppies needing relocation and care, but their efforts are limited by the number of fosters they can recruit and local donations to pay for often expensive veterinary care. The Humane Society of Sedona, on occasion, has transferred in rez dogs from Gallup, although some volunteers and residents complained about the practice. Another foster-based group, led by former Blackhat Humane Society president Tamara Martin, Good Dog Rez-Q, operates out of St. Johns, Arizona, and a Cave Creek-based group, Soul Survivors Animal Rescue, now works almost exclusively with Navajo Nation dogs, mostly the region's more desirable and adoptable puppies. Some are transferred from the Fort Defiance facility through Gallup, and then on to Cave Creek, by volunteers. The puppies, mostly Shepherd or Heeler mixes, are fostered until they are old enough to be spayed or neutered, and available to Phoenix area adopters.

In addition to the need to rescue the Navajo Nation's unwanted dogs and cats, a Gilbert, AZ-based group, Wildhorse Ranch Rescue, featured in an earlier issue of *Flagstaff-Sedona Dog* (June-July 2014 cover story), has attempted to help ease the problem facing the Havasupai tribe. In 2008, Wildhorse Ranch started its HavasuPup program, and in October 2014, the HavasuHorse Rescue Program.

REMAINS UNRESOLVED



Sadly, many of the animals arrive at rescue destinations with untreated injuries, often fatal illnesses, or a need for expensive veterinary procedures like amputations or dental work. Most have never been vaccinated or treated for conditions like mange because of a lack of veterinarians on Navajo Nation lands. This means that the rescue groups or shelters that take them in must absorb those costs, something that many are unwilling or unable to do.

Gateway communities bear much of the impact of these problems, whether they like it or not. Communities like Farmington and Gallup, New Mexico; Cortez, Colorado, and Flagstaff and Sedona find rez dogs dumped on their doorsteps. The strays cared for by the Coconino Humane Society or municipal shelters in Holbrook or Winslow do not come with information about where they came from, but they are often Heelers, Shepherds, or Pitbull blends that no one wants and that no one claims. They may be deliberately dumped, jumped from trucks coming into town, or left in a box or tied to a shelter fence.

Are these efforts making any impact on the rez dog problem?

There are several indices of success. Dr. Patrick Goddard, a veterinarian in Durango who works with the Soul Dog Rescue animals being cared for by the Todacheenes, says the group's efforts do make a difference. He says he now sees a visible impact, including a decrease in dogs running around the Shiprock area (Grover). Stacy Daw, the only Navajo Nation Animal Control officer in that area, agrees. She notes that there has been a decrease in the number of free roaming animals, that people are being more responsible pet owners, and that there are fewer calls for unwanted animals. "We do our best with what we can," she says (Shondin Silversmith, "A Happier Tail," *Navajo Times*, April 9, 2015). And Kris Gruda, the rescue transport coordinator and a volunteer with the Gallup shelter, says that organizations like Rez Dawg Rescue have made an impact because they save lives and create vacancies in the facility for more animals (Rachael Merilatt, "Partnering Saves Lives: Rez Dawg a Lifeline to Gallup's Unwanted Pets," *Gallup Sun*, May 15, 2015).

There is no doubt that much more needs to be done, and some animal advocates feel that it will take a unified effort that goes far beyond the existing animal care and control structure. Critics blame the Navajo Nation leadership for not doing more to control animal overpopulation, and some have suggested that tribal casino revenue (among other sources) be used to build additional shelter facilities and hire more animal control officers. Others feel that only a concerted spay and neuter effort will stem the tide of overpopulation, especially among dogs. Some suggest that the tribes ought to reimburse local communities for the expenses involved in picking up and caring for rez dogs, an idea that is not likely to go very far. And still

others want the tourism and hospitality industry to take some responsibility for the employees who feed animals, overflowing dumpsters that encourage dogs to congregate, or staff who take pity on the homeless animals but never get them spayed or neutered.

So we adopted Raven, now Lady, a rez dog who found herself eating out of the trash behind a convenience store. She was very thin, her coat was dull, and she needed a lot of dental work for teeth that had been broken. The unsprayed



Lady

dog's teats almost touched the ground, likely due to repetitive breeding, and at age 8 or 9, she was not likely to find an adopter in Gallup. We didn't ask if she was from the Navajo Nation or Zuni Pueblo, because all that mattered was that she needed a home. But unlike most of the dogs from the rez, she found one.



For further information on the groups mentioned in this article, to volunteer, or to make a donation, contact:

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A lifelong animal lover, Jacqueline Vaughn retired as professor in the Department of Politics and International Affairs at Northern Arizona University in May 2015. She now spends much of her time as a volunteer helping to network dogs and cats on social media that need rescue or adoption, transporting animals among shelters, fosters, and rescues, and advocating for humane legislation and policies. She also volunteers at the Humane Society of Sedona's Paw Prints Thrift Shop in the Village of Oak Creek, where she and her husband Robert Easton reside with their own rescue animals.