

August 12, 2007

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Who Let the Dogs Down?

By JESSE SCACCIA

I LIKE my neighbors. I swear. I really do.

I think my neighbors like me. But one thing I'm sure about is that my neighbors love their dogs.

They take their dogs for long walks along beaches where dogs are prohibited. They let their dogs relieve themselves, well, anywhere, and most of the time they pick up after them. And they'll even bike or skateboard through busy intersections with their dogs, both parties seemingly made oblivious by mutual love and affection. Clearly, love for one's pooch comes before respect for one's municipal laws. Maybe it is the owners who need obedience school? But I digress.

One major way owners show their love for their dogs is by leaving them outside when they're gone. The logic, I guess, is that by being outside, a dog gets to run around, breathe the fresh air and commune with nature.

As we enter the final blistering days of summer, dog owners everywhere will be faced with deciding whether to leave their pets out in the cool shade or in the air-conditioned house.

Well, I, for one, am happy to tell you what to do: keep the dog inside, even if it means that you will be single-handedly responsible for the next blackout.

The problem is that dogs talk — a lot. And much more when their owners are not home. This wouldn't be so bad if the dogs could talk about the Yankees. But my neighbors' dogs just bark earnestly and inanely. And when one of them barks, the rest of the dogs in the neighborhood start barking too.

This, of course, annoys me, especially since I often work from home. But what owners might not realize is that by leaving their animals outside they are potentially breaking a law.

Barking dogs can be considered a nuisance. "There are dog barking laws across the state," says Elinor D. Molbegott, an animal law lawyer in East Williston, N.Y., who served as general counsel for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "There are also noise ordinances and common law nuisance issues."

In July, New York City's dog barking law became much more severe. The first violation carries fines of up to \$175, while subsequent violations can cost an owner \$525 and an automatic court appearance.

In cases where the situation appears tantamount to abuse, the A.S.P.C.A. and other animal welfare groups have the power to take the dog away on the spot — in some cases, without a warrant.

A dog left alone is also prone to being territorial, thus making it more likely to bite unsuspecting neighbors. More than 50 percent of dog bites occur on the dog owner's property. According to the Insurance Information Institute, dog bites now account for 15 percent of all homeowner's insurance liability claims, costing about \$317 million.

"Once your dog has bitten someone, it poses an increased risk," says Loretta Worters, vice president of the Insurance Information Institute. That means premiums may increase or policies might not be renewed or might exclude the dog from future coverage. You can't blame the insurance carriers for taking these kinds of actions; the cost of the average dog bite claim has risen sharply in recent years, to about \$21,200 in 2005 from \$16,600 in 2002.

Indeed, pets are the No. 1 cause of neighbor disputes, according to the Foundation for Community Association Research. In their latest homeowner survey, of those who don't get along with their neighbors, 28 percent said pets are the source of conflict.

Clearly, leaving a dog outside when you're out won't win you any votes as Neighborhood Idol. But what about Fido? Are you doing him any favors?

Many dog experts believe that leaving a dog alone is an unnatural situation for the species that can lead to behavior problems like excessive barking, chewing on lawn chairs, digging in the yard and getting into the garbage.

According to Katherine Miller, a behavior counselor for the A.S.P.C.A., latchkey dogs misbehaving is a new phenomenon that has "arisen in the last 30 years or so with the increase in nuclear, two-income and single-parent families."

There's also the threat of weather changes, like storms and unexpected heat or cold — something we've seen a lot of in New York lately. A simple unexpected change in weather can instantly morph a loving owner into a common criminal. According to state law in New York, any person who owns a dog that is left outdoors must provide shelter appropriate to its breed, its physical condition and the climate.

My neighbors and I have come to what I think is a very human (or is it humane?) compromise. Certainly, it is more humane than my poisoning their dogs like Russian spies. My neighbors leave their dogs out when they're gone, but they gave me a key to their house. When the dogs bark too much I move them inside. The five minutes this takes is worth it for good neighborly relations. Most veterinarians agree that shock collars are also a safe option, as are citronella collars, which omit a foul odor every time the dog barks.

There is no universal answer for all dogs, owners and ear-plug-toting neighbors. But surely, an unattended barking dog is the best answer for no one, human or otherwise.

Jesse Scaccia is writing a memoir.

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