

Financial squeeze exacerbates Taiwan's stray dog problem

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TAIPEI, Taiwan -- Factories have shut down, workers are being laid off and many people with jobs are not expecting to get a bonus or raise, but people are not the only ones affected by the ongoing financial tumult sweeping across Taiwan; the economic downturn has also dealt a blow to the island's pets.

A growing number of dogs are being abandoned in national parks, small lanes, highways and even downtown Taipei in recent months -- worsening a problem that was already a headache in the densely populated capital, according to animal shelters and government agencies.

"It has become more common to find stray dogs on the streets in recent days," said Huang Ching-jung, secretary-general of the Animal Protection Association of the Republic of China, who also runs a veterinary hospital in Taipei. Big dog breeds, such as Huskies, Golden Retrievers and Labradors, are the main victims in this recent wave of dog abandonment, shelter and government officials said.

Tallies compiled by Taipei City's Environmental Protection Department, which is responsible for handling stray dogs, show that the highest number of abandoned canines were captured in the Shihlin and Beitou districts, adjacent to Yangmingshan National Park, a recreation area in northern Taiwan. The park has become a popular dumping ground because dog owners believe its vast wooded environment is suitable for dogs to find food, take shelter and survive on their own.

Huang estimated that there are more than 300 or 400 stray dogs roaming within the park at any given time. They survive on food and snacks left by visitors as well as small wild animals, such as snakes and mice, Huang said. Those abandoned in the cities scavenge for kitchen scraps at dumpsters outside the city's many restaurants.

As the financial crisis lingers, fewer people are adopting dogs, further exacerbating the stray dog problem. A dog adoption program run by the ROC Animal Protection Association since 2003 has seen the number of dogs adopted from its shelter in Bali, Taipei County fall from 45 in 2006, to 35 in 2007 and only 20 so far this year.

Stressing that the ultimate goal of the association is to provide a good environment and care for strays, Huang appealed to pet owners to treat their animals like their family members and urged the public to adopt dogs and cats. "Rather than strays, they should be our good friends," he said, because "we want them to return to human society and become a popular companion for human beings," Huang said. "These are our greatest hopes for them."

According to an association worker surnamed Wu who does not want her name to be

mentioned, most of the dogs sent to a shelter run by the association in Bali were of cross breeds in the past. But since last year, almost all breeds of dogs, including pricey dogs, began showing up, she noted. This is an indication that even relatively well-to-do dog owners were finding it too expensive to own dogs. According to pet shops, it costs at least NT\$10,000 or more per month to raise a dog of big breeds.

Wu, a veteran animal rights advocate, believed that the selfish mindset of some pet owners is a major root cause of the acute stray animal problem in Taipei. Many people fancying to have a dog like those depicted in movies might blindly buy a pet dog, but throw them away rashly when they realize they do not enjoy taking care of their pets, she said.

The government recommends that pet owners implant a microchip in their pets and have them spayed or neutered, but owners are not required to do so and many dog owners do not follow the practice. "Only doing so will effectively reduce the number of stray or wild dogs and cats," Wu said.

The problem of dogs born to stray parents has also been a big headache for the city's environmental protection authorities as it causes the population of strays to multiply. Stray dogs sometimes chase and bite people, while others can cause traffic accidents by not knowing how to cross the street. A continuously rising number of abandoned dogs has also damaged Taipei city's image, with dog manure frequently seen on the streets. The dogs abandoned in parks have also harmed the parks' ecological system and threatened visitors' safety.

Once caught, abandoned dogs will be sent to animal shelters and some of them will be eventually put to sleep if there is no way to trace their owners. Owners found to have intentionally abandoned their dogs could be fined up to NT\$75,000, officials said.

The problem is not limited to Taipei alone, as other areas are also reporting dogs being deserted. A pet shop owner in Tsaotun township in Nantou County, central Taiwan said six pet dogs have been dumped at his shop in just the last month. He said he is afraid that a large wave of such abandoning will emerge during the upcoming Chinese New Year in late January because money will be tight for many families then.

Besides pet shops, veterinary hospitals are also a common target for dog owners who want to discard their dogs. According to pet shops and veterinary hospitals, the number of pet owners who dump their pets at the shops has also been on a sharp rise. Veterinary hospitals in central Taiwan have begun demanding animal owners pay a NT\$5,000 deposit in advance if they send their pets there for treatment.

As the problem of strays grows, animal rights advocates urge the government to allot more funding for shelters. Shelters -- the only refuge for stray dogs -- operate on thin budgets, often surviving only through individuals' donations and fundraising activities. Due to limited resources, some public shelters are entitled to put animals to sleep within seven days if a dog or a cat has not been adopted upon their arrivals, officials said. Others such as Huang's take care of the animals until they die naturally, but space at those facilities are limited.

Last year, 8,000 of the over 9,000 stray dogs housed at the Hsinwu animal shelter in Taoyuan County were put to sleep, volunteer works said. Animal rights advocates said more also needs to be done by the government and society to educate people about being responsible pet owners and to punish people for abandoning their dogs. They said the process can start in pet shops, urging pet shop owners to not simply be tempted by money, and to assess buyers and warn them about the responsibilities of raising a dog, especially when the dogs grow to mature size. "But setting up more shelters to house the stray dogs or cats is by no means the perfect solution to this problem," Wu stressed.