

Newsweek

PETA and Euthanasia

Even among animal lovers, killing unwanted pets is a divisive issue.

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NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Updated: 12:43 PM ET Apr 28, 2008

Nearly a decade later, Daphna Nachminovitch still remembers the rerelease of the Disney classic "101 Dalmatians" and the tragedy that followed. First there was a spike in sales of the famous spotted breed. Then, in the months that followed, shelters took in hundreds of Dalmatians from disillusioned pet owners around the country. "As soon as the puppies outlived their cuteness and the kids didn't want to scoop the poop anymore, the dogs were dumped in shelters," says Nachminovitch, vice president of cruelty investigations for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). "Many of them had to be euthanized, because there was simply no place for them to go."

But what many animal lovers don't realize is that PETA itself may have put down some of those unwanted Dalmatians. The organization has practiced euthanasia for years. Since 1998 PETA has killed more than 17,000 animals, nearly 85 percent of all those it has rescued. Dalmatians may no longer be the breed of the day, but the problem of unwanted and abandoned pets is as urgent as ever. Shelters around the country kill 4 million animals every year; by some estimates, more than 80 percent of them are healthy. In recent years those grim statistics have split the animal rights community. Ironically, PETA has emerged as a strong proponent of euthanasia. (The group is better known for its public condemnations of everyone from fashion designer Donna Karan for her use of fur to the National Cancer Institute for its animal research.) In defense of its policy PETA has insisted that euthanasia is a necessary evil in a world full of unwanted pets. But while the group has some well-known allies, including the Humane Society of the United States, a growing number of animal rights activists claim to have found a better, more humane way.

"Over-population is a myth," says attorney Nathan Winograd, whose recent book "Redemption: The Myth of Pet Overpopulation and the No Kill Revolution in America" chronicles the rise of the no-kill shelter movement. "With better outreach and public relations, we can find homes for virtually all of the healthy animals we are now killing." As proof he points to a string of communities across the country whose shelters have managed to stop euthanizing all but the sickest animals. Bonney Brown, executive director of the Nevada Humane Society, says that in 2007, the first year her group went "no-kill," her shelters managed to save 90 percent of the 8,000 animals they took in. Among other strategies, the organization ramped up its volunteer force, from 30 to 1,700, expanded its hours so that people could come in after work and engaged in extensive media outreach.

"On balance, people love animals," says Brown, pointing out that animal causes are one of the fastest-growing segments of American philanthropy. "The biggest challenge has been convincing them to trust their local shelters. And with a little initiative we are finally starting to do that."

Shelters in Virginia, New York and San Francisco report successes similar to Nevada's, and communities in more than a dozen states have announced no-kill goals and added legislative mandates to their agenda. King County, Wash., passed a law requiring area shelters to achieve an 85 percent save rate by 2009. San Antonio, Texas, is aiming for zero kills by 2012. And Ivan City, Utah, saved 97 percent of its shelter animals beginning in 2006 when the animal control ordinances were rewritten to prohibit the euthanasia of healthy animals.

Those successes have not persuaded PETA or its allies. The group argues that in order to maintain their no-kill status these facilities simply turn away animals that are unlikely to be adopted, often leaving them to fates worse than death. "No one hates it more than we do," says Nachminovitch. "But we would rather offer these animals a painless death than have them tortured, starved or sold for research." PETA isn't the only group to take that stance. "No-kill is a noble goal," says Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States. "But the sheer number of animals make it almost unachievable."

Instead of zero kills, PETA claims to be shooting for zero births. "Focusing on the animals that come into shelters is like emptying a river with a teaspoon," says Nachminovitch. "By investing in spay and neuter programs, which are where a lot of our resources go, we can stop unwanted births and prevent four times as much suffering."

But Brown and others insist they have achieved no-kill without turning animals away, and on a fraction of PETA's \$30 million budget. "With the resources at their disposal, PETA and the Humane Society of the U.S. could become no-kill in no time," Winograd says. "Instead they have become leading killers of cats and dogs, and the animal-loving public unwittingly foots the bill through taxes and donations."

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