

Cultural Attitudes

In Plato's day dogs were respected; Plato called the dog a philosopher. But today in Greece the prevalent cultural attitude towards dogs is the culture of the Ottoman Empire. In any population there are the privileged, who may benefit from wisdom or wealth and who can afford to be a little generous with their kindness, but there is always a larger number of the poor whose every effort goes towards self preservation. Animal pets are thus looked upon from different realistic perspectives within a country's population. Caring for a pet may be a sign of one's status for the privileged but for the poor it is a responsibility they cannot afford and which they will be happy to avoid as an expense, whether of money or effort, they do not need. Often such persons see no reason why they should offer any care to poor dumb animals. Thus cultural attitudes towards pet animals vary in each culture. But going so far as to actively attack, mutilate and savage animals goes beyond a mere economic status. It is a sign of serious moral sickness in the culture and is not limited to the underprivileged.

Every country of the Western world has recorded atrocities committed by certain individuals against dogs, cats or other animals. For instance, an article published about someone deliberately blinding a small dog in Texas, U.S.A. tells us the extent of the mental and moral sickness of the individual who perpetrated this crime. The article, however, also tells of the consequences of this act: that legislation was passed to increase the penalty for the criminal, and the blinded dog was brought to the legislature to 'sign' with his paw print the legislation. Would this happen in Greece?

The recorded documents of the incident in Texas have told us a little about the mental state of people who find themselves capable of mutilating dogs and cats. It is written: "Some of America's most notorious killers, including Jeffrey Dahmer, first vented their fury on animals". When asked why one was spending so much effort gaining support against animal cruelty when children treated with neglect and cruelty the world over equally needed nurturing support, the Victorian animal supporter answered, "I am starting at the roots". Let us not forget, therefore, that an act of cruelty towards an animal is a sign that the perpetrating individual is capable of doing the same to his fellow man and he was not taught by his cultural upbringing that to do so was wrong.

In Western Europe and North America such acts of savagery are relatively rare, but visitors to Greece have witnessed and recorded similar acts of mutilation and neglect towards dogs, cats and other animals on an extensively large scale in all parts of Greece. In Greece dogs have been found with their leg tendons severed, the tongue cut out, hanged, dragged on ropes behind vehicles, thrown into lime, shot, chained up in the sun with no food or water, and tied to the railroad track which resulted in severed paws; these are only a few examples.

The lesson to be learned is that if an individual may be taught by the cultural attitudes of his society, to be tender and caring towards dumb animals, he equally grows up to be a more tolerant and caring citizen towards his fellow man, in other words a more civilized being.

A country is therefore judged along the path of civilization by its attitude towards dumb animals. It is a quantitative assessment. While every country may record acts of atrocity towards its dumb animals, the sheer number of such acts all over Greece marks its perception as an uncivilized country. This generalized judgement certainly comes as a shock to those foremost citizens of Greece who are highly educated, privileged or simply genuinely humane from the bottom of their hearts towards animals. But the attitudes of visitors to Greece are influenced by the sheer numbers of atrocities and the monstrous degree of neglect. Such observations upset individuals from all parts of North America and Western Europe who bear witness. This upsets many civilized Greeks too who daily have to observe the plight of stray animals suffering from disease, starvation, neglect, traffic injuries left unattended and such atrocities as mass poisoning, which is, in the end, perceived by animal lovers as the most brainless way of trying to hide the problem.

Outsiders cannot help judge all Greeks by observations of attitudes and actions on the part of the more primitive members of the population, and this general judgement is unfair to the number of the Greek citizenry who love animals and who have pleaded with their government for decades to implement a sensible humane policy like other countries have. While Greek politicians are smug about joining the European community and adopting the European laws on humane animal treatment as a means of pretending they fully belong to Europe, they have demonstrated little interest in actually implementing the change in broad cultural attitudes needed to demonstrate responsibility to become acceptable members of the community, especially with regards to humane animal practices.

The visitor to Greece gets the impression that the majority of the Greek people consider dogs and cats as vermin; something which should be exterminated. In spite of the existing laws against animal cruelty no one gets punished for cruelty. This tells us about the cultural attitude of the people and the police whose job it is to enforce the laws, and about the politicians who must instruct the police in enforcing the laws. It only takes one issue, like not punishing animal cruelty in Greece, to inform the world community that Greece acts like a third world country. The fact that such laws are in place but overlooked and ignored also tells the world that the administration is corrupt and self interested. It would only take a few well publicized prosecutions against animal cruelty, with increasingly large punishments, to get the message across to the humane-ignorant population that no longer are the laws going to be flaunted, and one can no longer treat stray animals as expendable. Of course this must be accompanied by active programs to deal with the issue humanely.

When the people all over the vast extent of Greece will learn of a few examples of vigorous enforcement of animal cruelty laws, such as high fines or imprisonment, they won't forget too quickly. If these are widely publicized then cultural attitudinal changes will begin to take place. In Western Europe and North America, about thirty years ago, the attitude developed rather quickly, about picking up one's dog's eliminations in a bag and disposing of them in the garbage. Because of the wide publicity of this societal desire in many countries at the same time, every responsible pet owner adopted the habit and the streets of the cities suddenly became dog-mess free. Such programs can bring real changes quickly when everyone participates and the rules are enforced, especially enforced by fellow citizens who are confident that their authorities will back them up if they choose to remind a negligent fellow citizen of his responsibilities.

It may take a little longer to change Greek habits towards cruelty to stray animals but the idea is the same. If it becomes widely publicized everywhere that the authorities have become serious about implementing the country's laws, instead of the authorities implementing their own personal judgmental attitudes according to how they were brought up, then change may be quickly possible. It is a question of discipline, strict adherence to the laws and a serious follow-through by the administrative powers to make examples. It may even appear Draconian at first but that might be seen positively as a return to classical attitudes for which Greece has always been respected, to do the sensible thing.

The cultural attitudes that Plato and classical Greece displayed generally towards dogs has been lost, along with other characteristics, after centuries under the Ottoman domination. Today outsiders observe that the majority of Greeks seem to retain those imperial Moslem attitudes that dogs are unclean. Making the necessary cultural corrections by strict, unflinching enforcement of animal cruelty laws, will not only help the animals but will uplift the general culture of the unenlightened majority of today's Greeks and return them the respect their Classical ancestors have enjoyed in the eyes of Western Europe since the Renaissance.

**Distributed with permission from author:
Dr. Brian Sparkes**

Toronto, Canada
Mrs. Dianne Aldan
Greek Animal Rescue - Canada (GARCANADA)
614 - 25 The Esplanade
Toronto, ON M5E 1W5

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"You can't save every animal in the world but, for the one you do save, it IS the world!"