

The NSPCA: Animal hoarding



Some people have a bizarre obsession with surrounding themselves with animals, which they do to such an extent that they do not know when to stop with their collection. These animal collectors/animal hoarders believe that they love their animals, but in reality, these animals are nothing more than "prisoners of love".

Animal hoarding is a complex and intricate issue with far-reaching consequences. Those who make themselves guilty of this practice can be seen as individuals with a mental illness that can cause criminal behaviour, with horrific consequences for animals, the hoarders' families and their communities. It is an animal welfare and public safety concern.

- More than the typical number of companion animals;
- an inability to provide even minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter and veterinary care, with this neglect often resulting in starvation, illness and death;
- denial of the inability to provide this minimum level of care and that this failure impacts on the animals, the household and the human occupants of the home.

What is animal hoarding?

Animal hoarding describes a situation where a person keeps a large number of animals as pets without having the ability, the space or the means to properly house and care for them. Hoarders demonstrate a compulsive need to collect and own animals for the sake of caring for them, which unfortunately leads to accidental neglect or abuse.

In most cases, the person suffering from this condition sees him-/herself as a rescuer and often as the only one who can provide the necessary love to these animals. The person has an intense emotional attachment to their animals and is unable to see that they can in no possible way provide proper care for all the animals that they accumulate.

According to the Hoarding Animals Research Consortium (HARC), the following criteria are used to define animal hoarding:

The HARC makes it clear that hoarding is about animal sheltering, rescue or sanctuary, and should not be confused with legitimate efforts to help animals. It is about satisfying a human need to accumulate animals and to control them and this need supersedes the needs of the animals involved.

A psychological problem

A clinical psychologist, Dr Kevin Bolon, explains: "This is a definite psychological problem. In the past it was seen as part of obsessive-compulsive disorder, but it now has its own category - hoarding disorder. There are object hoarders, who accumulate piles of often worthless things, such as newspapers and discarded junk and they cannot organise or get rid of them. Their house can resemble a rubbish dump. 40% of object hoarders will also hoard animals. Most animal hoarders are women - approximately 70%."

Any form of hoarding may be present on its own or as a symptom of another disorder. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), the disorders most often associated with hoarding are obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and depression. Although less often, hoarding may be associated with an eating disorder, pica (eating non-food materials), Prader-Willi syndrome (a genetic disorder), psychosis or dementia.

Hoarders are intelligent, communicate well and have a shrewd ability to attract sympathy to themselves, no matter how neglected their animals might be.

Treatment options for hoarders

Animal hoarders almost never seek treatment, as they do not regard their own behaviour as a problem. They are usually reported by family, friends or neighbours, and as a result, they come to the attention of authorities.

Hoarders do not persist in treatment, and may merely go through the motions of doing the right thing. Nearly all of them do the same thing over and over, and they do need to be monitored constantly. Often, it may be necessary to ban them from having animals as pets.

Animal hoarding in the news

From time to time, we hear about animal hoarding in the news. Earlier this year, *Carte Blanche* reported that the Bloemfontein SPCA

had removed more than 300 animals, including almost 200 dogs, from the home of a 72-year-old woman. Other animals found in the house included cats, rabbits and birds. She had stashed animals all over the house and when SPCA inspectors opened a drawer, they found a miniature Doberman. Dogs were found in cupboards and between pots and pans. A Maltese poodle was found in a disused washing machine. The floors of the house were covered in animal faeces.

In Witbank, charges of cruelty were brought against the owners of a large number of snakes, rabbits, rodents and tortoises crammed into filthy, cockroach-infested cages and glass tanks, without access to clean water. The owners did not seem to see anything wrong with their actions.

Carte Blanche also told the story of an animal hoarder from which the Durban and Coast SPCA removed 30 starving, diseased and neglected dogs. SPCA inspectors discovered more animals, including birds, bearded dragons, rats and mice, inside the house. The stench of animal waste filled the house. Within days of confiscating these animals, the woman had already begun accumulating more animals. She claimed to run an animal rescue service and denied any hoarding.

The link between animal hoarding and animal suffering

Animals kept in hoarding conditions often suffer extreme neglect, including a lack of food, proper veterinary care and sanitary conditions. They live in filthy, overcrowded conditions and are often covered with fleas and other parasites. Eye infections and skin diseases run rampant in these overcrowded conditions. Those investigating hoarding situations often find floors, furniture and coun-

ters covered with animal faeces and urine. In extreme cases, decaying animal carcasses are found among the living animals. Insect and rodent infestations are also common.

Animals that have been kept in cages often have injured paws from standing on wire surfaces in their own excrement. A lack of exercise results in severely overgrown nails with foot deformities, poor muscle development and weakness. Birds may have injured feet and beaks or have plucked out their feathers in response to stress.

Other concerns

Apart from the obvious animal suffering, animal hoarding presents health hazards for the humans living in the house as well, as the conditions in which these people live are usually very cluttered and filthy.

Filthy conditions also attract disease vectors such as insects and rodents which can also threaten neighbouring households.

Animal hoarding places a tremendous strain on already-overburdened animal shelters which suddenly have to deal with an influx of hundreds of animals, many of whom are usually in dire need of medical attention.

Charging options

The Animals Protection Act 71 of 1962 provides for the basic care of animals, which need to be provided with a clean living environment, food, water, adequate shelter and medical treatment. If the basic needs are not provided for, and after education has failed, the owner must be prosecuted in terms of the relevant sections of the Animals Protection Act as a last resort.

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Animal hoarding is about satisfying a human need to accumulate animals and to control them and this need supersedes the needs of the animals involved.

The National Council of SPCAs (NSPCA) requests that concerned members of the public should report any situation that looks like animal hoarding to the National Council of SPCAs at tel: (011) 907 3590 or via e-mail at: nspca@nspca.co.za

List of references

- Carte Blanche.** "Animal hoarders." 26 January 2014. <http://advocacy.britannica.com/blog/advocacy/2009/02/prisoners-of-love-the-victims-of-animal-hoarding/#sthash.VIBSLYbT.dpuf> - Accessed on 30 October 2014.
- www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/ask-and-learn/ask-expert/what-animal-hoarding-it-hoarding-lots-objects-can-people - Accessed on 31 October 2013.

