

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Dog Parks: Can a Place That Lets Rover Roam Help Your Shelter?

By Joanne Bourbeau

A well-operated dog park gives dogs a place to romp free, their owners a chance to play with their dogs and meet neighbors, and your agency a means to educate pet owners.

It's a clear, sunny afternoon in Southern California. A perfect day for a drive along the coast, where you can watch tall ocean waves crashing against the shore, seagulls dancing along the wet sand, couples walking hand in hand... and a few dozen dogs running loose.

No, this isn't an animal control officer's nightmare. It's a typical day on "Dog Beach" at the west end of the San Diego River Floodway, one of two area beaches that allow licensed dogs without leashes at all times of the day. All over the country, these places—commonly referred to as "dog parks," "dog runs," or "free running areas"—are rising in popularity and demand.

A dog park is an area designated specifically for the use of dogs and their owners. Most are managed by users in cooperation with local government, but some parks are privately operated. They may range in size from one-quarter acre to more than 50 acres, some with fencing and some without. All dog parks, however, share one common purpose: to provide an area where dogs can run free from restraint—legally and safely.

What role should your shelter play in setting up and operating a dog park? That's largely up to you. Unless your shelter chooses to develop and run its own private dog park, the burden of dog-park maintenance and oversight generally does not fall to the humane agency. Usually, the user group, in conjunction with the parks and recreation department, is re-

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sponsible for maintaining a public dog park—making sure the park is clean and dog waste is removed, for example. Your agency can play a supportive role by helping resolve and prevent animal-related problems through working with those responsible for the park and by educating users.

If the concept of dogs running free still makes your agency want to run the other way, consider this: Shelters with dog parks in their com-

orous exercise essential to their well-being. For some city dwellers, a dog park may also provide their only chance to interact with other dogs and people. And because a well-socialized dog is less likely to develop behavior problems such as aggression and excessive barking, an outdoor "club for canines" may help reduce associated neighborhood conflicts.

"In this day and age, when we're all working, [it's essential] that we cre-



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munities—even those agencies charged with enforcing leash laws—say that having a well-managed place where dogs can run off-leash actually helps them encourage responsible dog ownership. Before your agency volunteers to help local dog owners petition the city for a dog park, however, take some time to consider both the benefits and drawbacks.

It's a Dog's Life

The top benefit is what a dog park does for the dogs themselves. It gives them the space and freedom to run off-leash with other members of their species, all while being safely supervised.

A dog park is not only a secure place for dogs to engage in the vig-

ate a place where dogs can go and stretch their legs and get socialized in a play group," says Kate Pullen, director of the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria, Virginia, which was instrumental in creating public open-space areas for unleashed dogs back in the early '70s. "It's [important] for a healthy, happy dog."

Dog parks may be critical for the owners' happiness, too. While their dogs are busy socializing with each other, owners are doing the same, creating a sense of community and camaraderie. And from the humane agency's point of view, dog parks perform an even greater service: strengthening the human-animal bond. "[Going to a dog park] is an activity that an owner and a dog can do together,"

The sight of roaming dogs may be alarming to some ACOs, but by providing dogs with a place to do so safely, dog parks may help ensure more responsible pet ownership in your community.



says Madeline Bernstein, president of the Los Angeles SPCA in California. "For many people, the dogs really are their only companions. If they can go to a dog park, it gives them a reason to get dressed, go out, socialize, play with their dog, and strengthen that bond between them. If that doesn't serve a community need, I don't know what does."

From Leash Laws to Humane Education

Believe it or not, a leash-free space in your community may also make your humane agency's job a little easier.

"As an animal control officer, [having a dog park] makes it much easier for me when I see a dog off-leash," says Diana Johnson, an animal control officer with the Bowling Green (Ohio) Police Department. "I can make the owner aware that we have a dog park, an area where they can [let their dog run around safely]. From an animal-control standpoint, I think it's wonderful."

Before the city created the dog park, owners let their dogs run free on public-school grounds. So Johnson joined forces with a group of dog

owners, presenting signed petitions to the city's Parks and Recreation Department to convince officials of the need for a dog park. It worked.

"The people who use it just love it," says Johnson, "[especially] people who live in small apartments, condos, and homes with small yards. The park also gives the person who does dog rescue through the local shelter an opportunity to socialize the dogs together."

A dog park can provide your agency with a targeted audience for your educational messages on issues such as identification tags and spaying and neutering. The Marin (Calif.) Humane Society's (MHS) education efforts, for example, get a big boost from the local dog park's bulletin board. "From a humane education standpoint, these dog parks are a wonderful asset to the organization," says Rick Johnson, associate executive director of MHS, which has been instrumental in the creation of seven Bay Area dog parks. "We see this as a way to communicate with hundreds of people we may not normally reach."

A Different Type of "Neighborhood Watch"

Dog parks can provide these benefits, but only if they're run responsibly. Successful dog parks post rules and regulations for dog park users, who are expected to obey those rules or leave the park. (For examples of these rules, see page 21.) Whenever and wherever you have several dogs in a relatively small area, problems are bound to arise, especially if the park is overcrowded and attracts irresponsible owners.

Holmes Lake Park, a city-operated dog area in Lincoln, Nebraska, has been plagued by occasional problems—including one pit bull fight. "It's the few bad apples that can create problems, and someone can get hurt," says Jim Weverka, manager of the city's animal control department and president of the National Animal Control Association.

Careful planning and maintenance can minimize these risks. Dog park managers have found that the best way to keep the peace is to form a dog park "user group" that monitors and remedies problems. If, for example, a dog acts aggressively toward other dogs or people within the park, other owners point out the problem to the owner. If the problem persists, both dog and owner are simply asked to leave.

The peer group also tries to rectify potential health problems that could arise when an unfamiliar animal joins the park. The group can educate other users about the importance of neutering and spaying, vaccinations, and microchipping, says Dianne Chute, one of the founding members and president of Dog Owners Group (D.O.G.) of Sausalito, California, which oversees Remington Dog Park.

Not Everyone Is a Dog Person

A successful dog park must also appease non-users, whose concerns range from safety of wildlife to sanitation problems. Sometimes the owner needs to be reined in to clean up after his dog and teach his dog to stay in designated areas.

Another important but treatable problem occurs in unfenced parks, meaning people in other areas of the park may receive the occasional—even unwelcome—canine visitor. "If you have a dog who's playing and goes into a people area, that's when you get friction," says Pullen. Her shelter is helping the Parks and Recreation Department identify the off-leash areas that are used most often so they can be fenced in.

Structured appropriately, dog parks can be a help, not a hindrance, to those who'd rather not be around dogs. Dog parks with proper fencing and barriers segregate these animals from areas of the park being used for other activities

PRIVATE PARKS FOR PUBLIC USE

Although this article focuses exclusively on public dog parks, some shelters run private dog parks on or near their facilities. The Humane Society of Indianapolis, for example, operates "Pets and People Park," a three-acre area behind the shelter that includes more than two miles of nature trails, picnic areas, a fenced space for dog play, and a pet-agility course. The shelter charges a nominal user fee for humane society members (more for non-members). Since it opened last summer, the park has attracted 128 users. You can learn more about set-up, operation, and liability issues associated with private dog parks by contacting shelters that run their own dog parks. Here are a pair to help get you started:

The Animal Center/ Humane Society
3000 Las Palmas Ave.
Escondido, CA 92025
760-745-4507

Humane Society of Indianapolis
7929 N. Michigan Rd.
Indianapolis, IN 46268
317-872-5650

like softball games and children's recreational activities. What's more, dog "non-enthusiasts" may be less likely to encounter dogs throughout their community (both restrained and unrestrained) because dog owners are naturally attracted to the dog park and its amenities. As one more bonus, a dog park filled with users and their dogs is a great crime deterrent within the city park system.

Few Things in Life Are Free

Even after a planned dog park wins the support of dog owners and non-owners alike, there's still another hurdle park proponents must overcome: paying for the park. Building and maintaining a fenced area within an existing park can add up to big bucks—money that the city may not be willing to put up alone. In many cases, the dog-park users themselves must underwrite the costs through fundraisers and private donations.

The D.O.G. user group in Sausalito has provided more than \$36,000 in improvements to its park with money raised solely from the donations of park users. In addition to the original fencing, Remington Park now has other amenities such as lighting, a storage shed, a riding lawnmower, picnic tables, benches, a dog drinking-water area, and a waste disposal station. (For a list of several companies that make waste disposal products, see page 25.) Although the city provides services including water, electricity, and garbage removal, dog owners have maintained the park since its opening. A city and user group unwilling or unable to follow Sausalito's example may soon end up with a dog park that looks more like a junkyard.

Making the Big Sale

Despite the many benefits of dog parks, city planners, who are naturally conservative when it comes to changing city rules and uses, may concentrate solely on the risks and drawbacks. They may cite such obstacles as aggressive dogs, waste-related health concerns, opposition from some citizens, and park maintenance costs. So how can your shelter and other proponents convince city planners to develop a commu-

nity dog park?

"Rather than dismiss their concerns, [dog park proponents] should enter into a dialogue and be ready with statistics and experiences that allay or refute their concerns," says Priscilla Stockner, DVM, executive director of the Animal Center/Humane Society in Escondido, California, whose privately operated dog park has remained relatively problem-free since it opened in 1992—even with 250 to 300 dogs visiting every week.

Jennifer Goldfinger, a senior management analyst for the City of Novato, agrees. She advises groups to be prepared to jump through all the hoops involved in dealing with a municipality. "[A dog park] is definitely a positive addition to the community, but it has to be very well thought out," she says.

If your shelter plans to help local dog owners lobby the city for a dog park, consider showing planners the success of other communities' dog parks. This may be especially useful in allaying fears over liability and lawsuits. According to MHS's Rick Johnson, no dog-park-related lawsuits have been filed in Marin County since the first public dog park opened in 1989. Johnson attributes this to the fact that dogs in these parks are usually socialized and under control and that user groups work to diffuse problems quickly. Cities, he says, are sued more for defective playground equipment than for problems in dog parks.

To appeal to decision-makers' desire to please their constituencies, Johnson recommends that dog-park proponents sell the idea of a dog park as a "people park." "Dogs tend

to create a focus that shouldn't be there," he explains. "The focus should be on people who deserve part of the park system."

Creating a dog park requires the involvement and cooperation of

DOG PARK RULES AND REGULATIONS

- ▶ Owners must clean up after their pets
- ▶ Dogs with a known history of dangerous behavior prohibited
- ▶ Dogs must be licensed and vaccinated
- ▶ Dogs must be wearing a collar with identification at all times
- ▶ Puppies under 4 months of age prohibited
- ▶ Animals must be spayed or neutered
- ▶ Leaving dogs unattended prohibited
- ▶ Owners should carry a leash at all times
- ▶ Limit 3 dogs per person per visit
- ▶ Young children must be closely supervised
- ▶ Dogs should be leashed prior to entering and upon leaving

many diverse groups that are affected by the project—including animal care and control agencies, city government officials, dog owners, and citizens residing near the proposed park. By involving these people early on in the discussions, and addressing any concerns that may crop up along the way, communities can create long-lasting partnerships that will improve the lives of all their inhabitants, dogs included. ■

The HSUS recommends that most, if not all, of these rules and regulations be posted at community dog parks.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

■ Dianne Chute
Dog Owners Group of Sausalito
690 Butte St.
Sausalito, CA 94965
415-332-6086

■ Diana Johnson
Bowling Green Police Dept.
175 West Wooster St.
Bowling Green, OH 43402
419-352-1131

■ Rick Johnson
The Marin Humane Society
171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd.
Novato, CA 94949
415-883-4621 x 260

Publications:
■ *So You Want to Build a Dog Park? A Comprehensive Guide for Municipalities and Private Entities*—The 85-page guide covers benefits of dog parks, considerations for building a dog park, and obtaining dog park equipment. \$35 from Susyn Stecchi, SunPets Unlimited, 8034 Wiles Rd., Ste. 122, Coral Springs, FL 33067-2073; 954-752-1879.

■ *Planning Parks for Pets*—This guide presents analyses of existing dog park facilities. \$17.50

from National Recreation and Park Association Publications Office, 22377 Belmont Ridge Rd., Ashburn, VA 20148-4501; 703-858-2190.

Web sites about dog parks:
■ American Dog Trainers Network
<http://www.inch.com/~dogs/runs.html>
■ Marin County Dog Parks
<http://www.marin-humane.org/html/dogpark.html>