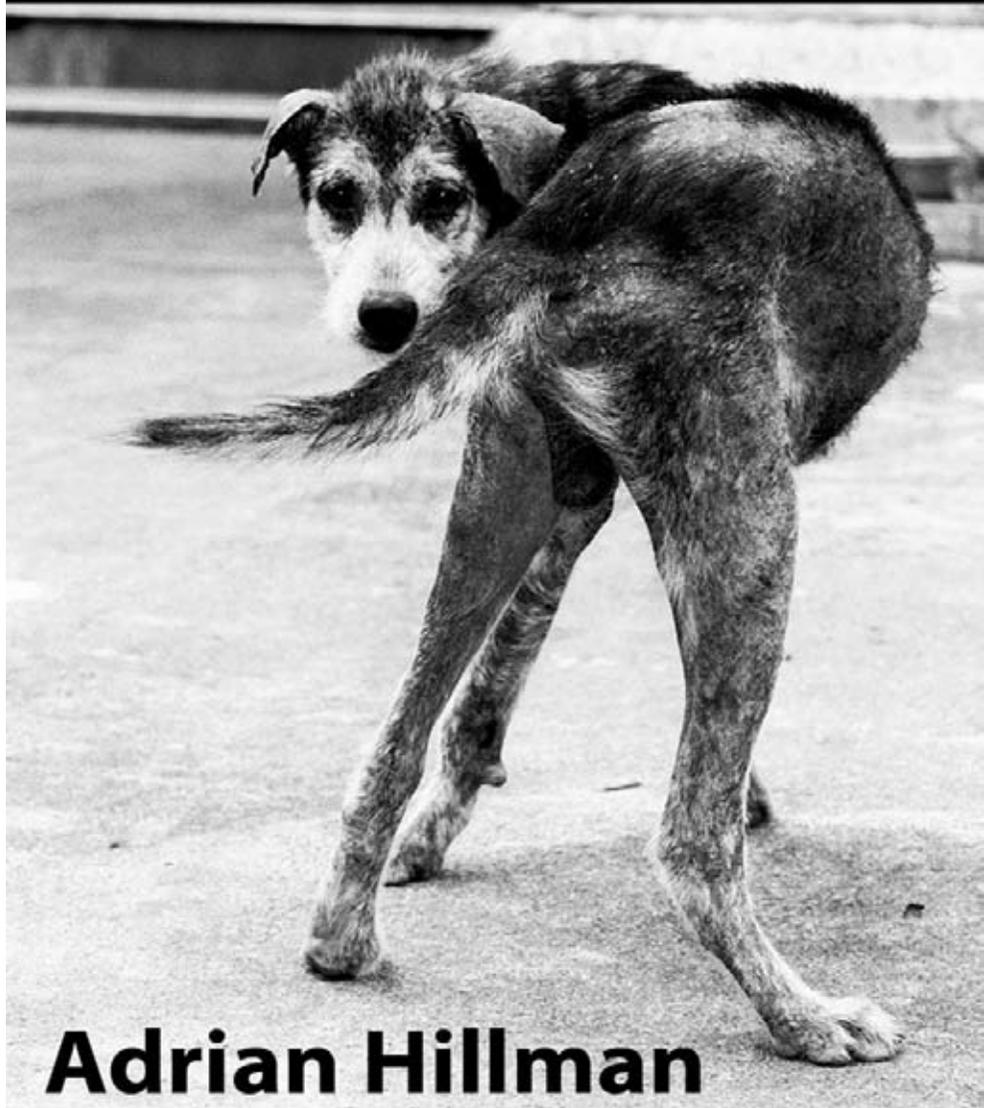


A Stray View



Adrian Hillman

A new look at dogs in Bangkok and beyond



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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Contact or find out more about the author and the stray dog issue at

<http://strayview.blogspot.com/>

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PREFACE



This is a book about urban stray dogs and their relationship to people. Most of the photographs were taken in Bangkok but with a few minor changes, such as climate and cuisine, they could be from many other towns or cities worldwide, especially in the tropics. Bangkok is just an example.

A quick review of letters published in newspapers about stray dogs shows that viewpoints can be very polarized, and maybe this book can in some small way help to bridge the gap between the “savers” and the “shooters”. More specifically, the aims of the discussion and photographs that follow are three-fold. Firstly, this is simply a portrait of the lives of urban dogs and their connections to people in the public arena. I photographed whatever caught my eye without deliberately targeting the sorriest-looking animals, and it is as representative as I could make it

without producing a book with little more than pictures of dogs asleep on concrete. However, one aspect that the photographs do not illuminate is the dogs' nightlife, which may well hold more secrets.

Secondly, it looks at attempts to solve the dog problem in Bangkok and elsewhere. Hopefully, there are some useful insights that can benefit both human and canine urban residents, but I certainly cannot claim to have all the answers.

Thirdly (and perhaps most significantly), although I recognize that stray dogs are a problem, I want to question the attitude that a dog's place is under direct control of a human and nowhere else. They do have a role as a free-living animal, and I discuss a new theory on how dogs originated that is currently gaining ground and may eventually help to modify our attitude to strays.

I am not particularly a dog-lover, nor a dog-hater, just an ecologist and city resident with a growing appreciation of what it means to be an urban stray.

INTRODUCTION



Bangkok has a stray dog problem, there are an estimated 130,000 (some say as high as 300,000) unowned dogs wandering the city's streets, and despite efforts to control them this number according to some reports steadily increases by about 10% a year. They are an eyesore, a disease risk, a danger to traffic, a noise-polluting messy nuisance, and at times an intimidating threat. Bites are common, rabies still a reality, and the city has gained an unwanted but prominent feature to rival traffic jams in the memory of visitors. Hardly an endearing picture of "man's best friend".

Occasionally the problem is horrific such as the case of a boy fortunate to escape with his life after getting savagely mauled by a large group of dogs. Or the Sunday morning

in September 2001 when a rabid dog bit 52 people in a popular Bangkok park before eventually getting beaten to death by a security guard. At other times its seriousness is tinged with farce such as the barking dogs that sent a female elephant into an uncontrolled two-hour jog through the busy streets. Everybody agrees that something needs to be done, and things are being done, but the stray dog problem is far from being solved.

However, another viewpoint would say that it is the stray dogs that have the problem. They have been pushed back onto the edge of our society from where they came, and from here they face ill-health, hunger, hard-hitting traffic and intimidation from kicking, stone-throwing humans. The ties that have bonded us for 10,000 years or more are welt-knotted, and this position of “outcast friend” is often an uncomfortable one for both sides.

These are the two commonest attitudes; either that strays need “controlling” or “saving”, but there is yet another angle which sees that many stray dogs arguably lead quite a good life and do not cause any significant trouble. This might sound strange to people living in clean, modern societies where any unowned dog looks out of place, but worldwide many strays are just a normal, unobtrusive part of the urban (or at least village) background. A closer look actually points to pets often being a larger part of the problem than unowned dogs.

Combining, or perhaps juggling, these three attitudes according to the situation will usually give the most balanced stance, but whichever angle is taken this is still not the full story as there are many close ties between stray dogs and people where both sides benefit. The fact is that some people like having these animals around, and this is

a point perhaps too easily ignored.

There will always be dogs in our cities, and even if the only ones left are pets, people will still get bitten, other health risks will still remain, and no doubt there will still be annoying unstoppable barkers amongst them. The dog problem will never totally go away as long as people have a desire to keep the human-dog relationship going, and personally I cannot imagine a dogless society. However, the chances are that for many years to come cities like Bangkok will still have dogs on the streets, perhaps just pets on the loose, but more likely some unowned strays as well. They are part of the urban environment, they are here to stay, and the task is managing them.

In many situations the practicalities of dealing with thousands of free-running dogs suggest that the pragmatic aim should be to reduce the problem not eliminate it. This is certainly true in Buddhist Thailand where a reluctance to resort to euthanasia cuts down the options. In each different urban situation the authorities together with the wider public have to decide on the exact target of stray management, whether dog-free streets or perhaps some more acceptable number of canine wanderers with a healthcare plan.

One possible exception to the reduce-rather-than-eliminate strategy is rabies, which is incurable, fatal and most commonly passed to people via dogs. Large strides have been made to lessen the impact of this disease in Thailand and its virtually eradication as a cause of fatalities is just about conceivable.

Managing the dog problem to a large degree means managing people, and here we have to accept responsibility for creating the headache in the first place. We also have to accept that even if we are able to make significant

improvements, the problems will just bloom again if there is no commitment to ongoing management.

But before looking at how to tackle strays it is worth getting to know our urban dogs a little better.