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2005 Pit Bull Ban

Successful Breed-Specific Law Results



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One endangered species But pit bull attacks are down

By ZEN RURYK, CITY HALL BUREAU CHIEF

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Sebastian is a lucky dog.

Charging around with puppy-like enthusiasm in a fenced off area behind the Toronto Humane Society's River St. building recently, the rambunctious 2-year, 11-month-old pit bull/bull mastiff mix has escaped the fate of many other similar dogs that have been put to death in accordance with provincial law.



Sebastian, a part pit bull, part bull mastiff romps through the snow at the Humane Society. He has escaped a death sentence because he was born before Aug. 29, 2005. Michael Peake, Sun Media)

Toronto's animal services officials report they euthanized 722 dogs generally labelled as pit bulls since changes to the Dog Owners' Liability Act kicked in on Aug. 29, 2005 -- albeit a significant number would have been put down regardless of the law for a variety of reasons.

And reports of bites by pit bull type dogs have dropped dramatically.

In 2004, the animal services department received reports about 130 of the powerful animals biting humans and animals.

The numbers dropped by substantial increments in subsequent years: 71 in 2005; 53 in 2006; and 44 in 2007.

If Sebastian had been born several months later -- after Aug. 29, 2005 -- and found himself in one of the kennels at the city's four animal services shelters, he would be on a kind of doggy death row, waiting to be injected with an overdose of lethal drugs.

A sign of just how controversial the issue can be, animal services officials refuse to allow the media to photograph or have contact with the condemned dogs in their shelters.

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"All it would do is make the public very upset about that particular one dog and whoever might own that dog -- it would potentially cause them further upset," says animal services manager Eletta Purdy.

Concern about attacks prompted the Ontario government to target pit bull terriers, Staffordshire bull terriers, American pit bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers and any other dog that possesses the physical characteristics of those creatures.

There's a ban on owning any of the identified dogs that were born or imported into the province after the law took affect.

People can keep robust canines such as Sebastian -- currently a homeless ward of the Toronto Humane Society which does not euthanize animals in its care -- as pets because they were owned by an Ontario resident prior to the date when provisions of the law were enacted.

However, owners must spay or neuter those pets and keep them muzzled and on a leash whenever their four-legged charges are in public.

Purdy is reluctant to declare the law a success even though the number of reported pit bull bites has dropped.

She explains that statistics can be misleading and factors such as the size of a breed's population -- and even the weather -- can have an impact on the number of bites that occur in a year.

Animal services officials, who figure that only about 15% of dog owners obtain licenses for their pets, have no idea of how many pit bulls now reside in Toronto.

"What I can say is what the legislation appears to be doing is it seems to be having an impact on the pit bull population with respect to the number of dogs that are potentially out there in the community," adds Purdy. "It looks like, by breed, from our statistics, that the number of bites that have been reported to us -- regarding pit bulls -- has dropped from 2005 to 2007."

She says that if restrictions were put on any other specific breeds, the same sort of pattern would likely occur for those dogs.

Of the 722 hapless pit bull-type dogs that have been destroyed since the law came into force, 297 were euthanized because they had the misfortune of not being owned by an Ontario resident prior to Aug. 29, 2005. Prior to enactment of the law, animal services personnel would have evaluated those dogs for such things as temperament with an eye to putting them up for adoption.

A significant number of the total would have been destroyed even if the province had not enshrined anti-pit-bull provisions into law.

The city put 188 of the muscular pooches to death because of behavioural and temperamental problems. In addition, the courts ordered that 12 others be put down and animal services personnel also euthanized 10 geriatric and 32 sick and injured dogs.

The city also put down 183 other dogs targeted by the legislation at the request of owners. Purdy says she doesn't know how many of those were destroyed because owners had concerns about complying with the anti-pit bull law.

Lee Oliver, of the Toronto Humane Society, which opposes the anti-pit bull provisions, argues that legislation won't stop the targeted dogs from jumping over a fence and biting someone.

"The owners that would have the dog in their front porch with a flimsy screen door that the dog can get through, those guys are still going to exist -- and they're within the law," he adds.

If the law is obeyed, time will greatly reduce -- if not eliminate -- the controversy surrounding pit bulls.

As Sebastian and other non-banned canines that fall under the pit bull label grow old and die, the targeted breeds will just disappear.

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