

Iran to tackle stray dogs conundrum



Social Desk

Stray dogs have become a problem in Iran due to the lack of a comprehensive law. In the first half of the current Persian year (starting on March 21), five people lost their lives due to dog attacks. However, the Department of the Environment (DoE) is working to pass legislation regarding these animals in collaboration with custodian institutions, especially the Ministry of Interior and municipalities. The goal is to minimize the damage to human health and the environment.

Dogs are known for their loving and kind nature. In today's world, they are considered companions and often become like family members and losing them can be a great source of pain. However, we occasionally hear about dogs attacking humans, and unfortunately, such incidents have been on the rise in recent years. Experts believe that the increase in stray dogs is a significant contributing factor. Stray dogs, left to roam the streets and alleys freely, pose a danger to humans and even wildlife.

In our country, herds of stray dogs freely roam the outskirts of cities, sleeping wherever they please and attacking anyone who crosses their path. In many countries, a dog without a collar is considered ownerless. In some Western countries, if a dog is found without a collar or leash, it is captured. If the dog has an owner, heavy fines are imposed, and if it does not have an owner, it is temporarily kept for a specific period, usually between three to ten days, until its owner is found or someone agrees to take responsibility for it. If a new owner is found, the expenses incurred during those few days are covered by the new owner. If the original owner is identified, they are required to pay the expenses and may face additional

fines.

However, in Iran, the situation of stray dogs is dire, with their numbers increasing day by day. Consequently, the harm they cause to humans is also on the rise. According to the country's Forensic Medicine Organization, from March to September 2023, 784 people sought examination and assessment for injuries caused by dog bites. Among them, 593 were men, and 191 were women. The province of Razavi Khorasan had the highest number of reported injuries, with 102 cases, followed by Tehran with 98 cases and Isfahan with 83 cases. Tragically, five people lost their lives due to dog bites, four of whom were male and one was female.

In a report titled "Overview of the challenges of managing free-roaming dogs in the country," the Office of Infrastructure Studies of the Islamic Parliament Research Center stated that the relationship between humans and dogs has evolved in today's lifestyle. Dogs play various roles, such as protecting human lives, assisting in natural disaster situations like earthquakes, aiding the police, safeguarding livestock, and providing companionship to the blind and elderly.

The report also mentioned that from a zoological perspective, dogs are considered domestic animals and do not naturally belong to any specific habitat on the planet. Therefore, their presence in any wildlife habitat can be seen as the introduction of non-native or invasive species.

According to the report, a free-roaming dog is defined as any dog that lacks behavioral control, regardless of whether it has an owner or not. The effects of these animals on wildlife include direct hunting of vulnerable species, competition for food with other animals, the spread of diseases, hybridization with wild canids, and

the creation of an unsafe environment. Regarding the impact on human health and social environments, cases such as the spread of diseases transmissible between dogs and humans (like rabies and hydatid disease), threats to public health, environmental pollution, dog bites, human casualties, and mental distress can be mentioned.

According to the Department of Common Human and Animal Diseases of the Ministry of Health, approximately 320,011 cases of animal bites were registered in Iran from March 2022 to March 2023, with nearly 81 percent of these cases involving dogs.

Statistics from the Infectious Diseases Management Center of the Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education show that despite spending over nine million Euros on importing human anti-rabies vaccines into the country in the last two years, 30 people have died from rabies during the same period. Moreover, Iran ranks third in the world for the number of rabies deaths resulting from dog bites between 2002 and 2020, with 37 deaths. Furthermore, dogs have played a role in the extinction of at least 11 wildlife species and pose a potential threat to 188 species. Iran is among the countries with 21 to 25 endangered animal species, and free-roaming dogs pose a serious threat to these valuable and endangered species. Asian leopards, of which there are only 17 pairs left in the country, are particularly at risk from stray dog attacks.

Free-roaming dogs are also carriers of various diseases that can affect other species, including rabies, canine distemper virus, and canine

parvovirus. These diseases have threatened species such as African lions, Ethiopian wolves, Caspian seals, and other carnivores in the 1990s.

Also, the interbreeding of dogs with wolves or jackals poses two significant threats: the loss of genetic integrity in canines and an increased risk of attacks on humans and livestock.

Stray dogs also disrupt habitats and instill fear in wildlife. Their presence reduces the populations of mammals and birds, especially ground birds, in their habitats. In urban and rural environments, they pose various harms and threats to humans.

Other effects of free-roaming dogs on human health include injuries, amputations, and deaths caused by bites. In a research study conducted in August of last year, dogs were ranked as the third deadliest animal for humans after mosquitoes and snakes, causing approximately 30,000 deaths. The management practices for free-roaming dog populations vary from country to country, with common methods including culling, sheltering, birth control, and financial incentives, which have shown success to a large extent. However, in our country, there are numerous challenges in managing the population of stray dogs. These challenges include the absence of comprehensive dog management laws, the limited role of the country's Veterinary Organization in managing stray dogs, inadequate education and awareness about responsible dog ownership, the presence of free-roaming dog centers due to unrestricted access to waste and uncontrolled feeding practices, insufficient focus on the role and capacity of animal shelters in managing stray dogs, and a lack of a comprehensive

database on the status of the stray dog population. Additionally, there is inadequate attention to anti-rabies vaccination for dogs in addressing the issue of free-roaming dogs in the country.

The DoE, as the guardian of Iran's wildlife, is taking steps to address this issue. They have organized working group meetings to discuss how to control the population of stray and herding dogs. According to the DoE's deputy director of Natural Environment and Biodiversity, serious and well-informed decisions should be made in these specialized working group meetings to effectively control the population of stray dogs. Emotional decision-making can lead to future problems that are difficult to manage.

"As long as there is an abundant food supply for stray dogs, their population will continue to grow exponentially. Therefore, it is crucial to reduce the availability of food for stray dogs through proper waste management and responsible disposal to prevent their population from increasing," said Hassan Akbari.

Gholamreza Ebdali, the director general of the DoE's Office of Wildlife Protection and Management, emphasized the need for comprehensive laws and collaboration among various institutions, including the Ministry of Interior and municipalities, to address the issue of stray dogs.

"In some countries, laws have been implemented to prohibit the feeding of dogs by hand, and heavy fines have been imposed to discourage such practices. Similar laws should be enacted in Iran to protect wildlife populations and human communities from the harm caused by stray dogs," he said.



Flight of no return

How migratory birds fall victim to the greed of poachers in Fereydunkenar

Social Desk

Fereydunkenar bird market in the northern Mazandaran Province in Iran, has gained a notorious reputation as one of the darkest places for migratory birds. Every year, millions of birds flock to the Fereydunkenar international wetland seeking refuge from the harsh winter, only to meet an untimely end there. Mazandaran Province owns two internationally recognized wetlands, Miankaleh and Fereydunkenar, along with numerous local wetlands and reservoirs. Additionally, it is home to over 800 dams, covering an area of 17,000 hectares, which attract around

90 species of wintering migratory birds, totaling approximately two million individuals.

However, a pressing question arises: how many of these birds manage to escape the clutches of these deadly lagoons?

Miankaleh and Fereydunkenar used to be ideal locations for wintering of migratory birds. However, these birds are now being hunted in thousands at once within these wetlands.

Statistics paint a bleak picture, revealing that between 700,000 and 1,500,000 migratory birds are killed in Fereydunkenar and Sorkhrud areas alone.

Although the exact figures remain

unknown, it's estimated that four million birds choose Iran as their winter haven – a third to half of them winter exclusively in Fereydunkenar wetland while the remainder are scattered across the country.

The diverse array of bird species, ranging from waterside birds and waterfowl to waders, egrets, herons, cormorants, ducks, geese, and swans, along with their predators such as falcons, eagles, owls, and hawks, all migrate to this area. However, the once-promised sanctuary has become their final resting place, with their beds and plates now mere commodities in the wild bird market. In an interview with Fars News Agency,

Iranian ornithologist Arash Habibiazer revealed a horrifying truth.

"In a single day, over 3,000 wild birds were mercilessly slaughtered in a farm within Fereydunkenar. This massacre, taking place in an area protected under the Ramsar Convention, demands immediate action. These migratory birds hold greater significance than 'Omid,' the Siberian crane that found respite in Iran," he said.

Habibiazer emphasizes that the birds arriving at these wetlands face large-scale slaughter, with some being sold to zoos and bird gardens.

"The hunting persists as long as there are customers, attracting individuals from

other provinces who come to purchase these unfortunate creatures. Whether slaughtered or kept alive, the birds are sought after for bird gardens, wildlife trafficking, and taxidermy," he said.

The staggering sums exchanged for these birds, dead or alive, drive a lucrative business, making it difficult to sever its ties. The market's turnover is astonishingly high, ensuring that a significant number of individuals will continue to partake in the hunting.

If the slaughter of these birds persists, we must bid farewell to these charming immigrants, as they either face extinction or choose to bypass Iran altogether, avoiding a tragic fate.