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Thursday, July 1, 2010
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U.S. Facing Feral-Dog Crisis

Maryann Mott for National Geographic News August 21, 2003

Packs of wild dogs roam America's city streets and backcountry roads. Linger on the edge of domestication, they live in dilapidated buildings, old cars, and sewers— anywhere that will shelter them from summer's blistering heat or winter's bitter cold.

Some are abandoned pets; others were born on the streets. In order to survive, these social creatures form packs, scavenging garbage or killing livestock in teams.

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In rural communities, wild dogs attack livestock, angering farmers who commonly shoot them. A survey by the National Agricultural Statistics Service in 1999 found that feral dogs were partly responsible for killing cows, sheep, and goats worth about U.S. 37 million dollars.

Farms aren't the only place where these animals may be found. Low-income, high-crime neighborhoods in cities like Los Angeles, St. Louis, New York, Santa Fe, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland, are being overrun by tens of thousands of unwanted dogs, says Randy Grim, founder of Stray Rescue in St. Louis, a nonprofit organization that saves street dogs.

"The problem is only going to get worse," he said. "Animal control agencies and humane societies don't want to deal with it. It's just too overwhelming."

The problem started in the 1980s, Grim said, springing from a combination of increased dog fighting, dogs being bred for aggressiveness, and reduced animal control. Compounding the problem, he said, is that America's poorest neighborhoods do not have veterinarians or

animal shelters.

In Detroit, packs of free-roaming dogs have posed such a danger that a postal service spokesman said they considered stopping mail delivery to some areas last year because carriers were "constantly being bitten" or injured eluding vicious animals.

In St. Louis, a 10-year-old boy was attacked and killed two years ago by a pack of stray dogs. Police Chief Ron Henderson told the St. Louis Post Dispatch: "They were feeding off this kid. I've seen over 1,500 bodies but I've never, never seen anything like this. Nobody has."

And it's not just a problem in the United States—it's worldwide.

According to some estimates, the current world population of domestic dogs may be as high as 500 million, of which a substantial, although unknown, proportion is free-roaming.

There have been news reports of feral dogs causing havoc in Australia, India, Russia, Taiwan, and Turkey.

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In Greece, more than U.S. one million dollars is reportedly being spent on rounding up, sterilizing, and vaccinating thousands of street dogs in Athens before the 2004 Olympic games.



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