

Man's best friend may be your livestock's worst enemy.

On a sunny spring day, amid mustard and poppies in full bloom, a cow chews contentedly at the succulent grasses in a pasture. Her two-day-old calf stays pressed to her side; every few minutes, she nuzzles it with her broad, wet nose. Mother and baby hum reassuringly to each other.

From the high brush that borders this pasture north of Santa Cruz, four large dogs appear. They are pets, wearing collars and sleek coats. Their tongues are hanging out—they've been chasing scents of the many wild animals that live in the woods. Upon spotting the cow and calf, the lead dog becomes intensely alert and rushes toward the cow, barking. The cow stops eating, stares at the intruder, and stands ground, but the scared calf runs from its mother's side. The dog chases after the calf, but the cow cuts it off, shielding her baby.

The calf's running has triggered hunting instincts in the other dogs. One barks wildly in front of the cow, baiting her to step away from her calf. She takes the dare and charges. The other dogs close on the calf. One crushes the newborn's hind leg and drags him backward. Spurred by the taste of blood, the dogs intensify their ripping and tearing. The calf cries weakly and struggles to stand, but can't. The cow moos loudly, then nuzzles him. He is silent.

A dog races in and grabs the cow's ear. She jumps to shake her ear free and runs frantically across the pasture. The dogs close in, biting at her udder and sides. She careens into a barbed-wire fence, becomes entangled, and falls. Relentlessly, the dogs tear into her flesh.

Scenes like this occur with a numbing regularity throughout California, resulting in tens of thousands of dollars of financial loss and needless grief to the small and large farmer alike.

One evening, rancher Joe Nulph found his calf and cow entangled and mutilated. His neighbors, whose dogs did the killing, returned from work to find their pets at home, where they left them that morning. Joe lost four calves and three cows to dog attacks in less than a year.

Though there are no statewide statistics to verify it, the No. 1 livestock predator in California is probably the family dog. County animal control officers, veterinarians, and ranchers can all attest to the devastating effects of dog attacks on livestock and poultry. Unlike problems with such wily wild predators as coyotes, the added frustration of dog attacks is that ultimately it's a problem of dealing with the irresponsibility and ignorance of dog owners.

For example, Nulph's life changed when his first calf was killed. "It's like going to war. After the first calf [died], I never knew when they'd hit again. I told my neighbors that dogs were killing my cattle, but most look a casual attitude toward the problem," Nulph says. With a shake of his head that conveys disbelief, Nulph explains, "Either they didn't care or they refused to acknowledge it was their

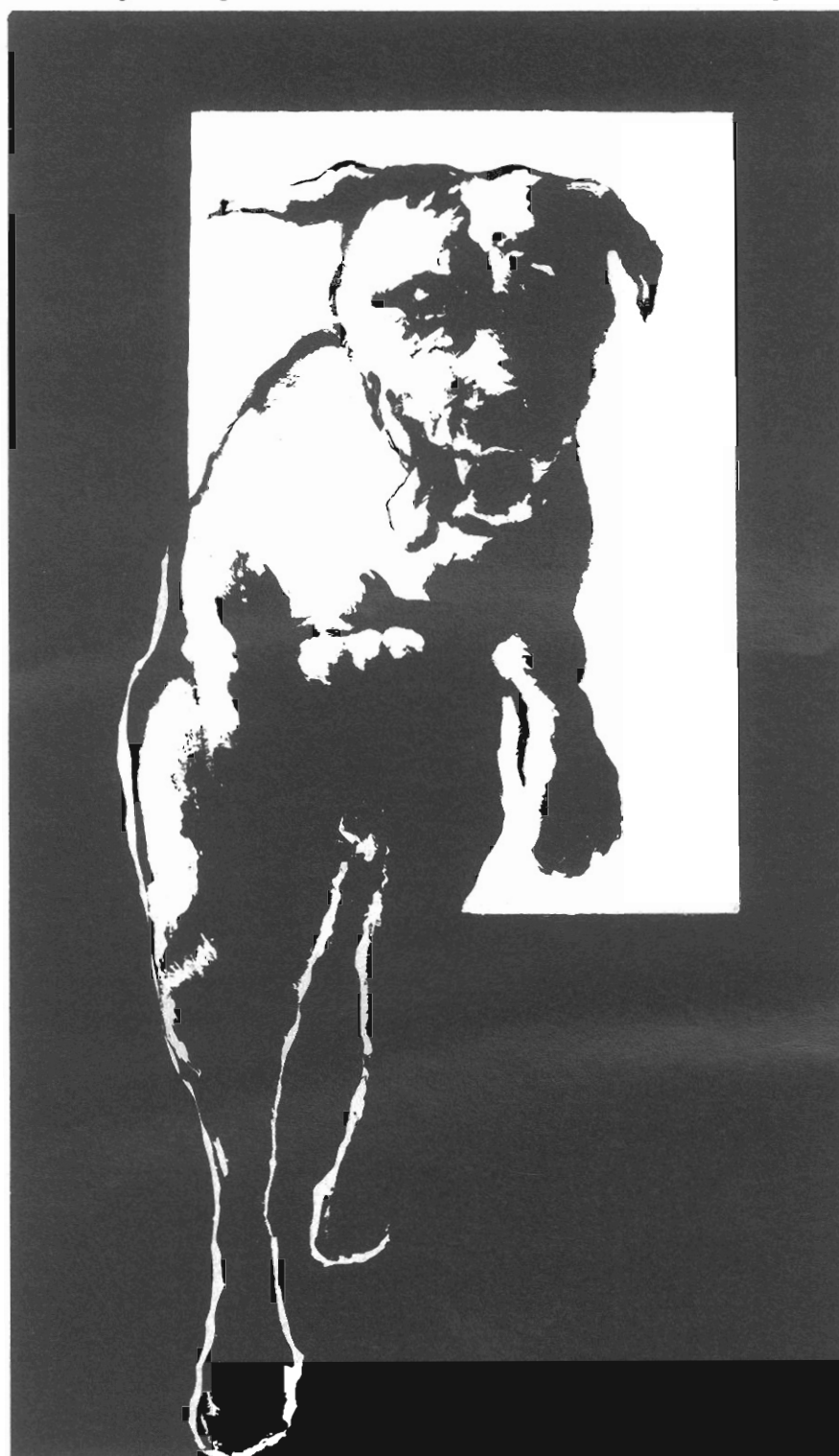


ILLUSTRATION BY A.D. LAFARGE

DESTRUCTIVE DOGS

BY ERIC HOFFMAN

dog. The problem continued, so I exercised my legal right to protect my livestock."

Joe started shooting or capturing his neighbors' dogs. California law (Agriculture Code Section 31102) permits the shooting "by any person" of dogs that "are killing, wounding, persistently pursuing, or worrying livestock or poultry on land or premises

not owned or possessed by the owner of the dog." The dog with feathers or fur hanging from its muzzle that has distanced itself from the scene of its predatory behavior, but hasn't made it to its home turf, can be shot too, according Section 31102, when "the person has such proof that conclusively shows the dog has been recently engaged in killing or wounding

livestock or poultry on land or premises which are not owned or possessed by the dog's owner."

The law was on Nulph's side, but it was up to Nulph to solve his problem. "I shot a couple of dogs, but more often than not, they'd come when I was asleep or away from the area. After a while I'd be jumping out of bed at the slightest noise and taking off across the pasture, gun loaded and ready. Usually the dogs would hear me coming and run like hell. Even when I got near them, the darkness made it tough to get a safe shot off because there is a small housing tract nearby."

Joe killed seven dogs in a two-month period before his livestock was safe again. As for the neighbors, ill feelings may exist for years. "I know I made some enemies. One guy hired a lawyer, but the law was on my side so they couldn't do anything. I don't like shooting someone's dog, but I like seeing animals eaten alive even less. If they'd only keep their dogs home, everything would've been OK. Most of all, I felt bad shooting a dog owned by children. I doubt the kids knew they had their parents to blame and not me."

The law did save Nulph the trouble of hiring a lawyer to defend himself because Section 31102 also states, "No action civil or criminal shall be maintained for killing any such dog."

But fixing blame and collecting damages were more difficult for Nulph. If the dog doesn't have identification tags, returning a dead dog to the dog's owner can be a volatile and emotional experience. "I shot a German shepherd and found the dog's owners were out of town," Nulph said. "So I put it in my freezer and invited them over to pick their dog up when they returned. I doubted they'd claim their dog if they knew he was frozen solid, so I didn't go into detail about the dog's condition. When I presented it to them, the woman cried and the guy got real angry. Eventually, they agreed to pay damages." If the dog's owners had refused to pay for Nulph's financial loss, Nulph would have had to take them to court.

Llama breeder Cecile Champagne knows both sides of the dog problem. "I grew up in the suburbs where people kept their dogs in the backyard," Champagne says. "I think a lot of people move into rural areas to be free of urban and suburban restraints. They think they're doing the family dog a favor to let it run free."

"I was totally shocked the first time a neighbor's dog went after my llamas. After a few attacks, I changed from a person who had no use for guns to a person who has a loaded gun close at hand. One neighbor's dog came back four times. When we practically begged him to keep his dog home, he told us we ought to buy some dogs to protect our stock. The next time his dog showed up, we shot it."

Champagne also has been on the other side of the dog issue. "My son's dog, Snoozer, was a good pet, trained to stay on the property and good

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with children. One afternoon we returned and he was gone. That evening a neighbor phoned and said he thought he'd seen Snoozer with some dogs that killed his cat. We built a dog run. Snoozer dug out and killed a neighbor's lamb. We paid for the lamb and had Snoozer destroyed."

One turkey farmer near San Jose, who asked for anonymity, has dog stories that span 30 years. His turkeys are victimized by coyotes, bobcats, and dogs, but to him dogs are the worst.

"Coyotes and bobcats take about 20 birds a year. I can live with that," he says. "Dogs often get into a frenzy and kill until they're so exhausted they can't go anymore. In the last five years, I've had about 20 attacks from dogs. A few years back, two dogs killed more than 170 laying turkeys in less than two hours. I shot one of them, but it didn't have tags, so I took a \$3500 loss. Dogs are way worse than wild animals. Wild animals run when they see man, but dogs on a killing spree are likely to turn on you."

The farmer recalls an encounter with a Great Dane. "First I saw about

10 dead turkeys. Then I saw the Great Dane shaking a turkey to death. I knew the dog, so I yelled at him and thought he'd stop. He ignored me. My hired hand came running with a shotgun and shot him in the side. The gun was loaded with light bird shot, so the first blast just made the dog mad. He charged us. My hand kept shooting and, on the last shot, the dog fell dead at our feet." The turkey rancher usually shoots dogs and feigns no knowledge of their whereabouts, if asked. "Some of these people get so mad, they'd shoot me. They don't care about my birds. I play it safe by shooting a dog and

playing dumb about it."

Captain Joyce Turner of the Santa Cruz County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals spends eight hours a day dealing with dog problems, often in the aftermath of a rampaging dog that has destroyed livestock. "People often don't realize dogs are pack-oriented, and once out of sight of their owners even well-trained dogs revert to their ancestry," Turner points out. "The dogs doing the damage are often harmless enough, if properly controlled. They're just dogs and all dogs need supervision."

In Santa Cruz County, where suburbs, ranchettes, farms, and cities all merge, often in heavily wooded settings with plenty of cover for marauding animals, Turner sees predation from dogs as more pervasive than natural predators. "It's of course hard to know for sure, but judging from what I've seen, dogs account for most of the destruction of livestock and poultry in this county." Turner's view is supported by animal control officers in adjoining Santa Clara, San Benito, and San Mateo counties as well.

Farms and ranches that border on suburbs suffer more than totally rural areas, according to Bob Garcia, supervisor of animal regulation for Sonoma County. Among animal control offices throughout California, Garcia's Sonoma County program, manned with eight full-time officers, is often cited as the most innovative and aggressive toward offending dogs and their owners.

Garcia feels areas zoned for 1-5-acre ranchettes are especially vulnerable. "Sometimes the big, untrained watchdog becomes the stock killer. Often the people in the suburbs aren't aware of the damage a dog can cause. Their backgrounds and forms of employment don't afford them knowledge of what can happen with a seemingly harmless pet."

Soquel veterinarian Ty McConnell says, "In areas where farms and suburbs are interspersed, it's common to get a call for a disemboweled pony or what's left of a small sheep herd. It's especially sad in the spring when so many newborn animals are senselessly killed. Usually the culprit is the neighbor's dog, and in some cases the owner's dog."

McConnell has had as many as three clients' animals attacked by the same group of dogs in one evening with the dogs evading capture. "A group of dogs that operated between midnight and 4 a.m. killed some sheep, and severely damaged some prize goats and a llama on three different ranches. I spent hours trying to save the animals only to have the dogs return a couple nights later."

Finally, McConnell recommended moving some of the surviving animals out of the area until the dogs were rounded up. "I found homes out of the area where the animals could safely recover. It took two weeks and plenty of sleepless nights by my clients before the dogs were identified. Some of the dogs turned out to live within a block of the animals that had been attacked."

Garcia says a vicious dog in a herd of sheep can add up to big losses. "Not too long ago we had a rancher lose \$30,000 in sheep in two nights."

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Even though the dogs were traced to owners, the farmer was only able to recover part of his loss because of the dog owners' limited financial worth. Losses of \$3000-5000 are fairly common, according to Garcia. In Sacramento County, a llama rancher lost seven animals to dogs, losing nearly \$30,000.

Not all losses caused by dogs are a result of the physical attacks. A pack of dogs in Los Altos Hills chased a herd of horses until they broke out of their enclosure and ran onto Interstate 280, where three horses were killed in collisions with cars. Sheep and cattle often succumb to exhaustion rather than injury.

There are significant dog problems in totally rural areas too. Veterinarian Wayne Merhoff, who practices in the Red Bluff area, estimates that 10 percent of the annual lamb crop is lost to production--dogs and coyotes about equally responsible. "I know of a dog that killed 27 lambs in one afternoon." But in purely rural areas, there is little confusion about how stray dogs should be treated. "We shoot any dog that won't respond to our call and isn't in close company of a person," says Cazadero rancher Tanya Charier.

Loaded guns, tense nights, and laws that allow shooting of predatory dogs haven't resolved the dog menace that so many farms have experienced. In different ways, Santa Cruz and Sonoma counties have led the way in going beyond the state law in curbing their dog problems.

Garcia feels the funding of his eight-person force and some innovative methods have been the keys to turning things around in Sonoma County. "Our county supervisors have aggressively sided with the livestock owners. We have large signs posted in livestock areas stating dogs will be shot. We cite owners of wandering dogs, even if the dogs aren't near livestock. The dog owners are usually fined \$54 and are often required to attend a four-hour educational course so they understand what's at stake when they allow their dogs to run. We try to inform, educate, and cite. People know we're around."

Garcia points to some interesting statistics as evidence of Sonoma County's success. "We have had reported annual losses in excess of \$60,000. We have also gotten a great deal of support and involvement from the large ranchers who traditionally resolved things on their own terms. We've a very good record at tracking down offending dogs."

Garcia has even learned how different breeds of dogs attack their victims, which helps him narrow the field when he searches for the attacker. "Usually the pit bulls and pit-bull crosses attack the face, ripping off the noses and ears of their victims." Garcia has been seeing more pit-bull types of dogs during the last three years, and says it's a statewide trend. However, he is quick to point out that all breeds are capable of participating; even a groomed and powdered poodle can get into the act. "I caught a German shepherd, Lab, and poodle, complete with rhinestone collar, finishing off a lamb."

Enforcement either happens or

doesn't happen at the county level. In most counties, the pound master, or a similar officer, is given the power to destroy or restrict the movements of a dog seen as vicious.

The traditional stalemate occurs once a marauding dog makes it home again. In reality, very little can be done, if there is no "conclusive evidence" linking a dog to a particular incident. Often the dog's owner is uncooperative, and as long as the dog stays on its owner's property, nearby livestock owners can only wait for the next incident and hope the dog is either shot or captured.

In Santa Cruz County, where Turner

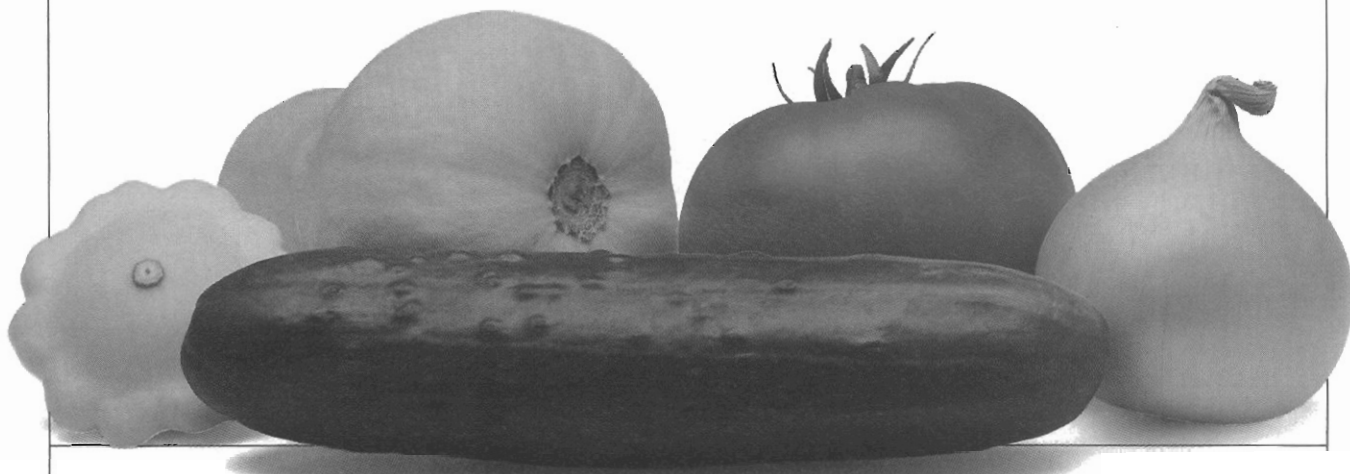
and Doug Fakkema, the chief animal control officer, deal with a constant stream of these problems, legislation that goes beyond state law is in the works. Turner explains, "All the dog owner has to say is, 'Are you sure it wasn't Sam's dog down the street? it looks like mine.'" Turner feels the proposed Santa Cruz County ordinance, which has the support of four or five supervisors, will get at the "irresponsibility factor."

"We've focused on the meaning of 'at large,'" Turner says. She explains that traditionally "at large" has meant when a dog is off its owner's property. In the proposed Santa Cruz County

ordinance, "at large" is defined in a stricter sense. "In the proposed ordinance, 'at large' means free of restraint, pen, or chain, even if the dog is on the owner's property," Turner says. "If a dog is unrestrained and out of sight of its owner, but still on its owner's property, a citation can be issued. This will at least ensure that problem owners address restraining their animals, if they want to avoid a fine. And it will create an awareness of how seriously this county views dog problems." ■

The author is a free-lance writer living in Santa Cruz.

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