

Dogs fill key roles in our society

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Pentagon study confirms value of dogs: Recently the Pentagon announced the end of a costly study aimed at discovering a replacement for the talents of a dog's nose.

For the past 10 years the U.S. military has attempted to develop a "sniffer" robot that would be able to successfully warn soldiers of the presence of explosive devices — to no avail. It seems that no matter how technically advanced the device, nothing can take the place of a dog's nose at seeking out those bombs before they cause mutilation and death.

There are costs for the dogs: sniffer dogs require extensive training, and each has a military handler. But soldiers in Afghanistan have declared their dogs the most valuable and reliable asset they have for detecting and avoiding dangers like hidden bombs. Dogs do not go through these battles unscathed; many are wounded and some are killed. But each of the dogs on patrol with military handlers can save lives, and they work day after day, in terrible conditions. And they don't even get a pension when they retire.

Japanese study finds dogs influence hormone levels: Researchers at Azabu University in Japan have found that when a dog gazes at his owner, the owner's oxytocin level will actually increase. Oxytocin is a social bonding hormone, usually associated with the response humans experience when viewing their own infant or a loved one. The contention based on this finding is that this ability of a dog to stimulate our bonding hormone has probably contributed to the evolution of a dog as a valued member of the human's family.

Our dogs do not sit with us around a campsite, ready to warn us of approaching predators as in prehistoric times, but they are equally valuable in our society today.

Dog and handler teams from Tampa, Fla., were used in Haiti to locate victims of last summer's earthquake. Anyone who flies regularly has probably noticed the sniffer dogs at airports, checking among passengers, sniffing for explosives in luggage, and reinforcing the security systems. Busy little Beagles are used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to check for particular insects or fungi in food shipments to this country, helping to keep our food supplies safe.

Other dogs help children learn to read (yes — some appear regularly at many nearby libraries), service dogs can assist epileptics by warning of impending seizures, and now dogs are being used to detect certain cancers by their scent. These uses of our dogs are a far stretch from those canids that lived with our prehistoric ancestors, acting both as early warning systems and as hunting assistants.

The roles of dogs in our modern culture are many and varied; dogs are generally valued as companions and helpers. Yet we still have those whose stated goal is the elimination of the domestic dog.

Mandatory spay/neuter laws' inevitable effects: Commenting on the current vogue of legislatively mandating that all dogs and cats be surgically neutered, James Serpell, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, has said "The thing about mandatory spay-neuter [laws] is that those who are most willing to have their dogs spayed or neutered tend to be responsible people. And often, their dogs also happen to be nice animals in temperament. So what you're doing essentially is taking those dogs out of the breeding population."

Serpell leaves us with one logical question: what will become of dog ownership if only ill-tempered puppies from disreputable breeding programs are available as pets?

Good question, that.

Given that in this state over 98 percent of owned cats and over 95 percent of dogs are neutered — that leaves a very small population available to create the next generation. Already some people seeking a family pet are having to travel a distance or take an animal that is not what they seek because of the limited pool of available animals.

Those seeking pets are advised to study the available animals in relation to their own lifestyle, with a goal of matching the best home with the best pet. A good match insures that the animal will be a permanent and valued member of that family. A poor match usually means the animal will have or cause problems, and leave this family for a doubtful future.

This option is becoming ever more difficult to accomplish as the supply of animals decreases.

Yes, people will often accept an animal that does not meet their needs, and for whom they do not offer the best home option. The best way to ensure that a pet stays in a family, and has a successful relationship with those people, is to work to make the best match.

When that option is not available, those placements tend not to be long-term successful. This does not help the animal, nor the people. *Suzanne Sparhawk's e-mail is suzanne.sparhawk@gmail.com.*