

# FENCES

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The human race has not commonly resorted to measures to control the physical characteristics of breeding. Selection has been mainly on economic and political grounds. The example of European royalty demonstrates how high the fences could be built to ensure that power, wealth and inheritance were very carefully restricted only to those with the right aristocratic pedigrees. By the time they had excluded Catholics they had to trawl through innumerable German princelings to come up with one who was neither an imbecile, a moral degenerate or a nut case. How lucky Queen Victoria was to get Albert the Good!

These royals, both on the Latin and Teutonic side, were awash with hereditary defects, of which haemophilia was the most lethal and in the Spanish branch the most common.

Getting back to dogs, building fences around specific pure bred dogs is a fairly recent thing. So, of course, is the recognition of distinct categories of pure breeds with registered pedigrees. There always were distinct breeds, bred for specific purposes, like hunting, fighting, retrieving, controlling vermin and herding and guarding livestock. These breeds would also vary according to the region where they were found.

The first fence round the pure-bred dog was bureaucratic, canine control organisations set up to record and regulate recognised breeds and their pedigrees. When a breed is recognised as such, evidence of line-breeding is required.

Once inside the charmed circle, matings must be with other pedigreed stock.

In so many ways we function on the basis of what is called conventional wisdom, that is what everybody knows. We even make laws on the basis of beliefs which have absolutely no foundation in fact. I remember when there were no German Shepherd Dogs allowed in Australia because they were believed to be related to wolves and a major threat to stock.

Politicians rely heavily on conventional wisdom, especially when elections are looming. They promise to put more police on the streets and make penalties for crime harsher despite the irrefutable evidence that neither measure has the slightest effect on the incidence of crime.

The current belief of law-makers and local authority regulators is that desexing dogs (as opposed to or as well as bitches) is an effective measure of canine control. It is agreed that there are too many unwanted dogs around, too many puppies are born, and that this problem can be solved by desexing canines generally. The case for desexing bitches is - with some reservations - a matter of commonsense and convenience for the owners of family pets. Ignorance about the bitch's cycle, of her season and the time for mating is so great that many bitches have puppies at their first season for no other reason than this.

What about desexing the dogs? When

people first enquire about our dog handling classes they tell me proudly that their dog is immunised, microchipped and desexed. "Why did you have it desexed?" I ask them. That beats them every time. Sometimes they really have no idea. It is the right thing to do. Often it is because the vet suggested it. Also if they got it from the pound or the RSPCA they may have been provided with a coupon to have the job done at a reduced rate. The cost of registration may be cheaper. In New South Wales now registration is once for life and it is cheaper to pay for an entire dog than for the operation plus lower Council rate. The conventional wisdom? The vets tell people that having the dog desexed will keep it from going over the fence. Nonsense!

Dogs are usually desexed after the testicles have descended when the masculine characteristics are developed. In human terms they are then eunuchs as compared with castrata. Eunuchs were originally guards in the harem where they could entertain the ladies with no untoward results. If a bitch in season is at large, the desexed dog will join the party like an entire dog. Breeders will use a desexed dog to tell them when a bitch they want to breed is ready to stand.

If the continuing over-production of puppies and the endless supply of dumped dogs is any guide, desexing dogs is about as effective in checking the flood of puppies as police on the street in preventing crime. In any case, it seems to me that the kind of people who have their pets desexed are the sort of responsible owners who do not let their dogs roam after bitches anyway and who have their bitches spayed before they can get into trouble. That is a subjective personal assessment based also on the grounds that the same kind of people bring their dogs to obedience classes. There is still lot of breeding stock at large - often literally.

But is it pursuit of sex that makes dog wander? In her excellent study of canine behaviour, 'The Hidden Life of Dogs', Elizabeth Marshall Thomas defines wandering as a territorial thing. She followed her Husky round the city. It could negotiate six-lane highways which she could not. It followed a regular route. Wandering is not confined to males. Five of the most committed wanderers I have known have been bitches, four of the desexed. Regulations are not going to stop innate wanderers any more than they will stop retrievers from retrieving.

One of the unfortunate effects of desexing is that it is reducing the gene pool of pure bred dogs. This is reinforced by the iniquitous provision now that puppies can be put on a limited register which means that they may

not be bred or shown. Since it is not easy always to determine the quality of puppies at the time of registration the limitation could well eliminate the best stock in the litter. It also supposes that show dogs are the only ones to breed with. Yet from the obedience ring and gundog and working dog trials may come the sturdy stock that infuses strength into the fenced-in purebred show world. It also assumes that people who buy the puppies may not become recruits to the dog fancy.

Had I had my Retriever spayed when I bought him as a pet and had he been on the limited register I would on present values have been about \$5,000 worse off and a whole new world of dogs - you could call a new career - would have been closed to me. These restrictions are a very high fence indeed because they exclude potential new recruits to showing and breeding. To put it kindly, the doyens of the dog fancy are not getting any younger.

Anyone who wants a pure bred puppy and is prepared to pay for it should be entitled to show it or breed it as they see fit. There seems to be no doubt that a case would succeed under Trade Practices legislation to have the limited register declared illegal as a restraint on trade.

Sadly the limited register provides fertile ground for breeders to proceed subject to no control by canine authorities, to breed bitches every time they come into season and to have no obligation to purchasers of the puppies. It is a licence to print money. 'Laundering' is often through pet shops.

One fence that is particularly restrictive and destructive is that of requiring hip x-rays of breeding stock before puppies can be registered, indeed before breeding goes ahead. Conventional wisdom is at its most formidable in this regard. As the vets kept telling us when all this started and we rushed to have our dogs x-rayed, hip dysplasia is just one factor among many. At most it is 50%, possibly as little as 25% genetically transmitted, that is by dogs that have developed the condition. The hereditary process is complicated and involves more than one generation. If every bitch had only one puppy at a time life would be simpler. But litters from 8 to 15 are by no means uncommon. The probability of a hereditary defect being transmitted when only one parent carries it is the sort of calculation to be done on a computer. The odds are not the sort you would bet on. In any case it is only a tendency that is transmitted.

The effect of the requirement for routine x-rays has had one interesting outcome. It has turned up many dogs with lamentable hip

scores who have never developed HD. We can all cite cases of dogs with conformation titles (on movement often) obedience titles, excellent working careers that have never been bred with because of their hip scores. Even their sires and dams have had acceptable hip scores. If they are bred their progeny are perfectly healthy. This restriction is crazy!

X-rays are a diagnostic tool. Hip problems show up in the growing dog. X-rays confirm hip dysplasia. So the dog is not bred with.

We know so much about the human race, how many births and deaths there are, year by year, the causes of death, life expectancy, differential statistics for country and city people, immigrant groups, Aborigine and Maori people, and comparative statistics for countries the world over. Dogs? We have virtually no overall statistics at all. Births and deaths? We know how many pure bred litters are registered with each controlling authority each year but how many pure bred dogs are there at large? We do not have collective veterinary statistics. We know virtually nothing about the hips of dogs in general let alone how many ever develop HD. But increasing we rely on x-rays to exclude breeding stock while at the same time increasingly in some breeds hereditary faults are coming through, like epilepsy and pancreatic disorders. No tests for those conditions! One breed at least is getting to be like those infamous German princelings!

You need depth of knowledge of your stock to know what faults are there. Yet people who hardly know a dog from a cat climb on the bandwagon of fashionable breeds, get their dogs x-rayed and so forth and into business. None of the tests applied to the dogs they breed with guarantees anything about their offspring. Hereditary disabilities still crop up even when the odds are 100 to 1 against it happening.

In the November 2002 issue of 'Science' there are three articles on the origin and domestication of dogs. They are very detailed and comprehensive studies carried out by international teams. They provide a wealth of information about the location and spread of dogs throughout the world going back 12,000 to 14,000 years. It saddens me that so much scholarship can be harnessed to study dogs 12,000 to 14,000 years ago when we know so little about dogs today.