

Ruminating on Sled-dog Welfare Guidelines



We were asked again, this week, to comment on some of the various guidelines that are being developed about animal welfare around the world.

I spent so long on the formulation of the reply, I figured I should share my thoughts, even though I know that they are contentious, since they apply across any set of guidelines that might be being developed.

Tethering vs Caging...the classic debate

With tethering and caging, I believe that the issues are probably quite different for each set of animals, and therefore I worry a little about any guidelines that try to develop mandates that work for camels, elephants, reindeer and sled-dogs under the same umbrella.

All I really know about, is sled-dogs.

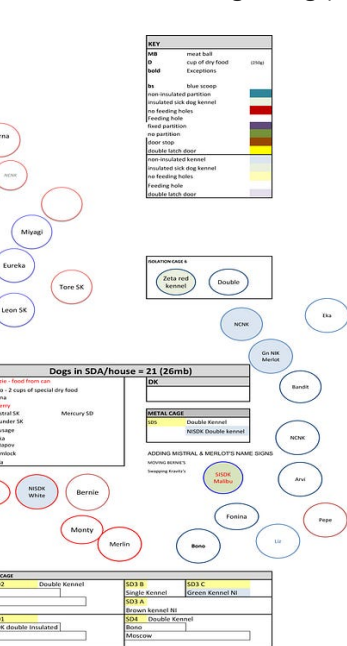
From a sled-dog perspective, the emotive anti-tethering PETA campaigns in the popular press are, to be honest, pretty frustrating.

Just as with so many successful popular press campaigns today, they are effective (you quote the US ban) in that they target an audience that doesn't really understand the subject in question and they focus on escalating emotions rather than utilising facts.

And, of course, it is totally understandable from a human, egocentric perspective, that in 2019, a raw image of tethering, especially if taken out of context, would appear 'wrong'.



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Our primarily qualitatively determined conclusions pretty much match those of the only independent (aka non-PETA-sponsored) scientific research into the pros and cons of chaining vs caging (with sled-dogs specifically) that we have been able to find.

We, like the Cornell study, found no clear advantage in tethering vs caging sled-dogs, per se. We found the pros and cons of both systems to be, rather, either dog-specific or situation-specific.

We would go a bit further and even say that we believe that we see benefit in sled-dogs being chained for a portion of their lives because of the learning potential involved in the process. The c. two months it takes to teach them to live without issue, through increased agility, on a flexible line, increases their safety when running with clients. They are then at far lower risk of injury from the line than those who have lived exclusively in cages.

And as I come to yet another day of writing this, 2 dogs (brothers) are brought up from the farm because they have fought in their cage and one requires staples in his ear. These two are very difficult rescue dogs.

Approximately 1/3 of our dogs are rescues from other farms that would have just killed them for reasons such as age, temperament, or athletic ability.

And that means that we do have quite a few dogs that are really challenging to find safe living mates for. I would not want to have to put them, alone, in a solitary cage, with a restricted view of the world. It is far better that they see that they are part of a larger pack, and live on an isolated chain until such time as we have found friends for them and either moved them to a non-isolated tether or — possibly, if they seem happier there than on a tether — a shared cage. For some, we just don't find a partner with whom they can live safely in a cage. For others, they are clearly more at ease, when on tethers, and do not, for instance, run in circles, but rather relax and watch over their wide domain.

Personally, I think it would be immensely sad, for a particular sub-set of our dogs and — by extension — for sled-dogs in general, if tethering was banned outright.

(Saying that it can only be used for a certain number of hours per day, seems to effectively be the same as banning it as a containment option).

And of course, it is hard for me to watch the one-sided debate win ground and to simply sit back and shrug my shoulders and say 'oh well', when the well-being of some of my dogs is at stake. (Hence why I have re-written this comment a whole bunch of times!). I think that this is a pretty universal feeling in the industry.

As you can imagine, we have talked a LOT about the subject of tethering (of sled-dogs) with vets and welfare boards across the industry and have even tried to generate more research in the subject.

I would love to have my qualitative judgements backed up with some quantitative data — even if that data were to disprove my initial conclusions.

(Ironically, in my thesis from my MSc from Oxford Uni, I was working on methods of taking qualitatively determined data (in a specific field) and presenting it quantitatively....maybe I should just apply for funding to do the research myself!).



JOURNAL OF APPLIED ANIMAL WELFARE SCIENCE, 4(4), 257-270
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A Comparison of Tethering and Pen Confinement of Dogs

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For now, though, it is obviously important that whatever we put into the guidelines has a sound scientific basis and isn't just based on numbers that are either arbitrary or taken from the opinions of a few people who happen to be involved (who again might not know much about the specific animals in question).

One thing that worries me with some of the guidelines that I have seen, for instance, is that the suggestion has been that the optimum living solution would be large cages with multiple dogs in them, so as to allow them to behave 'naturally' — but of course 'natural behaviour' in that scenario would be assertion of dominance through fighting until a hierarchy is established.

And yet I do not think that this is something that any of us would really want to encourage...

Off-season Stimulus...

One interesting thing I have observed over time, is that I believe that the caged dogs are in need of more 'out of ' cage stimulation than those tethered in circles...particularly in summer.

Caged dogs are literally barricaded away from human contact and therefore get far less interaction through the year from both clients and guides than the tethered dogs that can be approached, easily, by anyone wondering through our circles. Even at feeding, the tethered dogs get more contact with humans and they are at less risk of injury from fights from their cage mates (even on our farm, which is one of the few in Scandinavia that chains all caged dogs during feeding for this reason).

In summer in particular, the field of vision of the caged dogs is restricted in the good farms since they will have erected barricades between cages to prevent inter-cage fighting. The dogs tethered on circles, by comparison, have an unrestricted vantage over their whole domain and a much more stimulating and understandable (of what is happening around them) 'world view'. Hence, it could easily be argued (and I can do so below) that the chained sled-dogs have less need to free run in the off-season than the caged ones. And yet the last guidelines seemed to emphasise the need for the tethered dogs to have untethered time, and less emphasis was put on the caged dogs getting non-caged time.

In reality what we see is that some dogs that are totally relaxed when on tethers, are anxious and uncomfortable when in cages. And vice versa. And yet cages are important for the young dogs and for females in heat and for shorter-haired dogs etc. In other words, there are pros and cons of each system and I am worried that we are just moving away from tethers without sound reasoning.

Incidentally, whilst I don't think that it is realistic to say that the dogs have to free-run or be exercised every day, (since that doesn't happen, either with home-owned dogs), I do think there should be something in place to ensure socialisation and stimulation through the summer months.... but figuring out how to regulate this through the guidelines and an assessment process, is challenging. Anything that cannot be accurately assessed, substantiated or monitored, brings no added value to the guidelines.





And then you come to the overnight multi-day tour issues..

When out on multi-day tours, most sled-dogs are kept either singly or in pairs on short chains — or simply on their running lines — overnight, and they run and rest in those same lines, then, through the following days. In other words, they are on short lines or chains for most of the 24 hour period. We take any short haired dogs or in-heat females into the cabins with us but obviously the cabins are pretty tiny, so you are talking about a maximum of 6 out of 36 dogs and they are probably the same 6 dogs each night, for the same reasons. Some would argue that just as guides are pretty much working non-stop in such scenarios (different working rules apply for when working in wilderness settings than when working at base), so too, in that case, are dogs...so then maybe the 4 hour rule you are suggesting wouldn't apply?



To set the scene a little more; most companies work from cabin to cabin (or tent to tent) and most companies don't own the wilderness cabins they use so they cannot easily erect cages at these places. In many places, erecting any new structures in the wilderness would be completely banned and yet there are huge restrictions on where the companies can go, out of deference to reindeer herders and nomadic rights, so the options for change of route or cabin, even by those companies that would wish to do so, are pretty limited. Similarly, it would take years of planning and negotiating for the right to build cages in the wilderness before there could be any realistic change on the multi-day tours, even assuming that the right would be granted (unlikely in many locations), so I just wonder about the whole clause and how to word it in a more useful way for sled-dogs?



Most problematic of all is that even if there were any guidelines pertaining to these types of tours, they would be pretty unenforceable since no-one is going to have the money to send assessors out to the wilderness locations to check what the reality is. Hence, although guidelines shouldn't just ignore this issue, at the same time, whatever they say has to be realistic or they have no practical use.

And then I come to the concept of 'number of hours' of tethering / working etc.

You say that you can find no 'guidance or evidence as to the minimum **duration** of tethering'...And I agree. But my conclusion from this would be to move away from the whole thing until we understand more about it, rather than trying to come up with an arbitrary number of hours that we should enforce. In the meantime, we should also think about practical alternatives in real world scenarios for situations in which they are currently tethered (for instance on overnight journeys).

I have seen some guidelines in which '4' has been an — I am guessing, arbitrary — number used against acceptable number of working hours per day or against the number of hours, per day, in daytime, in which tethering on short chains is OK. However, I guess I am always curious as to how such numbers are generated and if they are simply plucked from the air, or from the thoughts of a few concerned (but not necessarily knowledgeable) individuals, they add no value to the debate.

Few people with sled-dog specific knowledge, would agree that 4 hours work per day, is an appropriate guideline for them... whereas maybe it is, for other working species. There has been quite a lot of research with the US army and sled-dogs, for instance, looking at their endurance capabilities to see what it is, about them, that makes them so different from other animals. Of course, a critical aspect of how they perform — and with what level of comfort they can work for however many hours — comes down to how they are trained in preparation for the season....

THE DUNNING - KRUGER EFFECT

The more you know, the less confident you're likely to be. Because experts know just how much they don't know, they tend to underestimate their ability; but it's easy to be over-confident when you have only a simple idea of how things are. Try not to mistake the cautiousness of experts as a lack of understanding, nor to give much credence to lay-people who appear confident but have only superficial knowledge.

"The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are so certain of themselves, yet wiser people so full of doubts." - Bertrand Russell



So far, few of the guideline drafts that I have seen have tackled this subject. Some of the heaviest demands on the dogs occur at the start of the season (eg with the December charter products) and therefore the dogs have to be literally ready to 'hit the season running'...and yet we steer clear of talking about what distances they should have 'under their belts' in order to be able to do this safely and with minimal chance of injury. (In other words with good metal, physical and skill-based preparation).

An Example Product

Just as an example, a pretty common product for many sled-dog companies in December, for instance, is to work for charter airlines who fly in for the day with eg 'last-wish' children and family groups wanting to see Santa. In one way, it is absolute mass tourism but if you think about the bigger picture, it happens for c. 12 days per year, and provides an absolutely critical source of annual income, in December, after 7 months in which the companies have had pretty much zero chance to earn anything towards the upkeep of their farms.

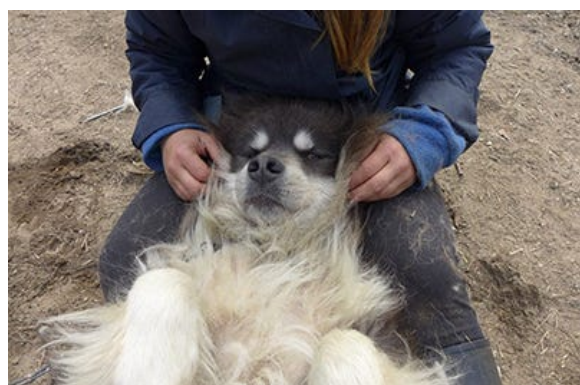


In those tours, guides and dogs spend 7–9 hours in one location (generally away from their home base where there are kennels) and the better companies will watch the dogs carefully and rotate the dogs through the loops depending on their age, fitness or just how they look and are performing on that day. They are not running that whole time, but are rather running loops when there are tourists and waiting when there are not. There are peak times and lag times between the program that often starts at 1pm (already in the dark) and finishes at about 9pm.

Resting dogs will rest on short travel chains whilst the others are running their stop, start product. Each round has a minimum of 2 minutes rest in-between, as families swap into and out of sleds. Some rounds might have up to 10 or even 30 minutes in-between, during lull periods.

We occasionally swap whole batches of dogs mid-product but that doesn't happen often since it is logistically impractical.

Other companies will keep the same dogs working throughout since it takes an additional member of experienced staff to be present, if the dogs are to be rotated systematically.



Assessors would never be granted access to such products since there simply wouldn't be time, and anyway, the dogs are generally subcontracted by subcontractors and non-contracted parties are not allowed on site. Anyway, I just use this example of a typical product throughout Lapland, since it would be hard to enforce the suggested guidelines against it.

Lifetime Commitment

For me, accountability for the full natural life of the animal is the biggest challenge in the industry...far more so than tethering.

Accountability in breeding and 'retirement' is impossible until all farms are required to chip the dogs and be accountable to someone (local vet?) for those that have 'disappeared' from one year to the next. I hope that there is something like this in your guidelines. This is something that actually would be enforceable with very little effort on behalf of everyone. In Sweden they require that greyhounds are chipped and they are not allowed to be put down before a certain age, unless the vet determines that there is a medical need to do so. I think this is a big thing that we could be pushing.

Of course, some vets will still just put down 12–15 dogs at a time and argue that otherwise they would just be shot / maybe it is better to put them down if the company cannot afford to keep them....but of course the company is then replacing them with newer dogs who can work more, so I do not see that as a valid argument. We should be absolutely advocating for a whole-life commitment of care and records which show what happens to the old and sick.

Veterinary Access

Another important issue is veterinary access, of course. But who can determine how much someone should spend on one dog? We just took a rescue pup to Helsinki assuming she would have a €2000 operation with a 96% chance of success. For a few days, it looked like the prognosis had changed to a €3000 operation with 50% chance of success and we were struggling over the decision until the conclusion from the vets was it wasn't operable. Many farms have a €200 limit. What is right? How do we monitor this?

We just took a dog from another place, pregnant, and realised that she had a huge tumour. We terminated, since the pregnancy would have accelerated the spread of the cancer, and then removed the tumours. The other farm said that they would take her back, keep the pregnancy (since they wanted the pups) and then just put her down once the cancer spread. What is the ethical thing to do?



One big issue I had with one assessment we had against a test set of guidelines, was that we were to be marked down if any dogs will ill or injured. And yet in any given population of X number of animals, a certain percentage SHOULD be ill or injured or arthritic or etc or then that tells you that all sub-optimal individuals have simply been eliminated.

Similarly, there should be shy dogs, aggressive dogs etc....all things that the farms were supposed to be marked down for, if present.

Designing a guideline assessment protocol that looks for a certain percentage of individuals to have issues, is something that I have been working on developing. There are some existing protocols that can be utilised (for instance with pigs as farm animals).

What there shouldn't be, are badly scared faces from fights that haven't been appropriately dealt with...but those kind of clues as to what is really happening 'behind the scenes' takes much more skill to assess..

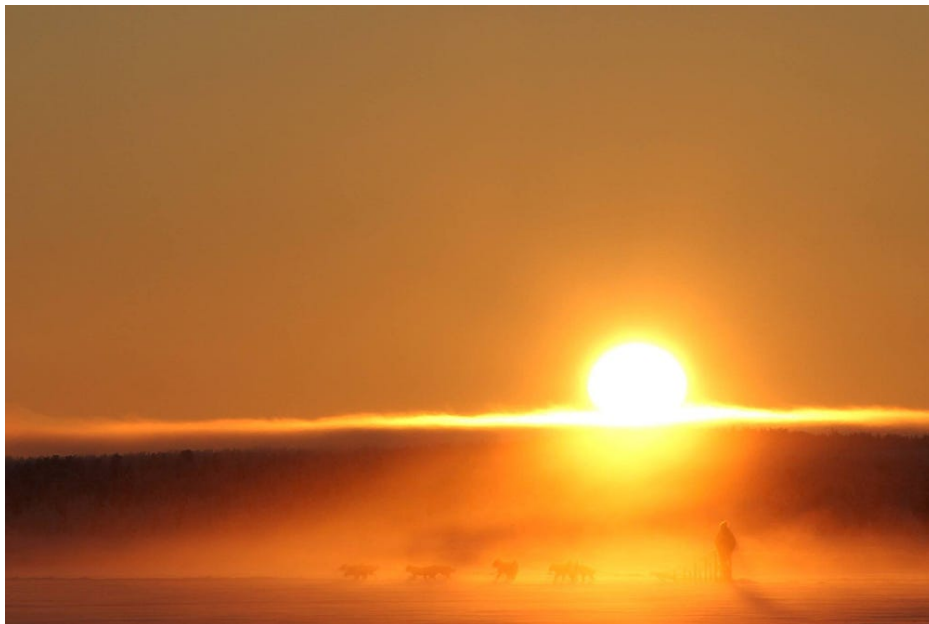
Value-Added, or not, in Universal Definition and Application?

I guess one general comment that I have is that although I understand the need to come up with universal welfare guidelines for simplicity's sake, it still makes me pretty wary about their utility, given the differences in welfare needs of the animals in question, (particularly given the lack of species-specific expertise by the assessors).

Anyway, I really hope that we come up with something that is relevant to, and of benefit to, sled-dogs, so that it can then be supported by the industry and take us one step further in the right direction. To this end, this has been written in a spirit of hope and with an open mind about questions so-far unanswered and tools that still need to be developed with care and thought and without a pressure to come up with 'something' in order to hit a timeline goal.

2022 Study Analysing 'Happiness' states in cages vs house vs circles using standard animal welfare indicators

Initial findings from a film-based research study carried out in 2021-2022 with the dogs at Hetta Huskies determined that the dogs living in cages were actually more stressed / anxious as a result of their housing type than those on circles - although they were also more sociable and attention seeking, and that the tethered dogs were, on the whole, more explorative and curious. We are looking forward to hearing more about the findings when published.



Anna