

Animal control beefs up

By **SORAYA GUTIERREZ**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

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'We're not the dog catchers of the past.'

MICHAEL SHARP, ANIMAL CONTROL OFFICER

Animal Shelter
✓ It can be an ugly job, but Michael Sharp, 42, loves being an animal control officer.

"The breadth of what we do is a lot broader than, I suspect, most people realize," he said while on a recent patrol through the county, during which he tangled with a growling feral cat, and checked on reports of pit bulls on the loose and a case of a possibly neglected chow chow.

The Santa Cruz County Animal Services Authority, with a \$2.8 million annual operating budget and a combined 6,500 animals housed at shelters in Scotts Valley and Watsonville, has added five new animal control officers during the past year to boost service, from more park patrols to cruelty investigations, said Todd Stosuy, field manager.

"I couldn't be everywhere at once," said Stosuy, who covered all patrol areas before he got the OK to beef up his department.

The move was prompted by numerous complaints from the public, tired of a slow response to calls for service.

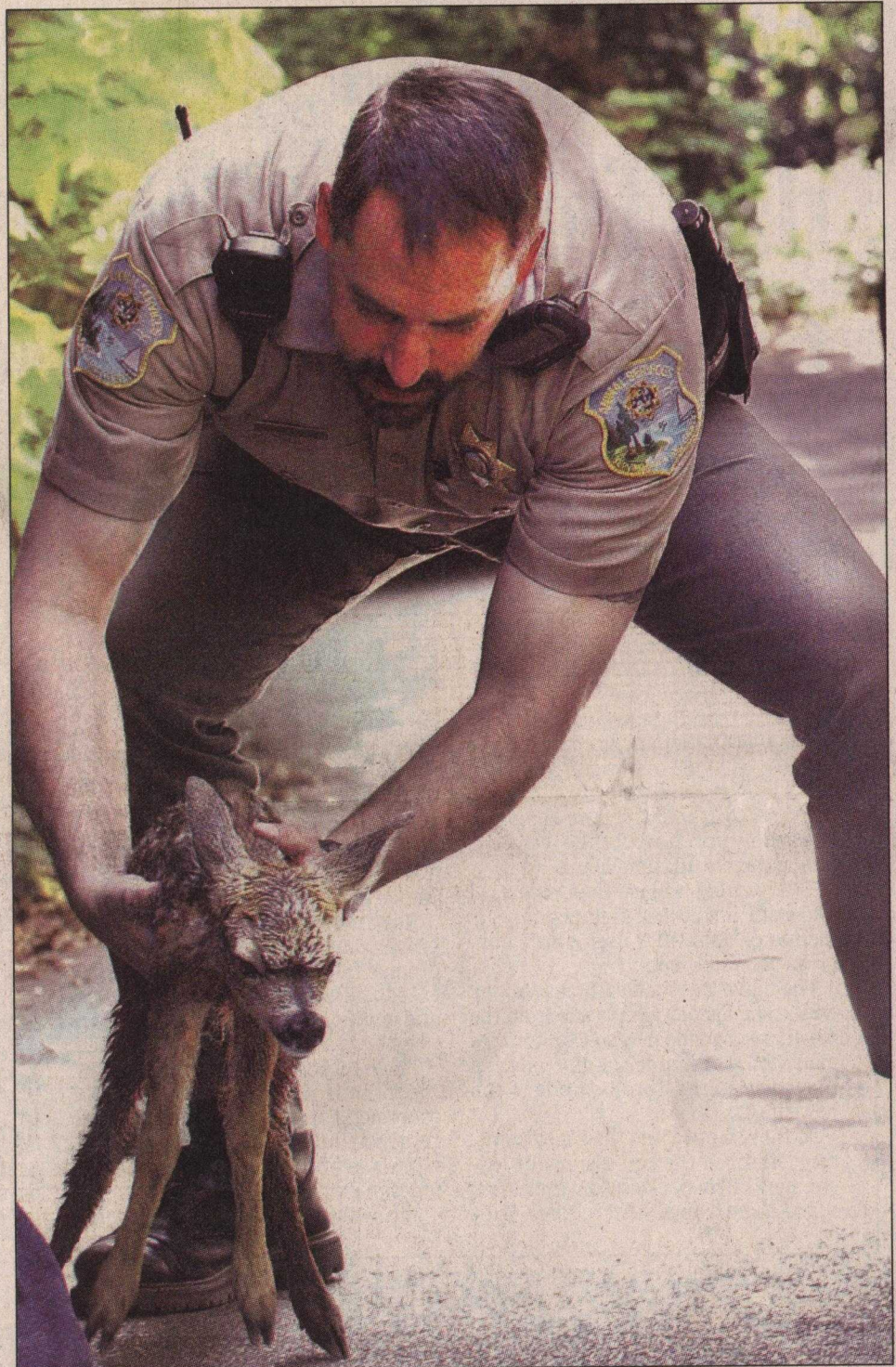
"The community itself knows how important animal control is," Stosuy said.

With community support, Stosuy was able to secure funding from each city the agency contracts with to boost his staff from one officer — himself — to six. By 2008, Stosuy hopes to hire another two officers to fully staff his department, which is part of the agency's overall staff of 30 full-time employees.

Already, he said, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of dog licenses sold. The agency also has been able to delve deeper into investigations, including the confiscation of nearly 50 roosters from a Watsonville home in March after their owner pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of possessing fighting cocks.

The addition of officers also has fueled resistance from some dog owners, who are unhappy about a crackdown on the county's leash and licensing laws in parks where their dogs used to roam without consequences.

Issuing citations, Sharp said, is not an officer's top priority. Their main role is to promote responsible pet ownership by taking a proactive approach. When efforts to correct or



Kate Falconer/Sentinel

Animal Control Officer Michael Sharp picks up a fawn on Glenwood Cutoff so he can take it to Native Animal Rescue.

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stop problems don't work, citations are written, and some people are taken to court in severe cases of animal abuse or neglect, he said.

"We're not all that hard core out there," he said while on patrol last week.

At the Santa Cruz Veterinary Hospital on Soquel Drive, the staff is happy to see Sharp walk in the door while on patrol. They've been waiting for him to take a feral cat away.

As soon as Sharp opens the animal's cage, it lets out a low growl, which escalates to a hiss as it swipes its paw at him.

At that point, it's time for the bite gloves, made of a thick material to protect him when handling "iffy" animals, from possums to raccoons.

Sharp's other must-have items: pepper spray, snake tongs, wire cutters, antibacterial lotion and a bite stick, which looks like a police baton.

After a brief struggle with the feral cat, Sharp gets the feline into a net and locked in a portable cage. A stench fills the air in the small holding room.

"You just deal with a lot of unpleasant smells in this job," said Sharp, beads of sweat forming on his forehead as he puts the caged animal in a storage bin in the back of his white truck.

When pet owners see his truck pull up to their home, they're not as pleased as the hospital staff. But by the end of the visit, Sharp has made clear to them the importance of dog licensing, rabies shots and other health issues.

By late afternoon, Sharp has sold three dog licenses to the owner of the pit bulls. At \$20 apiece, that brings in \$60 that goes directly to the county shelter.

"We're not the dog catchers of the past," Sharp said.

The demands of his job as an animal-control officer these days are focused on humane education, preventative patrols and follow-up calls, he said.

The officers go through exten-



sive training to prepare for the job, such as euthanasia certification, pepper spray and firearms courses.

In the past, Sharp has been dispatched to shoot deer that have been struck by vehicles and weren't expected to recover from their injuries.

That's part of the job's ugly side, he said, yet animal control is also the most rewarding work he has done.

"What I enjoy the most is helping animals in whatever way," he said.

Contact Soraya Gutierrez at sgutierrez@santacruzsentinel.com.

Animal Control Officer Michael Sharp, above and right, inspects a fence that needs repair. The homeowner's dogs were escaping their yard and wandering their Boulder Creek neighborhood.

Kate Falconer/Sentinel photos

