

REPORTS & COMMENTS

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Animals

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Pit Bull Hysteria Mauls Northern California

SINCE A 2-year-old boy was mauled to death by a pit bull in Morgan Hill two weeks ago, public hysteria over the maligned breed of dog has bitten Northern California.

Throughout the region, pit bull owners have been voluntarily turning their dogs in to animal shelters to be destroyed because of pressure by neighbors to get rid of the dogs. In general, many people have been reacting to pit bulls as if they were demons instead of dogs.

Moves are afoot to pass "vicious dog" ordinances in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, and there was talk of banning the dogs altogether in several localities, including Morgan Hill. In Seaside, police officers gunned down two pit bulls after allegedly being "terrorized" by them.

In Santa Cruz County, the phones have been ringing at the SPCA with

alarmed citizens expressing concern over pit bulls in their neighborhoods. And local fears have been magnified by two pit bull attacks on children and pets in Watsonville.

Despite the hysteria, there is little local organized effort to get tough on pit bulls or their owners. What the city and county do have is fairly standard vicious dog ordinances that require owners to keep their animals muzzled or kept on a leash. The city of Watsonville is considering a stricter ordinance aimed specifically at pit bulls after two recent attacks there.

There are about 150 licensed pit bulls in the county, but since licensing generally represents only about 10 percent of actual numbers, it is estimated there are at least 1,500, including a sizable population in the San Lorenzo Valley. The SPCA reports that about four or five dogs, mostly



This pit bull is on death row at the local SPCA for killing a kitten and biting a child in Watsonville.

pit bulls, have to be destroyed each year due to their aggressive behavior.

The debate over whether pit bulls are dangerous is nothing new. In

response to U.S. Humane Society reports that pit bulls have killed five people this year and were responsible for seven of the 13 dog-related deaths last year, 35 communities nationwide have introduced ordinances designed to make it very difficult to own the dogs.

Although most of the attempts at banning pit bull ownership have been struck down as unconstitutional, one judge in New Mexico has upheld such a ban because the pit bull breed displays "aggression, viciousness, unpredictability, and savageness" not found in any other dog.

SPCA officials, the president of the Santa Cruz Kennel Club and pit bull owners contest the argument that the dogs are either inherently vicious or have been bred for viciousness.

"Pit bulls have been bred to attack other animals but be friendly to people," said Judy Cassada, SPCA education director. "When they attack children they may think they are attacking a small animal. But their jaws are twice as strong as any other dog, so they can inflict horrible damage."

Lisa Mazzei is a Rio Del Mar resident who has owned a 4-year-old pit bull mix since it was a puppy.

"It's all in how the owner treats the dog," said Mazzei. "My dog has the sweetest temperament imaginable, and he gets along fine with two cats and a rabbit. If you treat any dog with meanness, it's going to be a mean dog. But if you love the dog, it's going to be sweet."

Connie O'Donnell owns two pure-bred Staffordshire bull terriers, one of three pure strains under the classification (the vast majority of what are known as pit bulls are mutts).

"There are obviously quite a few people with a macho complex who are raising pit bulls to be vicious," said O'Donnell. "They get off on the dog's reputation and all the media hype surrounding it. But I've been around pit bulls for years and I've done a lot of research on the subject, and innately these dogs are no more aggressive than any other breed.

"They were originally bred in England 200 years ago as an all-purpose family dog. Unfortunately they have developed an undeserved reputation and some dog owners are exploiting the situation." •

—Kevin Hanson