

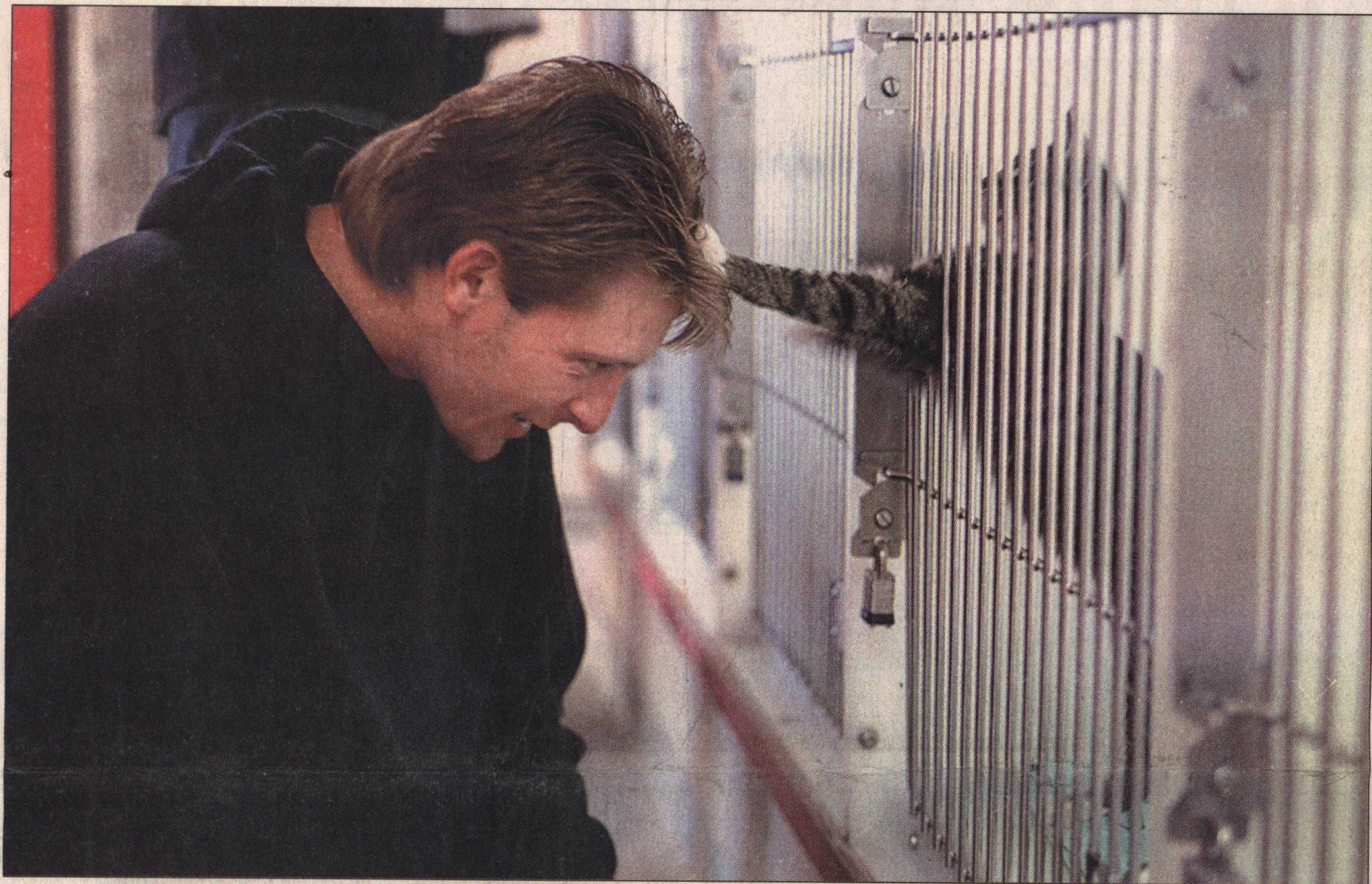
# Love at first bite



**LEFT:** Despite the fact the local SPCA has done an exemplary job reducing the number of animals needing adoption, there are still plenty of animals, like this trio of 2-month-old puppies, waiting for a good home.

**BELOW:** Damian Biondi gets the attention of Wyatt, a 6-month-old kitten waiting for adoption at the SPCA Sunday afternoon. Another visitor to the shelter adopted Wyatt before Biondi could take him home.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos



## Santa Cruz SPCA reports 70 percent adoption rate

By **CATHY REDFERN**  
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*Animal Shelter*

County animal lovers are doing something right, according to recent figures from the Santa Cruz Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Last year an all-time low of 5,864 animals were taken to the shelter, Executive Director Henry Brzezinski said.

The 2001 number contrasts with the 8,192 animals taken to the shelter in 1998, and the shelter's reported 70 percent adoption rate is double the national average.

Brzezinski says years of building local programs and awareness has led to a 10 percent decline in euthanasia.

"I believe the guardians of animals out there are becoming more responsible," he said. "This is not the old days when

**'I believe the guardians of animals out there are becoming more responsible. This is not the old days when animals were allowed to run at large and breed randomly.'**

HENRY BRZEZINSKI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SANTA CRUZ SPCA

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SPCA strategies include increased sterilizations, a growing number of foster guardians for recuperating shelter animals, a microchip tracking system, increased counseling for pet owners and education efforts.

Patrols by animal control officers have remained about the same although some positions were added in the agency's last contract, in 1999, several are unfilled and turnover is high, he said. This year

Brzezinski plans to ask for funding to boost salaries.

About 75 percent of the agency's animals are brought in, and the shelter is full most days because they tend to keep animals longer if they have room.

Veterinarian Rachel Meyer of Santa Cruz Veterinary Hospital agrees there has been "a huge" change in national responsibility by pet owners and points out that pet ownership has hit an all-time high of more than 50 percent nationwide.

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"I'm very impressed with the agency," said Meyer, who worked at the Humane Society while attending Cornell University. "They are definitely at the forefront of some of the programs to increase quality adoptions."

However, a burgeoning cat population, especially among feral cats, and animal neglect and abuse cases continue, Meyer said.

Spaying and neutering of pets has increased, she said, though misconceptions remain.

"We do see some individuals, and sometimes they are male, who don't want to castrate their animal, but we try to convince them (of the medical and behavior benefits)," she said.

In 1999, facing new state animal protection laws, the SPCA got a \$1.2 million

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# Shelter

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boost spanning three years after months of contract negotiations with area governments.

The SPCA sought the increase to strengthen adoption and other programs and threatened to discontinue animal control services if they didn't get it.

One of the programs now thriving is the foster guardian contingent that buys animals time to heal at a volunteer's home, Brzezinski said.

The SPCA also started a tracking system in 2000, and adopted animals now come with a microchip that can later be used to trace an animal's owner.

Several animal-protection laws also were passed in the last 10 years, Brzezinski said.

They include a 1994 county ordinance that requires dogs and cats 6 months old and older in unincorporated areas to be spayed or neutered unless owners purchase a \$15 "unaltered animal certificate" that necessitates a statement by a veterinarian.

Also, a 1998 state law extended the mandatory hold periods on shelter animals and another 1998

state regulation required that all dogs and cats be sterilized before they are adopted.

Local SPCA education efforts include an increased amount of school visits by the agency's "humane educator" and onsite obedience classes.

Workers also do a fair amount of counseling, sharing harmony-inducing strategies designed to allow pet owners to keep their pets, Brzezinski said.

For serious behavior issues they pass out referrals to local "animal behaviorists," he said.

In Santa Cruz, the SPCA finds homes for 85 to 90 percent of its healthy, "adoptable" animals with manageable or no behavioral problems, and 70 percent of all animals taken in, said Caitlyn Toropoza, SPCA public affairs coordinator.

"We're very proud of that, but it's not perfect," she said. "Part of that is (the support of) the community and part is great programs."

In Santa Cruz last week, some 141 animals called the 3-acre shelter home, including guinea pigs, rabbits, an iguana, a chameleon, some goats and the resident donkeys, Nestor and Jenny.

However, Chunky, the pot-bellied pig, has been snatched up by

a farmer who lives in the hills above Los Gatos.

But don't confuse Chunky with the "domestic pig" that eluded animal control officers for several weeks in the San Lorenzo Valley.

A few years ago, two standard poodles were found wandering the beach at Rio del Mar, and though their collars were dumped by the thieves who stole their owner's van, one of the dogs was traced to its Oregon owner by a tracking chip, SPCA volunteer Marcy Albert.

Albert, a Soquel resident, has adopted two cats and two dogs and said she wouldn't want the emptiness of a home devoid of four-legged friends.

She adopted Mocha from the shelter last month, after previous owners found the standard poodle too aggressive, even after sending him away for expensive training.

"He really only needed a place to play," she said. "Usually it's the people that need the training."

Problem areas remain for SPCA workers, including rural areas such as the Santa Cruz Mountains, where people seem more inclined to insist on free-roaming animals, Brzezinski



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Efforts by the local SPCA have reduced the numbers of animals needing to be adopted.

said. "There will always be a segment that isn't responsible, and ultimately taxpayers pay for it," he said. "But there were times when we took in 10,000 animals

and a decline shows things can work in a positive light for animals."

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