



## Dog breed bans ignore the real problem

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If you want to understand how little influence you have in the world, try telling another man's dog what to do.

Perhaps the reason dogs are our best friends is because they do what we tell them to for nothing more than a pat on the head or cookie.

These notions should colour the debate about owner responsibility and the danger of specific breeds that have arisen after another incident in which a pit bull attacked a passing dog.

This time it was a Labrador retriever on the receiving end as it passed the home of a mixed-breed pit bull that has had brushes with the law in the past.

Despite a Nanaimo bylaw that placed restrictions on that dog because of the earlier attacks, it was running free and was not muzzled.

That has some people thinking it may be time to follow the lead of jurisdictions that have an outright ban on so-called dangerous breeds.

Pit bulls are always at the head of that list.

There aren't many among us who wouldn't cast a wary eye when confronted by the muscular and stearn-looking pit bull, but the ability of the dog to inflict damage is only part of the argument.

How far a city or province needs to go in banning certain breeds to eliminate danger isn't an easy question to answer because once we say the dog is bad, we're absolving the owner of responsibility.

"Generally speaking, we find that dogs, when given a basic obedience class, are 89% less likely to be involved in a dog-bite incident," says noted dog behaviour expert Dr. Stanley Coren.

No one taking part in this conversation is suggesting the dogs be allowed to run wild, attacking other animals and people.

It is also logical to say that some specific dogs, either through training or breeding, may simply be too mean to be redeemed.

But if Nanaimo's bylaw can't keep a mean dog with a history of attacks leashed in the backyard or

wearing a muzzle, then it may be time to come up with a something that has a little more bite.

Owners of any dog, whether it's a muscled-ripped, 80-pound pit bull or a jittery, eight-pound teacup poodle, must take responsibility for that animal.

The big dog is going to do more damage when he lashes out, but each owner has an equal responsibility to the animals and people who inhabit the same space.

Coren and local animal-care workers favour efforts that clearly establish this priority of responsibility for dog owners. Suggestions such as a graduated licensing for animals that have or have not completed obedience training makes a lot of sense.

So does mandatory muzzling of those dogs whose owners haven't bothered to teach them right from wrong.

And let's not forget that it's already prohibited to let your dog run free, except on your own property or in designated off-leash areas within the city.

Mean dogs, whether they are pit bulls or another breed, will always exist. Worse, they will most times be owned by a jackass who puts his own sense of machismo ahead of the safety of other people and animals.

But as a society we have chosen to share our lives with domesticated animals and that comes with some inherent risks.

Dogs bite. It's a fact of nature.

We must do all that we can to limit the danger but there is sound research and anecdotal evidence to point us in the right direction to deal with this reality. There are people who have dedicated their lives to understanding this and they want nothing more than to help us solve this problem.

Banning all derivations of the pit bull may seem like the simple answer to this problem, but once eliminated from the picture it would only serve to illustrate that other dogs can sometimes be mean and scary, too.

The only way that a ban is the answer to this question is if we agree to ban all dogs. And we suspect that most people aren't yet ready to give up their best friend.

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