

Defending the Shell island dog issue

Panama City News Herald

SECTION:Viewpoints , May 25, 2007

By Stephanie Somerset

An op-ed column by a Panama City Beach resident presents an excellent opportunity to dispel inaccurate information regarding pet-friendly recreation ("Community should vote on Shell Island dog issue," May 23).

Michael Monahan suggests that dog owners advocating for outdoor areas they can enjoy with their four-legged family members are a vocal minority unduly influencing public policy. Fact: Dog owners are 40 percent of the American population. When asked, more than 95 percent of a random selection of Bay County's citizens agreed to sign the Bay Families with Dogs' petition supporting recreation with family dogs at Shell Island.

Monahan suggests that aggressive dogs menace beach-goers. Fact: There never has been a dog-related injury at Shell Island reported to law enforcement or animal control authorities. Many of the beachgoers at the island are drawn to the dogs like magnets, and go out of their way to pet them while reminiscing about a favorite dog they once loved.

Monahan suggests that dog owners exhibit hostile behavior. Facts: Pet owners have lower blood pressure (Friedmann, 1983; Anderson, 1992). Pet owners have better psychological well-being (Serpel, 1990). Pet owners have better physical health due to exercise with their pets (Serpel, 1990). Dogs are preventive and therapeutic measures against everyday stress (Allen, 1991). Pets decrease feelings of loneliness and isolation (Kidd, 1994) and 70 percent of families surveyed reported an increase in family happiness and fun subsequent to pet acquisition (Cain, 1985).

Monahan suggests that action must be taken to prevent some imagined future problem. Fact: Boating families had already been peacefully and quietly enjoying Shell Island with their dogs, and with non-dog owners, for generations. They are the ones who have kept it in the pristine condition the writer values.

Monahan suggests that dog scat might be problematic at Shell Island. Fact: The St. Andrews State Park management plan identifies humans, not dogs, relieving themselves as the main source of "non-native scat and disturbance of dunes" at Shell Island. No data is available for how many of the estimated 110,000 humans who visit the island each year pick up after themselves. Native scat is deposited by coyotes that hunt at night and destroy bird nests in search of the eggs to eat.

Monahan also suggests that it is inappropriate and an abuse of public policy to allow pets on any public beach. Fact: Most coastal counties in Florida allow pets on certain beaches. Bonus fact: Florida state parks, including St. Andrews, allow pets — so the letter writer could visit the state park with a pet tarantula if he so desires.

Monahan then suggests that Shell Island is a wildlife sanctuary. Fact: It isn't. The park owns a portion of the island, and its management plan states that "public outdoor recreation and conservation is the designated single use of the property." The wild birds have always coexisted with people boating, jogging, fishing, kayaking, flying kites and enjoying other activities that people just love to do at the beach. Nests are typically in isolated areas and should be marked when found, so that they can be avoided.

Monahan suggests that people advocating for pet-friendly outdoor recreation don't reside in Bay County. Fact: Of the more than 1,700 petition signers gained by Bay Families with Dogs, 90 percent reside in or own property in Bay County.

Monahan suggests that allowing dogs on beaches will have a negative effect on tourism. Fact: The Travel Industry Association of America reports that more than 29 million Americans took their pets on trips of more than 50 miles in the past three years. Americans spent \$36 billion on their pets in 2005 (American Pet Products Manufacturing Association), making the pet industry the seventh-largest retail industry in the country. This is not lost on many communities such as Port St. Joe and St. George Island, which market their pristine beaches as "pet friendly."

Monahan is correct on one issue, however. Designating specific areas where people can recreate with their dogs will be the beginning of the end — the end of the discussion between citizens who want to be around their pets and those who don't. The 1,200-acre, seven-mile-long island is as good a place as any to demonstrate that everyone — even a family's dog — can have a place in the sun. We can all win.

And, of course, if the issue continues to stress Monahan out, getting a dog might help him relax and enjoy the paradise in which we all live.

