

Giving new meaning to Down Under

(Acknowledgement for possum photograph: *The Sunday Mail*, Gold Coast, Australia)

I am writing this column from the Gold Coast, Australia, where a possum of superior tastes has taken up residence under the bonnet of a Toowoomba family's new luxury Mercedes Benz and appears to be regarding this as a long-term project.

Although a bit startled, the family had found it rather amusing at first and had tried luring the little creature out with pieces of fruit, but then it became clear that the possum had chosen his new hangout with tenancy in mind and was not in the least inclined vacate it.

Professional catchers have had no luck in persuading him to change his mind. He simply returns and squeezes back under the bonnet. This has led to his being named Boomerang!

Possoms are strictly protected in Australia, and his rights actually supersede those of the family in this case, because possums must be relocated within 25 metres of where they were captured. This is to ensure that they are not removed from their familiar territory.

Christina Falla, mother of the family, says they are feeling quite desperate at not being able to use the new car for which they had saved for three years, but taking Boomerang along for the ride would be breaking the law, apart from possibly harming him. They have tried leaving a comfortable box as an alternative nest, but Boomerang has more expensive tastes, so the Mercedes remains in the carport, while the family has resignedly gone back to using their old car until they find a solution.

They have applied for a special concession from the Government to allow the 25-metre restriction to be waived temporarily. At the time of my writing this column, Boomerang has been residing under the bonnet of the new Merc for two weeks.

The difference an animal makes

Veterinarian Dr Michael Archinal, author of *Animal Wisdom*, refers to a 1996 Brisbane research paper entitled "A long-term study of elderly people in nursing homes with visiting and resident dogs". The study showed clear benefits for the residents, including noticeable "reduction in tension and confusion". Where there was a resident dog, there was also a "significant decrease in depression, a substantial increase in vigour, and a decrease in the level of fatigue". A resident dog was shown to be more beneficial than visiting dogs, but still had a definite positive effect.

Some years ago, a resident at one of our local retirement centres sent a letter to our *Pigeon Post* letter column in *The Animal Angle* saying that she had had enough of neighbours' barking dogs before moving from her former home and did not want to have to put up with them now that she was living in a place that should guarantee peace and quiet. But there are breeds that are not noisy, and older big dogs are usually fairly quiet.

A retirement centre is not a place for a lively puppy that requires the company of its own kind and needs plenty of exercise, but is ideal for an older dog needing love and attention and ready to give back even more than it receives. The lives of many older dogs could be saved in this way, and their presence would make all the difference in the world to animal-lovers pining after their pets.

This is something we should be talking about and asking for. It is hard enough for people to give up their homes, let alone give up the unconditional love of a precious animal.

Speak out for having resident dogs, especially older dogs, at retirement centres which have even a small amount of garden space. The SPCA tries always to fit an animal to any particular environment and will check that an adopted animal is being well looked after.

A resident pet is worth every cent it costs, and a donation box for veterinary expenses is likely to find many willing donors.

How we wish we, too, had "as long as it takes"...

The Animal Welfare League's Coombabah shelter in Queensland, Australia, takes in up to 45 animals a day. As with our Durban & Coast SPCA, many of the animals are not micro-chipped, which means that their owners cannot be traced. How dearly we would love to be in their position of having a "no euthanasia" policy, which is possible because of the financial support they receive and because they are able to keep animals until they are adopted. This can take many months.

At a large Animal Welfare shelter I visited on my trip last year, a notice as one entered the adoption area gave the happy information that the last euthanasia that had been necessary at the centre had taken place in 2008. This enviable situation becomes possible when people take responsibility for their animals; when cities are able to offer free neutering services; where there are not vast numbers of people battling poverty; and where animals are not cast out to create feral populations.

Few people realise the heavy emotional toll on those involved in the euthanasia of animals. Only members of the public can help us reduce the statistics by adopting if they can afford to do so and truly want an animal, and also by looking after those they have so that SPCAs and other animal welfare centres do not end up with so many lost and unclaimed animals.

Owing to their policy of re-homing every animal, unless beyond medical help, the Animal Welfare League's Coombabah shelter is usually full. On a really heavy day, they could take in up to 45 dogs and cats, some of which will be reclaimed by owners, of course, but they are able to re-home up to 70 animals each week. One has, of course, to take into account that they are operating in a largely privileged country, where one would expect a healthy adoption rate.

Australia is a noticeably dog-loving country. There are dog parks, where dogs of all breeds and sizes play together, and dedicated dog beaches, which have no commercial development and are kept unspoilt. Here, dogs race around in joyous freedom. Many happily frolic in the surf. Litter bins with bags (and strict municipal laws) keep the dog beaches free from faeces.

One can't help being struck by the number of dogs being walked at all times of the day. They sit under their owners' chairs at coffee shops or wait patiently outside on leashes. Holiday homes along the beautiful beaches up and down the coast are usually advertised as "dog-friendly".

About loving animals

As animal welfare agencies know only too well, income does not have much to do with kindness to animals. There have been horrifying cases in the most upmarket of areas, while there is often devotion to animals in the poorest of homes. A few months ago, I got to know about a dog called Facebook, who lives in Kwa Mashu. Facebook is much loved by his owner, Siphon, who puts Facebook's well-being before his own, although he is a part-time worker, struggling to make ends meet and always hoping for full-time employment. It is a joy to help out a bit with Facebook's diet, and a small thing to do.