

Pawns of Pot: The Coexistence of Marijuana and Animal Crimes

Dr. Kris Otteman DVM, Director of Shelter Medicine, Oregon Humane Society and Emily Davidsohn, Oregon

Abstract

Animals are commonly exploited by the drug using community, and investigation of this exploitation often leads to discovery of drug crimes. Guard dogs are utilized in the production and trafficking business and may spend their lives on a chain. Companion animals can be exploited by dealers as a means to control their customers. Marijuana does not cause people to commit animal cruelty, but animal cruelty and marijuana crimes are undeniably connected.

A timeless human and canine duo is Shaggy and his partner in crime Scooby-Doo. This pair entertains children as well as adults around the country with their crazy behavior. However, their antics are construed differently by children and more mature audiences. An internet search of "Shaggy and Scooby" paired with any slang word for marijuana returns hundreds of links. Adults enjoy the marijuana innuendos that can be interpreted throughout any given episode, such as the constant craving for "Scooby Snacks," the cloud of smoke billowing out of the Mystery Machine when the back doors open, and the constant paranoia both Shaggy and Scooby exhibit. Shaggy embodies the typical "stoner" portrayed most often through the media; a relaxed person who laughs easily and craves snack food often. This comedic duo, however, fails to demonstrate the reality of marijuana use and its link to animal abuse. The Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals found that people who abuse animals were **three** times more likely to have a record for drug or disorderly conduct offenses.⁽¹⁾ Marijuana does not cause people to commit animal cruelty, but animal cruelty and marijuana crimes are undeniably connected.

The Oregon Humane Society employs three full-time, police certified Special Agents who investigate animal cruelty in the state. When responding to complaints, it is not uncommon for the officers to encounter a suspect whom they believe to be under the influence of marijuana. It is imperative for animal investigators to collaborate with local law enforcement when drugs become a component of an animal abuse case.⁽²⁾ There is ample evidence that animals are commonly exploited by the drug using community, and investigation of this exploitation often leads to discovery of drug crimes.

A common exploitation of animals in the marijuana production and trafficking business is the use of guard dogs. These dogs spend their life on a chain on drug producing property and alert their owners when strangers approach. This exploitation easily crosses over into the realm of animal cruelty when those dogs are not provided "minimum care" as defined under Oregon law. Oregon requires that animals, at a minimum, be provided with sufficient food, water, and shelter.⁽³⁾ Failing to provide *minimum* care to an animal constitutes neglect, which is a misdemeanor in Oregon.⁽⁴⁾

Companion animals can also be exploited by dealers as a means to control their "customers." Similar to circumstances in domestic violence situations⁽⁵⁾, the dealer can threaten or actually injure a pet in order to get the animal's owner to give them what they want. In Oregon this type of animal cruelty, known as Aggravated Animal Abuse, is a felony.⁽⁶⁾ Although this crime is more severe and the injuries are more apparent, it is difficult for humane officers to investigate because drug users are not likely to come forward with their injured animals for fear of incriminating themselves and their dealers, as well as the daunting repercussions that would ensue.

Cases in Oregon substantiate the argument that investigating an animal cruelty complaint can lead to a crime involving marijuana. In March of this year, in Benton County, Oregon, a search warrant executed in a marijuana investigation led to the discovery of a dog fighting ring.⁽⁷⁾ In that case fourteen pounds of marijuana were seized as well as fifteen dogs.⁽⁸⁾ In the fall of 2009 an 18 year old from Corvallis, Oregon participated in the torture of a duck using a homemade blowgun and razor-tipped arrows, ultimately killing the duck by wringing its neck.⁽⁹⁾ Five days after the duck killing, the teen was charged with manufacture of marijuana, delivery of marijuana, and possession of marijuana.⁽¹⁰⁾

The coexistence of marijuana and animal abuse is also evident on a national scale. The now infamous Atlanta dog fighter, Michael Vick, tested positive for marijuana while under house arrest. Vick was responsible for severe cruelty to over fifty dogs, and the costs of rehabilitating the dogs in that case totaled \$928,073.⁽¹¹⁾ In 2009, Acea Schomaker of Lincoln, Nebraska trapped his six month old kitten in a homemade bong while he smoked in order to "keep it calm" because it was "high-strung."⁽¹²⁾ As recently as March of 2010, a teen from North Carolina was charged with misdemeanor animal cruelty for feeding marijuana to a pit bull.⁽¹³⁾

The presence of marijuana in animal cruelty incidents can be documented through cases over the span of many years. Just recently a young man rushed his large dog to the hospital at the Oregon Humane Society. The dog could not retain its balance and its personality was listless. The doctors treated the dog

with fluids and ran some tests but the next morning the dog was fine, showing none of the symptoms from the previous day. The doctors treating this dog suspected that it had ingested marijuana and impressed upon its owner that it would be important for the veterinarians to know if that were the case in order to treat the dog accordingly. True to the trend in investigations like this, the owner refused to admit to anything. In this case the dog was lucky and it survived; so many other animals that fall victim to this trade do not.

On the surface Shaggy appears to be a good dog owner; Scooby is neutered, socialized, and well fed. However, if Shaggy is in fact the "stoner" adult fans make him out to be then, in reality, there is a chance that Scooby is being exploited and abused behind the closed doors of the Mystery Machine.

Author Information

Dr. Kris Otteman, DVM

Dr. Kris Otteman, OSU graduate 1986, College of Veterinary Medicine, has enjoyed a diverse and challenging career in veterinary medicine. Post graduate Dr. Otteman returned to her home town in southern Oregon to build a three doctor mixed animal practice. During this 8 year stint she focused on client relationships, quality medicine and tracking medical AND service outcomes while building a high quality full service community hospital.

In 1993 Dr. Otteman and her husband Jeff moved to Portland, Oregon to join a veterinary school classmate and founded what was then called VetSmart and is now known as Banfield, the Pet Hospital. While with Banfield, Dr. Otteman worked as Vice President of Team Resources and Education. She worked actively in doctor recruiting and retention, development of support systems for training and hospital openings and completed many special projects including the 1999 merger of Banfield with PetSmart Veterinary Services.

Dr. Otteman's next career stop was with CAT Adoption Team - the Pacific Northwest's largest non-profit, no-kill cat shelter where she and her team have built an on-site full service medical facility to serve the needs of the cats and kittens in their care. During her five year tenure, she led CAT in the housing of about 600 cats continuously and the adoption of over 3000 cats in 2006. The shelter has grown at least 30% per year for the past 5 years in terms of rescue, adoptions, collaboration and medical services.

For the past 2.5 years Dr. Otteman has served as Director of Shelter Medicine for Oregon Humane Society. Her role at OHS includes oversight of the medical center and investigations department. The medical center provides services for the 10,000 animals that come to the shelter per year and provides a required course for OSU's College of Veterinary Medicine designed to provide valuable hands-on surgical and medical experience for 4th year veterinary students. The team handles animal neglect and abuse cases for the Portland community and collaborates with local law enforcement to address animal cases as well.

Dr. Otteman and family - including husband Jeff and children Jessica, Jarrett, and Kameron - make their home in Camas, Washington with their dogs Rose and Sky, cats Doodle, Pepper and Dolly and two horses.

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3. Or. Rev. Stat. § 167.310(6).
4. Or. Rev. Stat. § 167.325, Or. Rev. Stat. § 167.330.
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