

# Stephen Hume: When paws ignite passions

## Documentary takes on the darker and lighter sides of the fight between dog owners and the dogless

BY STEPHEN HUME, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST MARCH 19, 2013

true



Dogs and joggers: Here they get along, but new documentary also has darker tales.

**Photograph by:** Ward Perrin, PNG

Suggest that dogs and their owners are part of an emerging civic problem and the most pugnacious canine enthusiasts are instantly in your face, challenging everything from bite statistics to the prevalence or significance of pet excrement in the urban landscape.

But as *Dog Dazed: A Light-Hearted Search for Sanity in a Dog-obsessed World*, a new documentary by Vancouver-based film journalists Helen Slinger and Maureen Palmer, shows convincingly, there is indeed growing conflict – and some surprising solutions — as the owners of 84 million dogs compete with their dogless fellow citizens of North America for increasingly scarce and crowded public space.

This is fuelled not just by sentiment but by money — big money. The U.S. pet food and pet care industry, for example is a near-\$75-billion-a-year economic behemoth. Dog food sales alone are worth \$32.6 billion, according to one Canadian study. These markets expanded by almost 30 per cent between 2004 and 2009.

In the U.S. and Europe, more than 100 million households have at least one dog and most of them consider that dog an intimate family member. Perhaps that feeling drives the vehemence of the lobby promoting dogs' interests when they clash with the broader community's.

One of the issues that Slinger and Palmer raise is the growing propensity of dog owners to consider their canine pets as substitutes for human children. In the competition for adult affection, dogs appear to be outperforming Cupid. The documentary notes that while there are 38 million families with children in North America, there are now 42 million with dogs. Yep, and the dogs outnumber the kids, too.

*Dog Dazed* premieres on CBC's Doc Zone Thursday night. Neither dog lovers nor those who feel afflicted by dogs or just by the often-venomous canine politics dividing communities will want to miss it.

It travels from Vancouver's Stanley Park to suburban Toronto and from crowded New York to not-so-laid-back San Francisco.

The arguments are remarkably similar.

There are spat over dogs doing their business in public places – the documentary asserts that canine pets in Canada and the United States deposit 30,000 tonnes of excrement on city streets, beaches, playing field, trails, lawns, boulevards and parklands every day (and provides ample footage to back up the claim).

It's not all strife and gloom, though. The film keeps its sense of humour.

One amusing segment deals with a New Yorker who walked his local beach every night, collected the dog droppings left in the sand and delivered them to the steps of city hall in an attempt to get politicians to address the problem. He was charged with littering.

In another, a householder persuades previously recalcitrant dog owners into cleaning up by posting surveillance photos of offenders on his personal wall of shame.

And another segment reveals how a housing complex solved the problem by requiring dog-owning tenants to file a canine DNA sample, then holding them accountable for their pets' leavings by matching deposits with what's on file. There are uplifting tales of composting schemes and a park that used pet poop methane to power a street light.

The film doesn't pull any punches, though.

Another segment examines how converting a park to an off-leash area tore a Toronto community asunder – with one family moving to escape both the noise from the dogs and the poisonous atmosphere when off-leash rights were revoked because of complaints.

In California, political battles went ballistic as dog owners rallied against citizens who felt unsafe at the proliferation of off-leash dogs in a state park.

Other conflicts on the West Coast, including Metro, concerned off-leash dogs harassing wildlife, particularly nesting or migratory birds – or joggers – while owners seemed oblivious.

One Vancouver resident recounts for the camera how she was knocked down by two large dogs while out for a run. The owners leaned over — the dogs still had their paws planted on her chest and head — to assure her that she needn't worry, they were just friendly.

And a militant Vancouver dog owner summed up the notion that canine rights trump wildlife's with the comment: "Bottom line is that birds don't pay taxes, we do."

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