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A mixed-method survey to understand the role of dog welfare organisations in Ireland, including reported challenges and potential solutions

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Abstract

Background This novel study forms part of a larger research programme seeking an improved understanding of aspects of the owned dog population in Ireland. Dog welfare organisations (DWOs) in Ireland are recognised as an instrumental pillar of the animal welfare sector with some receiving substantial public funding. We conducted a survey of DWOs in Ireland ($n = 39$) to gain a better understanding of their role and function, including their policies and procedures and the rehoming of dogs to other regions. In addition, we wanted to get a better understanding of the challenges experienced by DWOs in fulfilling their role and their perspectives on potential solutions to these challenges. The survey questions consisted of closed and open-ended items. Closed items were analysed quantitatively; open-ended items were analysed thematically.

Results Most DWOs (> 80%) had written protocols for important welfare actions including rehoming procedures, assessment of owner suitability and euthanasia. DWOs sent dogs to Northern Ireland (13%), Great Britain (38.5%) and to other countries outside the United Kingdom (36%, including Germany, Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands and Czechia). Reported challenges included a general lack of funding, limited public awareness of the importance of dog welfare and insufficient capacity to handle dog numbers. To address these challenges, the DWOs highlighted the potential contribution of subsidised programmes and access to resources to educate potential owners. In a further qualitative evaluation to capture perceptions of appropriate solutions by DWOs, several themes emerged, relating to legislation, education, an overwhelmed workforce, and funding.

Conclusions This study provides important insights into the roles and functions of DWOs and challenges they experience in Ireland. It is hoped that the findings from this research will inform future research investigating potential solutions to these challenges as well as the development of policy in Ireland.

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Background

Many dog owners in Europe consider their pet to be a part of the family [1, 2], with 25–35% of Irish households reporting at least one dog in their home [3]. Canine welfare has subjective connotations for different people [4] and its safeguarding involves many interconnected components. Ultimately, maintaining dog welfare includes protecting animals from abuse and neglect, providing sanitary housing, providing an adequately balanced diet and clean water as well as disease control, vaccinations, and access to veterinary care, in addition to regular grooming and exercise [5, 6]. In addition, ensuring psychological and emotional well-being is a fundamental element of animal welfare including addressing an animal's behavioural needs such as exercising natural behaviour, interacting with its own species, and playing [6].

Previous studies on dog welfare have mainly focussed on the owner-dog relationship. Several studies completed in Ireland and Great Britain have highlighted limited awareness and knowledge among dog owners in relation to both guardianship fundamentals (i.e., correct feeding and exercise) [7–9] and the legislation applicable to dog ownership, such as dog identification and tail docking [10]. Anderson et al. reported that legislation in relation to companion animal welfare differed widely across 11 western jurisdictions [11] and studies have suggested that structured education campaigns could contribute to improvements in overall animal welfare. However, the scope of these campaigns are often limited to dog owner attitudes, beliefs and opinions influencing understanding and knowledge [11, 12]. Education while necessary, is not sufficient to ensure behaviour change and translation of knowledge into action. Michie, van Stralen and West describe the COM-B system, which is a behavioural system involving three essential conditions – capability, opportunity, motivation – and nine intervention functions aimed at addressing deficits in one or more of these conditions and interacting to generate behaviour change [13]. Other studies have considered how a dog's environment, training, and specific exercise (i.e., lead walking) can help to address behavioural issues in dogs, thus contributing to better animal welfare [14–18].

To date, there have been few peer-reviewed studies seeking an understanding of the characteristics of the owned-dog population in Ireland, including overall size and distribution. Downes et al. [19, 20] investigated aspects of dog ownership in Ireland in 2007. At that time, they estimated that 35.6% of Irish households owned one or more pet dogs. Dog ownership was associated with such factors as location, house type, household social class and composition, presence of children in the household, and the presence of a cat [19, 20]. Subsequent published work has mainly focused on Irish legislation and

controls [21, 22]. Most recently, Keogh et al. reported that among well-educated employees of an Irish University, there were low levels of awareness (both dog owners and non-dog owners) that key responsibilities of dog owners are stipulated under Irish law [10].

In Ireland, dog welfare organisations (DWOs) receive surrendered dogs from the public, assess dogs for suitability to be re-homed, re-home dogs, and educate potential dog owners. These organisations regularly communicate among themselves and with multiple stakeholders such as local and national government officials and An Garda Síochána (the Irish police and security service). An annual grant is also given to eligible DWOs (those with charity status as determined by the Irish Charities Regulator) by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM).

Due to the limited research available in relation to the role and challenges faced by these organisations, and their reliance on public funding, DWOs were chosen as the focus of this study. The current study is part of a multi-study research programme seeking to develop a robust evidence base in relation to the owned dog population in Ireland, including challenges and opportunities for dog ownership and welfare, and the role played by DWOs, noting that some may also care for other animal species. As part of this research programme, More et al. reviewed the usefulness of existing data sources to inform our understanding of changes to the pet dog population in Ireland, including those relating to biological (demographics, movement of dogs across national borders) and organisational (the roles of different organisations, regulatory and non-regulatory impacts, drivers of supply and demand) processes [23]. Further, Murphy et al. identified and explored the experiences of DWOs in Ireland using a qualitative study design integrating online focus groups and interviews [24]. In the current study, a mixed-methods approach was used to seek additional information in relation to DWOs in receipt of animal welfare grant funding in Ireland. In particular, the current study sought to describe the roles and functions of selected DWOs in Ireland using quantitative items, such as general information about the organisations, dogs under their care, and policies and procedures, coupled with qualitative free text options to explore the challenges faced by these organisations and the suitability of solutions available.

Methods

Survey design

A survey was developed to capture and gain a better understanding of the role and function of DWOs in Ireland, including their policies and procedures and the rehoming of dogs to other regions, in addition to the challenges they experienced in fulfilling their role and

potential solutions to these challenges. The scope and focus of the survey were informed by a narrative review of relevant literature [19], and detailed discussions within the research team. The finalised survey was developed using Qualtrics software (Qualtrics XM, USA), which is available upon request.

The survey was separated into four different sections including:

- General information about the DWOs,
- Information about the DWO's current policies and procedures,
- Information about the rehoming of dogs to other regions (Northern Ireland (NI), Great Britain (GB), and other countries) in 2019 and 2021, and
- The views of DWOs on the challenges they experience in seeking to positively impact the welfare of dogs, and of potential solutions to address these challenges. This includes the duty of owners to protect animal welfare, the prohibition of animal abandonment and cruelty, the regulation of particular surgical procedures, as well as the requirement of dog licensing, the prohibition of dog straying and dog by-laws, as reported by Keogh et al. [10]

The survey included both closed and open-ended items. Data were collected using 5-point Likert scale items, rank scales, dichotomous “yes” or “no” items, and multiple-choice questions with fixed-choice response options (multiple answers possible). Additionally, fixed-choice response options provided an “Other, (please specify)” item to obtain further qualitative data. Free-text items were included to capture qualitative insights from DWOs to support findings from the quantitative analysis and to provide further insights on proposed solutions to challenges they experience. The survey questions are included as [Supplementary material](#).

A pilot survey was conducted with individuals working within the dog welfare environment, to ensure items were understood as intended by the research team and conducive to reflecting participants' experiences. Following this pilot survey, the number of items in the survey was substantially reduced to alleviate participant burden.

Data collection

The target population included the 68 DWOs that received animal welfare grant funding from the DAFM in 2021. One representative per organisation was invited to participate in the study, which was conducted during March–April 2022. An initial email was circulated to a generic in-box for each of these DWOs to introduce and outline the purposes of the study. Subsequent to this initial contact, a representative from each of the responding

organisations volunteered to take part in the study on behalf of the organisation that they were affiliated with. In addition, weekly follow-up emails were sent for 3 successive weeks to encourage participation. To maximise participation, the survey was made available on three different platforms including a self-administered online version, an interviewer-administered version via telephone and a hard copy version (mailed to participants upon request).

With the online version, data were collected directly using the Qualtrics software. If participants opted to complete the survey via telephone or hard-copy questionnaire, their responses were manually inputted into Qualtrics by the first author (CMcK) and labelled accordingly. At the commencement of the survey, each participant was given an explanation of the purpose of the survey. Each participant was also given assurances that their answers would be treated confidentially, and their organisation would not be individually identified in any research. Exemption from ethical review was granted by University College Dublin (UCD) Human Research Ethics Committee (LS-E-21–279-More). Data collection was conducted in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines given in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Data analysis

The raw survey data were exported from Qualtrics into IBM SPSS Statistics version 26.0 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA) for analysis. The imported datasets were cleaned prior to analysis, and responses considered partially completed and/or duplicated were removed. Survey responses that did not progress beyond the consent items within 3 weeks of becoming active were recorded as 'blanks' and removed as no organisational information was obtained. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentages) were used to examine the data with confidence intervals obtained using exact methods and the method by Sison and Glaz for binomial and multinomial proportions, respectively [25, 26]. Free text survey items were imported to NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, Doncaster, Victoria, Australia) and data were analysed qualitatively using inductive thematic analysis [27].

The funding awarded to the 68 DWOs in 2021 was retrieved from publicly available information published annually by DAFM. The Odds ratio (OR) for the association between funding level and participation by these DWOs was estimated in order to investigate the potential for systematic differences in DAFM funding levels among those DWOs that did and did not participate in the survey. During this analysis, the DWOs were categorised by survey participation (organisations with completed and partially completed survey responses and

organisations with no participation) and 2021 funding level ($\leq \text{€}20,000, > \text{€}20,000$).

Results

The survey was circulated to all 68 eligible organisations. Two of these responses were completed via postal method, and the remaining participants completed the survey online. Initial cleaning removed blank responses ($n=13$) and duplication ($n=11$) from the database. Additionally, the responses of five DWOs who partially completed the survey were not included as the proportion of the survey completed was between 2 and 24%, indicating that the participant did not progress beyond providing general organisation information such as name and location. Therefore, 39 DWOs providing complete responses, equating to a 57% response rate.

With respect to all 68 DWOs, there was a slight negative association between participation and 2021 funding level ($OR=0.9$; 95% CI: 0.3, 2.4). The estimate is imprecise and the confidence interval is compatible with both a positive and negative association between DAFM funding and study participation in almost equal measure. On average, the survey took 60 min.

The 39 DWOs providing complete responses were located in 19 of the 26 counties in Ireland: Munster (16), Leinster (15), Connacht (5) and Ulster (3).

Only these 39 DWOs were considered further.

General information on organisation structure, policies and procedures

Of the 39 DWOs with complete responses, most also cared for cats (90%; 95% CI: 76, 97%) and poultry/other birds (31%; 95% CI: 17, 48%). Most DWOs cared for more than one species, with ($n=12$) (31%; 95% CI: 17, 48%)

caring for 2 species, and ($n=23$) (59%; 95% CI: 42, 74%) caring for 3 or more species. The most common wildlife species ($n=16$) cared for, included foxes ($n=9$), hedgehogs ($n=5$), deer, badgers, otters and bats ($n=2$).

Few (13%; 95% CI: 4, 24%) of the 39 DWOs were members of the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes (ADCH) and most (74%; 95% CI: 58, 87%) reported using foster homes to provide care for dogs in 2021. A high proportion of DWOs had written protocols for welfare actions, including rehoming procedures (97%; 95% CI: 86, 100%), assessment of owner suitability (92%; 95% CI: 79, 98%), and euthanasia (85%; 95% CI: 69, 94%). In relation to general protocols for animals under their care, approximately half of the DWOs had written procedures for feeding routines, housing, and cleaning (Table 1). DWOs were asked to report the most common reasons for euthanasia in 2019 and 2021 respectively. Dog bites and aggression were reported as the most common reason for euthanasia ($n=20$), closely followed by physical injury ($n=18$), while being unable to rehome dogs was the least common reason and only selected by two organisations. In cases in which DWOs selected 'Other' as their most common reason for euthanasia, the reasons included illness, old age, and no quality of life.

Rehoming procedures

At the time of the survey, in 2022, 38 of 39 of the DWOs rehomed dogs. At this time, each of these DWOs followed one or more specific procedures as outlined in Table 2. The procedures most commonly reported by these DWOs included a home visit (100%; 95% CI: 91, 100%), a check on existing animals residing in owners' homes (95%; 95% CI: 82, 95%) and verification of owner experience with companion animals (79%; 95% CI: 63,

Table 1 The number and percentage (with 95% confidence limits (CLs)) of 39 dog welfare organisations with written protocols for welfare actions and general caring procedures. These data relate to organisations in Ireland with complete responses to a survey conducted in March–April 2022

Item		Number	Percentage		
			95% CL		
			Lower		Upper
Welfare Actions	Euthanasia	33	84.6	69.5	94.1
	Rehoming	38	97.4	86.5	99.9
	Assessment of potential owner suitability	36	92.3	79.1	98.4
	Record of all dogs adopted	38	97.4	85.6	99.9
	Follow up rehoming check	33	84.6	69.5	94.1
General Caring Procedures	Feeding Routines	19	48.7	32.4	65.2
	Housing	22	56.4	39.6	72.2
	Cleaning	23	59.0	42.1	74.4

Table 2 The number and percentage (with 95% confidence limits (CLs)) of 38 dog welfare organisations that conducted procedures when a dog was released to a new owner. These data relate to organisations in Ireland with complete responses to a survey conducted in March–April 2022 that re-homed dogs

Procedures conducted	Number	Percentage	CL (95%)	
			Lower	Upper
Home visit	38	100.0	90.7	100.0
Check (or verification) of the number and type of animals already in the home	36	94.7	82.2	94.7
Verification of prospective owner experience with dogs or other companion animals	30	78.9	62.7	90.4
Organisation of trial visits (with prospective owners)	24	63.2	46.0	78.2
Screening of prospective owner for previous breaches of animal welfare legislation	7	18.4	7.7	34.3
Request for proof of income to determine ability to provide proper care	2	5.3	0.6	17.3

90%). Most of these organisations employed multiple procedures before releasing a dog to a new owner, with 11 DWOs including three procedures (29%; 95% CI: 15, 46%) and 17 DWOs including four or more (45%, 95% CI: 29, 62%). Participants that selected ‘Other’ in response to the question about releasing a dog to a new owner, indicated that home visits were not permitted due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Four other DWOs implemented an online form or questionnaire for dog adoption to assess owner suitability, and one DWO sought references from the private veterinary practitioner. Interestingly, one DWO indicated that they would like to have the capability to determine if a potential owner has convictions in relation to animal cruelty (however, this is not currently possible under the GDPR).

In relation to fees for rehoming dogs, the majority of the 38 DWOs (64%) requested a fixed amount, and some requested a voluntary donation (26%). The two participants that selected “Other”, indicated that finding a suitable owner and home for a dog is much more important than the financial situation of the owner. One DWO indicated that the fixed amount requested, assisted with necessary neutering, microchipping, and vaccination costs. Additionally, most DWOs reported having a written record of all dogs adopted (97%; 95% CI: 86, 100%) and completed a follow up rehoming check (85%; 95% CI: 70, 94%) (Table 1). Most DWOs (84%) indicated that social media (Facebook, Instagram) were the most effective and influential platforms to use for rehoming dogs.

Rehoming dogs to other regions

Most of the 39 DWOs reported that they did not send dogs to other countries during either 2019 or 2021. Dogs were reportedly sent by DWOs to GB (England, Scotland, and Wales) (39%; 95% CI: 23, 55%), other countries outside the UK (36%; 95% CI: 21, 53%), and NI (13%; 95% CI: 4, 27%) (Table 3).

Table 3 The number and percentage (with 95% confidence limits (CLs)) of 39 dog welfare organisations that sent dogs to selected countries (2019 and 2021). These data relate to organisations in Ireland with complete responses to a survey conducted in March–April 2022

Country	Number	Percentage	95% CL	
			Lower	Upper
Great Britain	15	38.5	23.3	55.4
Northern Ireland	5	12.8	4.3	27.4
Other ^a	14	35.9	21.2	52.8

^a Includes Germany, Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands and Czechia

Participants were further asked to indicate the three countries, excluding GB and NI, to which dogs were most frequently rehomed. For the purposes of this study, the data for 2019 and 2021 were consolidated when identifying countries and determining the frequency of movements. Among the 14 DWOs that rehomed dogs to countries other than the UK during 2019 and 2021, the most common destinations were Germany (31%, $n=4$), Sweden (31%, $n=4$), Italy (23%, $n=3$), The Netherlands (7%, $n=1$) and Czechia (7%, $n=1$) (Table 3).

The most common reason for rehoming dogs to NI was the perception that there are more suitable owners in NI compared to the Republic of Ireland. Overall DWOs that sent dogs to GB and other countries did so because of a perception of insufficient eligible owners in Ireland (Table 4). Among participants that selected “Other”, one reported that “*Irish farmers keep breeding to get a good sheepdog. No one wants collies in Ireland; in the UK, they love them and there is more of a demand*”. Another participant indicated that they “*... only send dogs over to UK or any other country if an owner comes forward from that country. We do not seek new owners from other countries*”.

Table 4 The number and percentage of reasons reported by dog welfare organisations for rehoming dogs outside Ireland, for 15 organisations that rehomed to Great Britain (GB), 5 to Northern Ireland (NI) and 14 to other countries (Germany, Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands and Czechia). These data relate to organisations in Ireland with complete responses to a survey conducted in March–April 2022 that rehomed to these countries

Reasons	N (%)		
	GB (n = 15)	NI (n = 5)	Other countries (n = 14)
Insufficient eligible owners for rehoming dogs in Ireland	10 (66.7)	2 (40.0)	10 (71.4)
More suitable owners for rehoming dogs in NI/GB/Other countries	10 (66.7)	3 (60.0)	7 (50.0)
More suitable charities/organisations in NI/GB/Other countries	10 (66.7)	2 (40.0)	7 (50.0)
Financial contributions for rehoming of dogs higher in NI/ GB/Other countries	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Contractual agreements with funders or other agencies/charities	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Other	2 (13.3)	2 (40.0)	2 (14.3)

for the simple reason that other countries cannot be the solution for the Irish dog problem”.

Challenges experienced, and solutions suggested, by dog welfare organisations

In total, 32 (82%; 95% CI: 66, 92%) DWOs either agreed or strongly agreed that all animal welfare organisations should be registered with the Charities Regulatory Authority. Similarly, most DWOs (82%; 95% CI: 66, 92%) agreed or strongly agreed that minimum operational and animal welfare standards should be established by the regulatory authority (DAFM).

When the 39 DWOs were asked to state the extent to which they experienced selected challenges in fulfilling their roles and positively impacting dog welfare on a Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree), 82% (95% CI: 72, 93%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the assertion that funding was insufficient (Table 5). Moreover, 31 (80%; 95% CI: 69, 92%) either agreed or strongly agreed that limited public awareness in relation to the importance of dog welfare presented a challenge, 30 (77%; 95% CI: 67, 91%) agreed or strongly agreed that there was insufficient capacity to handle the number of dogs, and 25 (64%; 95% CI: 51, 80%) agreed or strongly agreed that insufficient staffing levels posed a problem (Table 5). Participants that selected “Other” to this question, reported that *“difficulties in persuading dog owners to comply with legislation/rules”* and *“government bodies not enforcing regulations (e.g., microchipping and dog licensing)”* were significant challenges. Twenty percent or more of the DWOs disagreed or strongly disagreed that insufficiently trained staff, insufficient coordination with other DWOs, insufficient engagement with local authorities and difficulty with complying with government requirements were challenges they faced (Table 5).

When the 39 DWOs were asked to indicate their opinion on specific solutions to address challenges

experienced, almost all (95%; 95% CI: 90, 100%) indicated that subsidised programmes involving vaccination, neutering, and microchipping would be very or extremely helpful (Table 6). Further, 30 (77%; 95% CI: 67, 91%) felt greater clarity about the criteria used when awarding government grant funding would be very helpful or extremely helpful (Table 6). Solutions promoting increased education on animal welfare were also perceived to be beneficial by the DWOs with 80% (95% CI: 69, 92%) indicating that access to standardised training for volunteers/employees and 82% (95% CI: 72, 93%) indicating that access to resources to educate owners on breed suitability would be helpful or extremely helpful. In addition, 30 (77%; 95% CI: 67, 91%) organisations felt that rigorous enforcement of recommendations and policies would be very helpful or extremely helpful (Table 6). Overall, subsidisation of programmes (e.g., vaccination, neutering and microchipping) were felt to be potentially the most helpful solutions with no DWO feeling this would not be so (Table 6).

In response to an open-ended question aimed at capturing perceptions of appropriate solutions specifically related to challenges experienced by DWOs to fulfil their role, several themes emerged, relating to legislation, education, an overwhelmed workforce, and funding. These themes each reflect the opinions and beliefs of the DWOs.

Legislation

The majority of DWOs believed that there was limited compliance with legislation among dog owners. Moreover, they felt that legislation, such as that relating to microchipping, is not uniformly or stringently enforced.

“Modify the legislation to allow for on the spot fines for non-compliance, for example, a €100 fine for not <having> a dog microchipped”

Table 5 Percentages (%) of 39 dog welfare organisations that Agree or Strongly Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, and Disagree or Strongly Disagree that they experience selected challenges in fulfilling their roles

Challenges	Response	n (%)
General lack of funding	Agree or Strongly Agree	32 (82)
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	3 (8)
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	4 (10)
General lack of awareness among the public of the importance of dog welfare	Agree or Strongly Agree	31 (80)
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	4 (10)
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	4 (10)
Insufficient capacity to handle the number of dogs (supply and/or demand)	Agree or Strongly Agree	30 (77)
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	6 (15)
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	3 (8)
Difficulties or an inability to rehome particular dog breeds	Agree or Strongly Agree	32 (82)
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	4 (10)
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	3 (8)
Insufficient staff	Agree or Strongly Agree	25 (64)
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	8 (21)
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	6 (15)
Lack of resources to meet costs of rehoming abroad (certification, transport, etc.)	Agree or Strongly Agree	21 (54)
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	13 (33)
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	5 (13)
Difficulties for organisation to comply with government requirements	Agree or Strongly Agree	21 (54)
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	6 (15)
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	12 (31)
Insufficient engagement with local authorities	Agree or Strongly Agree	20 (51)
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	8 (21)
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	11 (28)
Lack of sufficient coordination with other DWOs	Agree or Strongly Agree	18 (46)
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	10 (26)
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	11 (28)
Insufficient staff with suitable training	Agree or Strongly Agree	16 (41)
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	15 (39)
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	8 (20)

“Anyone adopting a dog from any charity should produce a current dog licence when collecting their new dog, to bring regulation to dog ownership. We know how many cattle we have in Ireland but when it comes to dogs, it is guesswork. The micro chipping registrations need to be seriously looked at; it is the responsibility of the new owner to re-register the dog in their name”

The DWOs raised concerns about a perceived lack of awareness amongst the Gardaí (Irish police) regarding the regulations outlined by the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 (Act 15/2013), and sought greater collaboration and engagement with local authorities, including local dog wardens.

“While Gardaí are authorised officers under the 2013 Animal Welfare Act, most are unaware of this and regularly pass what are actually crimes under this Act, to animal welfare societies who lack the power to do anything about them”

“More involvement and engagement with local authorities and Garda with animal rescue groups in terms of assisting with difficult dog cases, cases of suspected cruelty and neglect”

The DWOs cited over-breeding and unregulated puppy-farming for fashionable dog breeds as a serious challenge and called for the introduction of stricter regulations on breeding.