

ANIMAL HABITAT AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

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Animal habitat and environmental factors influence local rabies situations primarily through the suitability of habitat for sylvatic or feral reservoirs/vectors of rabies and through opportunities that the habitat and environment may provide for interactions between rabid animals and susceptible humans, wild, and domestic animals. Landscape and natural barriers can influence spread of rabies, as illustrated by the sylvatic rabies progression in Europe. The introduction and establishment of populations of dogs into an environment, especially under rural conditions where contact with native wildlife is more likely, may cause problems not only for the wildlife via predation, competition, or disease introduction, but also can increase the likelihood of human rabies exposure. Human contact with dogs is more likely than contact with wildlife, and feral or stray dogs are less friendly and more likely to bite, particularly if they are protecting food sources or litters of pups. In addition to the direct means of reducing problematic dog populations by direct manipulation of the dogs, indirect methods should be employed to keep dog populations small, or to exclude dogs from specific areas. Indirect methods often are centered on removal of food or other items that attract dogs to an area. Making rubbish dumps and garbage from households, restaurants, food markets, and abattoirs unavailable to roaming animals is a critical component of any (wild or domestic) animal population control program. In fact, actual removal of dogs is documented to be much less effective than reducing the carrying capacity of the habitat through removal of food sources, because dogs that are removed will be replaced by dogs that migrate from other areas to fill the void and utilize the food source. Regardless of the method employed, all dog population control programs must have an effective public education campaign in order to have any chance for success.