



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

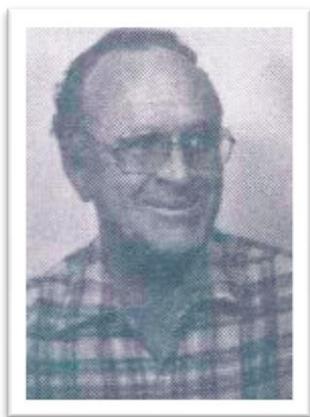
(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

PO Box 248, Panania NSW 2213, Australia

Love Thy Neighbour

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By Brian Healy



"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"

It has become apparent that the majority of problems with local Councils have occurred because of some dispute with a neighbour and many of these could have been avoided if the above rules had been followed. Admittedly some neighbours complain about anything, make up stories, or are so difficult, that it appears impossible to have a dialogue with them. A move away to another location by one or the other party often presents the only practical solution.

Some local Councils have a fairly laid back attitude to the keeping of animals in backyards and give owners free reign. They may not even have a policy, or may have no intention of enforcing a policy, which may unnecessarily restrict animal owners. This situation may not last. In fact, the tide is already turning as population densities increase, backyards shrink and people move further towards self first and bugger anyone else.

Members may recall recent real cases of a person with over 100 cocker spaniels in the house, or a lady with over 150 cats locked inside. Even in these cases it wasn't the Council that took action, but the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty for Animals).

Other local Councils, fortunately apparently few in number, take the opposite extreme and draft draconian policies which are rigorously interpreted for every application that comes before the Council, regardless of whether or not any neighbour objects or has complained. This attitude can be created by Councillors as happened at Kogarah where political motives existed (and continue to do so). It can also be created by an arrogant, authoritarian or simply a zealous staff member who has responsibility for the policy. These staff members are usually short term employees buoyed by the power of their position but they lack practical experience or foresight of the consequences of their decisions. These are the Councils to avoid. It may be best not to submit an application. However, no matter what kind of Council is involved, prior agreement by each and every neighbour becomes absolutely essential. "Love Thy Neighbour" becomes critical. A disgruntled neighbour, especially one with significant political clout, poses a serious threat to the continuing enjoyment of your hobby. For your own sake and for the future of bird keeping, don't allow this situation to develop.

The best Councils are those that have or will develop policies for the keeping of animals but only enforce them when problems emerge. In other words Councils that rely on performance rather than on arbitrary figures like numbers of birds, number of aviaries or distances between structures. If your management of your animals causes a problem then it becomes your responsibility to fix it. Consequentially it would appear far better to prevent the problem occurring in the first place.

The key is contented neighbours. The ball is definitely in the animal keeper's court to achieve this harmony. The following are some suggestions as to how this may be achieved.

When moving to a new home or planning to set up your first aviaries or even remodelling old aviaries or pens, several important steps must be taken.

- Firstly contact the local Council office and ascertain the Council's policy. Obtain written confirmation and explanation of the policy and check with a senior person or Councillor to determine how the policy is or is not enforced. Does Council act only when a problem or realistic complaint occurs, or does it take the more convenient way out through draconian numerical restrictions? You may find the Council is not concerned by your proposal or is a procedure exempt from the need to make a building application.
- If moving into a new development area be amongst the first, so that you can set the tone rather than come in late and risk objections because your proposals are different to those of the established properties.
- Talk to other animal keepers in the area, especially those keeping similar species to your choice.
- An absolute essential is to visit each and every one of your neighbours. Start with those who may be within earshot of your place but furthest away and least likely to be affected. By the time you have worked your way into visits to your immediate neighbours, you will have a better idea about how to handle each critical visit.
- Take with you on these visits a carefully prepared statement (see sample below) and get members of each household to sign it when you are sure they would be agreeable. Return later to those who waver when you have the other signatures in place. They may then 'toe the line' or resolve their uncertainties by further discussions with you and/or other neighbours.

Sample Statement:

We have no objection to the proposed aviary construction and bird keeping as explained in the proposal given to us by Mr Smith on (date)

- When you have achieved your objective of obtaining agreement from each of the adjoining neighbours, go back to each one that had any comment to make or expressed any concern, and get those comments and concerns recorded. You can then address these before going to the next stage.

On these visits you should have a basic plan of what you propose to do; how the aviary structures will look and function, and the nature of the species of birds you want to keep.

- Invite each of the neighbours around for a drink and a look at the situation. You will then have a reasonable profile of each of the neighbours and may discover new friendships. You may even find fellow aviculturists or introduce someone into the hobby (take two 'Brownie points').
- Once established do not drop your guard. Maintain periodic contact with the neighbours to maintain their support and to check that they are not experiencing some concern.
- It is important also to visit any new neighbours and gain their support.

The main reasons for complaints are noise, smell, drainage, rodents, unsightly structures and conduct of business.

- If your first choice is cockatoos, Asiatic parrots, Peacocks or Wonga or Woompoo Pigeons, then the task may be ahead of you. An alternative choice is recommended to avoid objections on account of noise. Most Councils will support objections of excessive noise.

- Smell and drainage indicate management problems. If you wish to continue in your hobby, complaints about smell or drainage must be avoided at all costs. If such a problem occurs, please do not jeopardise the hobby for the rest of us by failing to lift your game.
- Rats and mice occur nearly everywhere and they will be even more attracted to your property if you have livestock, regardless of how perfect your set up might be. This is a fact of life. The statement that appears in many Council policies "shall not attract vermin" shows the limited knowledge of some Council officers. Vermin will be attracted. Your job is to make sure they don't stay and multiply.

There are many things that bird keepers can do to prevent vermin becoming a problem.

- Rats and birds are not compatible so cages and aviaries must be built and maintained rat proof. Mice are unavoidable but life can be made very difficult for them by care in aviary construction and by maintaining a constant trapping/baiting programme.
- Jack Russell terriers and many other breeds of dogs are natural ratters and also act as watchdogs for your aviaries. Cats are my preferred option. Encourage each of your neighbours to keep a cat. Giving each of your neighbours a cat will go a long way towards countering the reputation that aviculturists have created for themselves over the years. If a person in the neighbourhood loses their cat, the nearest bird keeper is sure to be blamed.

Part and parcel to the encouragement of neighbourhood cats is for the bird keeper to train the cats to understand that the bird aviaries are a 'no-go' area. This is so easily done that it should be considered an essential element in the management of birds of any species.

Electric fences are the answer.

Provided they are constructed to standard specifications they are most effective and are legal. The Associated Birdkeepers of Australia (ABA) agitated strongly to get electric fences on bird aviaries made legal under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. Don't waste the opportunity to use this cheap and efficient tool.

Electric fences are effective in deterring cats, possums, rats, snakes, cockatoos, soldier birds (Noisy Miner - *Manorina melanocephala*), currawongs and most other large creatures that are of concern to aviculturists. Immature goshawks are one of the worst problems as unfortunately they are very slow learners and need to get bitten several times by the fence before they realise that they are not welcome. Most other creatures only need one bite for a lifetime lesson.

Don't go overboard with construction. Adopt the KISS principle (Keep It Simple Stupid) and all will be well. A friend of mine put his engineering skills to work and built an electric fence to stop soldier birds menacing his finches. It was such an elaborate setup that the soldier birds were almost physically as well as electrically prevented from getting at the finches. However it appears that the number and the closeness of the wires somehow created such an electromagnetic field that the fertility of the finches was severely reduced for the rest of the season. There does not appear to be any other possible explanation for the new dramatic effect on his birds that season. This would not occur with the usual method of a single wire along the roof perimeter.

With an electric fence in place the local cats are very quickly educated and they then form a barrier around your property. This barrier greatly reduces the number of rodents that may otherwise be attracted to your aviaries and likewise deter any rats and mice from your place or invading your neighbours' kitchens. Cats also tend to become very territorial so that straying uneducated cats are unlikely to pay you surprise visits. The best news is that you have disproved the popular conception that birdkeepers are cat haters (another feather in your cap and another step towards lasting neighbourhood harmony).

Feed storage and disposal are also important.

It may be nice to you to attract native birds to your yard by throwing out waste seed, but beware; you are more likely to encourage pest species which can spread disease to your birds, or noisy species, which may be a greater source of annoyance to your neighbour. Such waste provides a very ready source for nocturnal rodents. It may even result in odours when the dumping site becomes wet.

The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW): <http://www.aviculturalsocietynsw.org>
Membership Secretary: PO Box 248, Panania NSW 2213, Australia
E-mail: aviculturalsocietynsw@yahoo.com.au
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