

Not so "Pit Bull" After All

On March 18, 2012, an Ohio-based newspaper ran an article titled Mistaken Identity highlighting the subjective nature of breed assignment in shelters and revealing through DNA analysis that many shelter dogs are mislabeled "pit bulls".

I have little doubt this comes as no surprise. It's no secret among animal welfare professionals that breed identification is largely guesswork. Groups do their best to assess based on physical characteristics and temperament but no amount of experience or familiarity with the process produces consistent, accurate results.

In most instances, the mislabeling of a stray dog has minimal impact on the adoption outcome. However, in the case of pit bull-type dogs, mistaken identity can be fatal.

In preparation for the article, the newspaper used MARS Wisdom Panel DNA kits to test six dogs originally labeled pit bulls by the Lucas County dog warden. Only one came back predominantly American Staffordshire terrier and Staffordshire bull terrier, two breeds recognized and labeled as "Pit Bull". Two other dogs had "some" pit bull heritage and three had none whatsoever.

This is not the first time research has confirmed a high degree of mistaken identity among shelter dogs. A 2009 study conducted by Victoria Voith, DVM and colleagues at the Western University of Health Sciences in Pomona, CA, found there is little correlation between dog adoption agencies' identification of probable breed composition and actual breeds identified through genetic analysis.

A second study involving four Florida shelters found that out of 120 dogs observed by 16 shelter staff, 55 were identified as "pit bull" of which only 25 tested positively using DNA analysis.

Alternatively, only 8% of the "true" pit bulls in the group were identified as such by staff members, indicating there is not only misidentification of non-pit bull-type dogs, but also failure to recognize true pit bulls. Although this failure has no doubt spared lives, in municipalities where pit bulls are banned, there may be legal and emotional ramifications for adopting out an "illegal" pet.

The results of this news story coupled with those of past studies suggest DNA testing can play an important role in the shelter and rescue environment, especially where pit bull-type dogs are concerned. Here are just a few ways you can help save more lives through DNA testing:

1. Use DNA testing to help longer term residents at your shelter find new homes. Giving your potential adopters more information can help reduce length of stay and place more dogs with new families.
2. Offer the MARS Wisdom Panel DNA test to pet owners forced to relinquish their dog due to breed restrictions enforced by homeowner's insurance providers, landlords, and municipal laws. More and more cities, such as Aurora, CO, are accepting DNA testing to settle breed restriction cases.
3. Test dogs that look like pit bulls. This will not only help rule out those dogs that aren't, but also help your organization avoid adopting out a banned breed.
4. To help validate DNA testing, the microchip number of the test dog can be entered on submission as proof of accuracy. This is just one more way you can add credibility to your program and reassure new pet adopters about dogs in your care.

Mars has the only approved swab test on the market, and the ever expanding genetic database has more than 190 breeds identified to date, making it an invaluable 'tool' for breed identification.

1. Kimberly R. Olson, BS, Julie K. Levy, DVM, PhD, DACVIM, and Bo Norby, CVM, MPVM, PhD. "Pit Bull Identification in Animal Shelters." Maddie's Fund. http://www.maddiesfund.org/Resource_Library/Incorrect_Breed_Identification.html.

Did you know?

"Batch testing" of lots of 12 kits will be available in May! This will help reduce test turn-around time to 4 to 5 days. Contact your local outreach representative for more information.

The MARS Wisdom Panel "Shelter Dog DNA Kit" is available exclusively through PetPoint; call 1-866-630-7387, contact your Regional Director or order online at www.ThePetangoStore.com/business. Purchase a single kit for just \$50.00, six for \$45.00 each, or 12 for \$40.00 each!

Sincerely,

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