

Pruning the Beasts

This spring, Mayor Giuliani proclaimed the week of May 2 through May 8 "Be Kind to Animals Week." Neal L. Cohen, commissioner of the Dept. of Health, was at the Mayor's side for the announcement, as were a number of puppies, kittens and smiling children. The Mayor emphasized responsible pet ownership and encouraged citizens to adopt shelter animals.

So it was that much more of a surprise when, a mere seven weeks later, the Board of Health—which Neal Cohen chairs—effectively instructed thousands of New Yorkers to either euthanize their pets or live in violation of the law.

It's true. At its June 29 meeting, the Board of Health adopted a resolution that banned the sale and ownership of hundreds of supposedly "dangerous" animals. Before, the city health code didn't specify which beasts it considered dangerous, because the board feared that leaving an animal off the list might be interpreted as a tacit approval of its sale or ownership in the city. But now, empowered by the city's charter to amend the health code—and invoking "public safety" as a justification—the board's explicitly outlawed a breathtaking range of creatures. Its list of proscribed animals reads as though it were culled from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. It includes "dogs other than domesticated dogs (*Canis familiaris*)"; animals belonging to the family *procyonidae*, including raccoons, kinkajous, cacomistles and pandas; and "all bats (*Chiroptera*)."

The board claims that it acted on the basis of "the Department's past experience" in removing dangerous animals from New Yorkers' homes. But since the list includes elephants, Komodo dragons (which grow to 300 pounds and are found only on the Sunda Islands near Java) and polar bears, that claim's suspect. Plus, the inclusion on the list of docile creatures like iguanas, ball pythons and ferrets makes you wonder if anybody on the board knew what they were doing. Take ferrets, for example. Cohen claims that the peaceful mammals are "prone to vicious, unprovoked attacks on humans," even though only three ferret bites were reported this past year, compared with more than 8000 dog bites.

The code was further amended to authorize the seizure of prohibited animals. Anyone who works for the Dept. of Health or any other city agency can snatch an animal from its owner on sight. Owners are entitled to a hearing within 15 days with Cohen, who will judge the offending animal's disposition. The image is ludicrous: hundreds of New Yorkers queuing up outside the department's office on Worth St. while Commissioner Cohen reviews a Noah's Ark's worth of critters to determine which should be returned to their owners and which should be confiscated.

The problem's exacerbated by the fact that shelters, which typically operate at capacity in New York anyway, aren't equipped to handle unusual animals.

"What are we supposed to do with them?" asked a volunteer at a Brooklyn shelter that's already swamped with plain old cats and dogs. "You can't just throw a snake or bat in a dog cage."

A worker at a Manhattan shelter agreed. "If someone dumps an illegal animal here, we can't put it up for adoption without breaking the law, and we can't keep it forever. Unless a zoo wants it, we'll have to put it down."

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