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Our stray animal policy keeps paying to chase, not prevent — Mohd Zaidi Md Zabri



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Summary

- The article addresses the persistent issue of Malaysia's reactive and economically inefficient approach to managing stray dog and cat populations, which is largely based on costly catch-and-cull operations.
- It advocates for a preventive strategy through sterilization programs, citing successful examples from countries like India and Bhutan, which have demonstrated cost-effectiveness and improved public health outcomes.
- The piece urges Malaysia to adopt structural financial incentives such as tax relief and differential licensing fees to encourage sterilization and manage strays sustainably, in contrast to Turkiye's unsuccessful unfunded mandates.
- Implementing these measures can transform prevention into a consistent, economical strategy rather than relying on episodic and expensive enforcement actions.

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debate that resurfaces every time an enforcement operation turns violent. Notwithstanding, beneath the outrage over one animal's death lies a more durable policy failure: Malaysia's approach to stray dog and cat management remains almost entirely reactive, and reactive systems are, by their nature, economically inefficient.

Local authorities across the country operate largely on a catch-and-cull or catch-and-impound model, deployed only after complaints accumulate or an incident triggers a response. At best, this is damage control rather than population management, and on the evidence from other countries that have wrestled with the same problem, it is also the more expensive path.

Paying to chase, never to prevent

Consider what an enforcement operation actually costs a local council: manpower, vehicles, holding facilities, veterinary processing, and increasingly, legal and reputational costs when operations go wrong, as the Rocky case illustrates.

None of the above addresses the underlying driver of the stray population, which is uncontrolled breeding. A dog captured and euthanised today does not reduce next year's stray count if the surrounding population continues to reproduce unchecked.

The alternative, sterilisation-led prevention, has an unusually well-documented economic record. A peer-reviewed case study of a sterilisation and vaccination programme run by the animal welfare organisation Help in Suffering in Jaipur, India, tracked costs and outcomes from 1994 to 2017 and found the programme cost approximately US\$10.78 per dog sterilised and vaccinated, or roughly RM60 in today's terms, adjusted for inflation.

Against that modest outlay, researchers calculated a benefit-cost ratio of 8.5 from averted dog bites and rabies treatment costs alone, rising to 58.4 once the value of lives saved was factored in. Jaipur recorded its first year of zero human rabies deaths in 2003, more than two decades ago, a result attributed directly to the sterilisation programme.

Bhutan offers a second data point, this time at national scale. Working with the Department of Livestock and a national

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For context, that figure is several times larger than the RM1.21 million KPKT disbursed nationally to PBTs last year across seven environmental campaigns, of which stray animal management was only one of them.

Bhutan, an economy a fraction the size of Malaysia's, treated nationwide sterilisation as worth a scale of investment Malaysia has not come close to matching even at the federal level, let alone consolidated across its states.

Turkiye's warning: Mandates without budgets



Malaysia has an ongoing challenge in managing stray animal populations through prevention rather than repeated enforcement operations. — Pexels pic

Turkiye's experience shows what happens when prevention is legislated but not funded. A 2004 law required all Turkish municipalities to sterilise, vaccinate, and return stray dogs rather than kill them.

Two decades later, of the country's roughly 1,389 municipalities, an estimated 1,200 had never built a shelter or sterilisation facility, and more than 1,000 had never performed a single sterilisation under the law.

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This is a warning worth taking seriously in Malaysia's own governance structure. Under the Local Government Act 1976, stray animal management falls under the purview of Pihak Berkuasa Tempatan (PBTs), which operate under state government supervision rather than a single national authority.

This is precisely why enforcement looks different from council to council: Majlis Bandaraya Diraja Klang's operation that led to Rocky's death and Majlis Bandaraya Melaka Bersejarah's humane-capture partnership with animal welfare groups are two separate institutional responses to the same underlying problem.

Without a financing mechanism simple enough to apply consistently across this fragmented system, Malaysia risks the same drift Turkiye saw, where a legal obligation existed everywhere but was funded almost nowhere.

Give prevention something to run on

Of the possible levers available, tax relief and differential fees for sterilisation are the most implementable, because neither depends on any single PBT's budget discipline or any one state's political will.

Perak's own experience illustrates both the opportunity and the limits of relying on budgets alone: the state doubled its stray animal allocation from RM150,000 to RM300,000 for 2026, evidence that political appetite for funded prevention exists, but it remains a discretionary line item, subject to the next budget cycle and the next administration's priorities.

Tax relief and fee-based incentives remove that vulnerability by being structural rather than discretionary. Formal recognition of trap-neuter-return operators as approved institutions under Section 44(6) of the Income Tax Act 1967 would make donations to sterilisation-specific programmes tax-deductible, a status that already exists for other approved charitable causes and would require administrative extension rather than new legislation.

This matters because NGOs running these operations currently rely almost entirely on donated funds and volunteer labour,

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minimum a reduced local licence fee tied to proof of sterilisation, would shift the incentive away from abandonment, a significant source of new strays when owners find pet costs unmanageable.

For example, Majlis Daerah Yong Peng already prices this correctly: licensing a sterilised female dog at half the rate of an unsterilised one. However, the practice remains one council's discretion rather than a national standard. Making this differential fee structure mandatory across all PBTs would convert an example into a rule, closing the same gap that let Turkiye's unfunded mandate stall for two decades.

Unlike grants or state allocations that compete annually against other priorities, tax relief and fee-based incentives, once legislated, run on their own. This is where Malaysia's policy conversation should move next, from debating how enforcement operations should be conducted to asking why prevention has never been made worth anyone's while.

As the Malay *pepatah* goes, *mencegah lebih baik daripada merawat*, prevention is better than cure. And in this case, the cure is culling, an operation that must be repeated annually, at growing cost, against a population it never actually shrinks.

PBTs do not need a better catch pole. They need a reason for the population to stop growing in the first place, which means prevention finally needs a budget to run on, rather than another chase to run after.

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