

Lesley Fox: In Year of the Rabbit, over-population crisis looms across B.C.

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It is going to be the Year of the Rabbit, and it's a good thing because Peter Cottontail and his friends need all the attention they can get.

There is a rabbit over-population crisis looming in many cities in B.C., including Delta, Kamloops, Kelowna, Nanaimo, Richmond, Vernon, and Victoria.

The suspected cause? Dumping.

Domestic rabbits, perhaps a one-time "Easter gift", are routinely dumped by irresponsible guardians onto public green spaces. Once abandoned, the rabbits breed like crazy.

The offspring of these former pet rabbits are unsocialized and feral. The breeding rapidly continues and, before you know it, we literally have hundreds of rabbits eating the landscape.

That number is increasing exponentially.

The gestation period for a rabbit is 28 days, and it is possible for a rabbit to conceive immediately after giving birth. Therefore, it is possible for a rabbit to have 13 litters in a year. There can be anywhere between two to 10 rabbits in one litter! You do the math. So how are various cities coping with the problem?

On Vancouver Island, the University of Victoria announced it [wanted to cull](#) the 1,600 rabbits that were living on campus. To help save the bunnies from certain death, several community groups [stepped forward](#), and with a spay/neuter grant from the Association for the Protection of Fur-Bearing Animals, over 700 rabbits have now been placed in sanctuaries.

While UVic continues to deal with the situation, the City of Victoria is now considering adopting bylaws to prevent the sale of unsterilized rabbits to help curb the problem.

In the town of Canmore, Alberta, council recently approved spending \$50,000 to remove bunnies and transport them to wildlife rehabilitation centres to be used as food. But now the live-trapping of thousands of rapidly-breeding feral rabbits seems to be attracting unwanted predators like coyotes and cougars and the town is in a real predicament.

In Vernon, local rabbit rescue groups are working overtime to live trap, spay/neuter, and re-home the animals. To date, one small group has rescued and taken in over 225 rabbits.

But perhaps the most proactive step was made by the City of Richmond. In early 2010, council voted unanimously to ban the sale of rabbits in pet stores. New Westminster, Kelowna, and North Vancouver have also adopted sale restrictions.

While these efforts might have spared the lives of many rabbits, the problem still persists and it is growing.

What is the long-term answer? Like many issues affecting animals, the root cause is in our perception.

Animals are not toys to be bought, sold, or simply dumped. Rabbits in particular are gentle creatures. They require a lifetime commitment to their care.

If you are considering adopting a rabbit, you should know they can live up to 12 years and require a great deal of social interaction. You cannot just stick them in a cage and feed them pellets. They need lots of exercise, fresh hay, and a variety of fresh vegetables.

It is also important to note rabbits are not ideal companions for children.

While rabbits like to be around people, they usually do not like to be held. Rabbits are a prey animal, so handling them makes them nervous.

Lastly, like other animals, rabbits require routine veterinary care and need to be spayed or neutered.

To help make a difference in the over-population of rabbits, you can contact your mayor and council and ask them to ban the sale of rabbits in pet stores and to require that rabbits be spayed or neutered prior to adoption.

If you could care less about rabbits, you still might want to advocate for their sterilization as it will be your tax dollars that foot the bill for their management in your city.

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