

Time to Review Park's Pet Policy

Woodall's Campground Management – March 1996

“What should I do about pets?”

That question. Usually from new owners, will start an interesting discussion at any gathering of RV park and campground operators, and every participant in the exchange probably will be convinced that his or her way of dealing with pets is the “best” policy.

I remember several CTPA conventions when this question was raised in cracker-barrel sessions. My impression was that no one really had a handle on exactly how to deal with the various questions that the issue raised.

Undoubtedly everyone reading this article has already established some type of policy regarding pets in the park, but it still might be a good idea to take time to review that policy just as a park operator takes time to review the park's budget.

Statistics tell me that today pets rank higher in their owners' priorities than ever before. If you question this, simply look around your community and see if it is similar to what I see in Sacramento.

Here every grocery store and many discount stores devote a large section of floor space to pet food and supplies. Near my home is one of the many “super” pet stores that offer pet fanciers everything they could possibly imagine they need from books, clothing, toys and videos to grooming facilities and pet portraits. Also, within a few blocks of my home are stores specializing in birds and fish.

The annual domestic expenditure of pet owners for food and supplies is \$12 billion with an additional \$4 billion spent on grooming and medical, according to a spokesperson at San Diego based Petco. Add to that the cost of the pets themselves, kenneling and transportation, and the total is likely to be close to \$20 billion. Analysts predict that the market will expand six percent over the next five years. These figures suggest that Americans definitely do have a love affair with their pets.

Granted some pet owners don't care for their animals like they should, but my impression is that very few campers fall into that group. That's why I believe that banning campers with pets from an RV park or campground is as unwise as banning RVers themselves because a small percentage might skip without paying, write a bad check, break the park's rules or vandalize the restrooms.

Considering Americans' love affair with pets, I believe that, if we don't allow pets or properly plan for them, potential guests will choose other activities that accommodate their pets or at least require less time away from them such as movies, bowling, golf and dining out. Perhaps the hassle of finding a dog sitter or taking a trip to a kennel could easily deter a would-be camper from planning to spend a few days at a park.

As you review your "pets policy," you might want to consider the following:

1) **Shall I allow pets?** If you currently permit pets in your park, you will find it extremely difficult to change that policy, and you probably don't want to anyway. However, with the expansion in the type of animals people acquire as pets - for example: pot belly pigs and snakes, you might want to refine your policy before you're startled by the arrival of someone with an "unusual" critter.

2) **Shall I charge for pets?** For some reason, we have singled out dogs as the one animal that we charge for. Often we evidence a bias in favor of small dogs, too. However, some very small dogs can be as much trouble as large ones. Granted, most large dogs have a loud bark, but the constant yapping of a small dog can be extremely irritating, too.

I well remember an evening of distress in my own park. One of the many clubs that visited our park went out to a local restaurant rather than cook in the clubhouse. It was a beautiful evening, and campers were walking throughout the park especially by the swimming pool.

A motorhome near the clubhouse and pool housed two, small, cute and innocent looking poodles whose owners, club members at dinner, had very thoughtfully left the front window open so their' two darlings could look out and enjoy the evening.

After sniffing the night air for a while, the poodles decided to become the great protectors of their masters' prized motorhome. Furthermore, they decided it was "them against the world" and that everyone who passed by or appeared to be headed in their general direction was an arch enemy. Even birds flying nearby apparently were considered dive bombers with kamikaze pilots.

Bark and yelp they did. Not for a while or until they had successfully chased every one away, but even after the enemy disappeared from view and remained only in the memories of the two little critters.

Answering complaints about their noise spoiled my evening. I finally had to call the

restaurant and ask the owners to leave early and come solve the problem. Of course, not having been there to experience the nerve wracking constant barking, the owners could not believe that their two, cute, little darlings could have been awarded top billing on our park's most-unwanted poster.

Yes, small dogs and large dogs can be problems. It would appear that the best solution is to have a very clear policy regarding the behavior of pets while they are in the park and to be sure that all guests clearly understand that policy.

One of the problems with charging for pets is to be fair and equitable with those charges.

I always had the same feeling about charging for pets as I did about charging for electric heat. If we posted a charge for electric heat like we did for air conditioners, I knew some people would be tempted to tell their first little lie and say: "Electric heat? Never heard of such a thing." The end result would be that I would reward them for telling their little white lies and penalize the honest guests.

I could see an air conditioner from the registration desk, but, with electric heat, I had to ask them and depend upon their honesty. I well knew that to do so was to invite some people to lie in order to save a buck, and, believe it or not, some would have! So our policy was to include any cost of electric heat in our base rate since I had a problem with financially rewarding people who were willing to lie.

So, before you decide to charge for any pet, be sure that you can count on everyone being totally honest with you when they are given the choice of paying the charge or telling a little white lie.

Even if you might discover later that someone lied to you to save a dollar or two, in my mind, the shaky situation that arises in approaching the person to collect the fee is going to undoubtedly embarrass him or her and perhaps you. Even if you are in the right and the camper is in the wrong, in the camper's mind, you will be a cheap skate for worrying about a couple of dollars.

And, such guests will undoubtedly tell others about the scene you made to collect a couple of bucks just because they happened to forget about their pets or because, they will swear, you never asked them.

I do not believe that there should be a charge for any pet unless specific facilities such as pet areas have been provided to assist owners with their pets. If the special facility is for all pets and they are to be kept on a leash when in the area, then the area can be small

and sand can be used as a base. The park operator's placing some interesting accessories such as fire plugs or automobile tires in the area makes any charges for pets justifiable in the minds of the campers.

An appropriate waste container should be placed near the entrance to such an area for the owners to deposit what, hopefully, they've picked up. Even providing "pooper scoopers" near the entrance alongside the waste container is probably a good idea. These also have seen considerable advancement in technology over the past few years. Sturdy ones can be purchased at most large pet stores. Sure, someone might decide to take one home, but then a guest might also decide the same about the flowers in the restrooms. Park operators will have to make that decision based on the type of clientele to whom they cater.

Whether or not the park charges for pets, staff members need to police the pet area at least daily to remove any residue the pet owners failed to pick up. Doing so, of course, justifies any charge for pets.

Perhaps, if you have extra space you're not currently utilizing, establishing a run where large dogs can exercise as well as do their duty is also a way of saying to guests that "we think of everything to make your stay with us enjoyable." Needless to say, such an area should be gated and fenced.

3) Shall I require all pets to be kept on a leash when outside the RV? Here is one area where I feel you have an opportunity to treat all pet owners as equals. I have never understood the logic of requiring a camper's miniature poodle to be placed on a leash while allowing another camper's cat to wander freely about the campground.

I remember another evening when I searched our park for a constantly barking dog. Once I'd found the offender, the reason for his barking was apparent. Someone's cat, crouched safely beyond the reach of the leash, was occasionally hissing at the dog. Was the dog at fault for following his instincts and expressing his frustration? Not in my opinion. The fairest and safest policy is to require that all pets must be kept on a leash and under the control of the owner whenever they're outside of the RV.

4) What about guidelines? Some parks provide their guests who bring pets with a specially prepared set of pet guidelines. While I agree that rules and regulations should be kept to a minimum, I am also aware that they must be adequate or misunderstandings will arise. If a park has a pet area, posting pet guidelines at the entrance to that area is mandatory.

5) **Any need for two pet policies?** A park operator who rents sites by the month might wish to develop a completely different set of pet guidelines for such guests. In fact, since such guests are sometimes transient workers rather than campers, he or she might want to consider a no-pets policy for monthly guests if the adult occupants of the RV work. Seasonal guests usually don't occupy their units other than on weekends and holidays and, therefore, can usually abide by the park's normal pet policy without creating problems.

I believe that all business policies must occasionally be reviewed with an eye to the ever-changing markets. Regardless of what your current park policy on pets is, reviewing that policy in light of today's growing pet market would be a good idea.

One thing appears clear: Americans love their pets; and, if park operators are to be on the cutting edge of the hospitality industry, then we must carefully plan to serve each member of our guests' families while not forgetting that, to many of those guests, pets are important members of their families.

[Back to John's Articles](#)