

Tail docking

Tail docking has resulted in impassioned debates all over the world. Here we present both arguments

The arguments AGAINST docking

A dog's tail is useful: it communicates emotions to other dogs and to people. The tail is particularly important for happy emotions – so by docking you're taking away the dog's smile.

Sometimes, taking away a dog's 'smile' has benefits for the owner. Rottweilers and Dobermans are traditionally docked and are traditionally seen as fiercely protective guard dogs. This has been instilled in our culture – think of Zeus and Apollo in Magnum PI. For a potential trespasser or burglar, a docked black dog is likely to be a much greater disincentive than a waggy Labrador – because of the 'advertising' or social connotations we as a society associate with the particular appearances of these dogs.

Look at the photos below and examine your emotional response to the alternative appearances.



This emotional response can be heightened by cropping the dog's ears – again examine your response to the images below



There is no way the cropped dog could ever look as gormless as the uncropped Doberman to the right.



Actually, the cropped dog has a sweet, biddable temperament. The dog on the right is trained to do man work and will attack on command. So perhaps altering the dog's appearance has a protective function for the dog and its owner – making it look more scary than it really is?



If the dog doesn't conform to the physical image we have of a breed (it doesn't look like a 'real' Doberman), we are less certain what to expect of that animal's temperament – especially when the temperament is a big part of a breed's 'image'. So if you own a Doberman with a tail, it could be a less effective deterrent? Possibly...

But can you justify a cosmetic procedure for its deterrent effect? If all dogs had tails, burglars would have to learn that any dog **COULD** bite. Not that that's news.

The tail is used for balance – especially over uneven terrain - and for steering while swimming. Not a huge part of every dog's life but probably more useful than your baby finger. Yet I'm sure you'd much rather have it than not.

At least two studies have associated docked breeds with an increased risk of incontinence after spaying. That does not mean the two conditions (docking and incontinence) are definitely causally related – but again, anyone that's owned an

incontinent dog would probably agree that this would be a strong deterrent to docking.

Docking risks complications (bleeding, bone infections, neuroma (nerve growth resulting pain) for cosmetic reasons. I would agree that docking pups is associated with fewer complications during healing than docking adult dogs, but why deprive all dogs of a breed of their tail when only a tiny minority would need to have it amputated for medical reasons later in life.

Docking is painful. People will disagree. Ultimately we cannot sit in the pup's body and feel what it feels and we can't ask it. But all would agree that when comparing docking to not docking, not docking is LESS painful.

Some argue that tails have to be docked to improve hygiene in breeds with long coats – think of Old English Sheepdogs, Yorkies and Poodles. Yet there are many long coated breeds that are not traditionally docked that have somehow managed to cope – think Afghans, Maltese, German Shepherds, Bernese Mountain Dogs, Cavalier King Charles Spaniels.

Some argue that tails have to be docked to prevent dogs injuring them while working ie hunting and indeed the British Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons still allows the docking of dogs that are destined to go to working homes. It is true that you cannot hurt something that's not there – but taken to its logical conclusion if you prophylactically amputated the right hind leg at birth you would also prevent all fractured bones in the right hind of said pups. It is also true than many traditionally non-docked breeds are also used for hunting / herding – eg Border Collies, Labradors, Golden Retrievers, Setters, English Pointers, Foxhounds and Beagles.

Many exceptional specimens of traditionally docked breeds have 'horrible' (curly, thin etc) tails. If you now have to select for tail conformation in addition to the other breed attributes, you will narrow the gene pool and indirectly select for more problems. I agree in principle that narrowing the gene pool is likely to increase the prevalence of inherited defects or problems. You could counter this with two arguments: the breeds with tails have managed so far. Perhaps we also need a more fundamental debate on what we're trying to achieve breeding dogs eg breeding really short noses in breeds like Boxers, Bull Dogs, Boston Terriers holds only health risks for the dogs – they can't breathe properly, they are prone to heat stroke, they can't bite properly so their teeth don't clean themselves, the round heads don't engage in the birth canal properly leading to a high rate of caesarian births. Is it 'fair' to consciously impose such handicaps on our companions now that we are aware of the associated health risks?

In my opinion (which many vets share), docking is done purely for the benefit of the owner in the vast majority of cases (ie in all instances bar where the tail is severely injured). It is a cosmetic procedure, like ear cropping. It risks harm to the

dog for no benefit to the dog. Vets swear an oath on graduation and / joining a veterinary body. This binds us to promoting the health and welfare of animals. Some bodies go as far as spelling out that when there is an apparent conflict of interest between people and animals, the vet should decide in favour of the animal. Docking cannot be compared to neutering, which has distinct health benefits for the dog – preventing prostate problems and decreasing aggression in dogs and preventing uterine infections, mammary tumours and many unwanted litters in bitches.

Docking dogs cannot be justified by pointing out that lambs and pigs are docked and cattle dehorned. In the first place, there are management and welfare reasons for the procedures rather than cosmetic ones. Even if there weren't, you cannot justify a wrong by pointing out a similar one being more accepted. That would be like saying that it's morally right to pirate DVDs because so many people do it.

As far as I can tell, people's approach to docking depends on their underlying philosophy: is your dog a tool – a means to keep burglars away, much like a cow is a means of producing meat or milk? Or is your dog a part of your family with a strong emotional bond between you? Do you believe that man has dominion over all beasts and thus the right to do what he wishes to them? Or do you believe that man is given guardianship over the pets in his care, that humans are a part of rather than the sole focus of their existence and that their unconditional love, trust and companionship carries with it the obligation to protect them from harm?

As it stands at the moment, vets that dock dogs with uninjured tails risk being struck off the South African Veterinary Council's register. Vets that are not registered with the Council break the law by practicing their profession (this is enforceable in civil court). The fact that docking itself is not illegal is irrelevant for vets at the moment, because they risk losing their livelihood if they dock dogs.

Marlies Böhm

The arguments FOR docking

Tail docking has received much attention recently and the pronouncements of various organisations and individuals seems to have created a false impression of the status in South Africa with many dog owners, breeders and members of the public being led to believe that a new law has either been created or implemented. This is not the case at all and in law the status quo remains as before.

The polarization of this issue has been initiated by the South African Veterinary Council (SAVC) which unilaterally and without prior consultation with all the

various affected and interested parties, declared the procedure unethical and instructed all practicing veterinarians to refuse the procedure from 01.06.2008.

It is generally and scientifically accepted that the domestic dog is descended from the wolf. In order to make the domestic dog useful to himself, man has for thousands of years bred out undesirable physical and mental attributes and bred in those faculties which were desirable and useful to him. Thus, the domestic dog is not a creation of nature but one of man and the more than 200 vastly varying breeds bear witness to this fact. It is pointless therefore to equate the physical and mental requirements of our domestic dogs to that of canines that live in the wild.

The tail of the domestic dog is a case in point. Even in nature there exist animals, living within the identical environment, some of which have tails and some have not. For example, apes and monkeys, and even then there is a species of monkey that does not have a tail. To suggest therefore that the traditionally docked dog breeds are disadvantaged with regard to their movement and communication-possibilities is laughable because docked breeds have no problems in coping with the demands of everyday life. Always, of course, keeping in mind that the domestic dog exists primarily for the company of man and not for the entertainment of other dogs. Consequently, certain breeds have their tails docked to certain lengths for specific reasons. Jack Russells for example have their tails docked "to the length of a man's hand". This 'handle' was used to pull the Russell out of the hole during hunting. In the Dobermann breed the tail is docked to 1-2 digits to prevent the criminal from grabbing the tail and being able to manipulate the dog.

In a remarkable case of selective morality, the opponents of the tail docking, which now includes the veterinary profession and the NSPCA, have labeled the procedure as a mutilation, whilst at the same time seeing nothing wrong with the neutering every year of thousands of dogs for no reason other than the fact that the unneutered dog is a nuisance to the owner. Surely, the removal of the reproductive organs from otherwise perfectly healthy dogs constitutes a far greater mutilation than the docking of the tail and yet the veterinary profession and the NSPCA see nothing wrong with it. Would it be expedient to suggest that a substantial part of the veterinary profession's income is derived from such activity and that the NSPCA has a vested interest in the reduction of animal numbers. One is left wondering how the NSPCA finds the time, effort and resources to persecute those who breed, own and care for the docked breeds when there is so much to do to eliminate and fight real cruelty to animals.

In the view of many, the veterinary profession is obliged to serve society and not the other way around and the establishment of ethical and moral standards is the preserve of our society as a whole and not that of any individual organisation. Those who foster and care for the traditionally tail-docked breeds, love their

animals as much as anybody else and to suggest an element of cruelty in this regard seems absurd.

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