

A healthy rez dog means a healthy community: Advocates working to bring vet care to Indigenous communities

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THUNDER BAY, ONT.
PUBLISHED AUGUST 19, 2024
UPDATED YESTERDAY
FOR SUBSCRIBERS



Fort William First Nation member and resident Helen Pelletier sits outside her home with her two "rez dogs" Zaagi and Nico. Nico is a free-roaming dog who stays within the property.

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The classic “rez dog” is a beloved, free-roaming mix of a mutt, often appearing to be a stray or without owners in Indigenous communities. It may hang out regularly at local businesses, soliciting treats and “good boy’s” with rubs on top of the head, or be found sauntering along the dusty roads with regal confidence.

Rez dogs become a collective responsibility of the entire community that watches over them, even if many of them have individual owners and a home. In return, communities feel protected and loved by their wanderlust guardians.

Apache is such a rez dog.

The older, handsome grey and brown husky mix charms customers at the gas stations in Fort William First Nation, just south of Thunder Bay, Ont., receiving gentle, affectionate pets and cuddles.

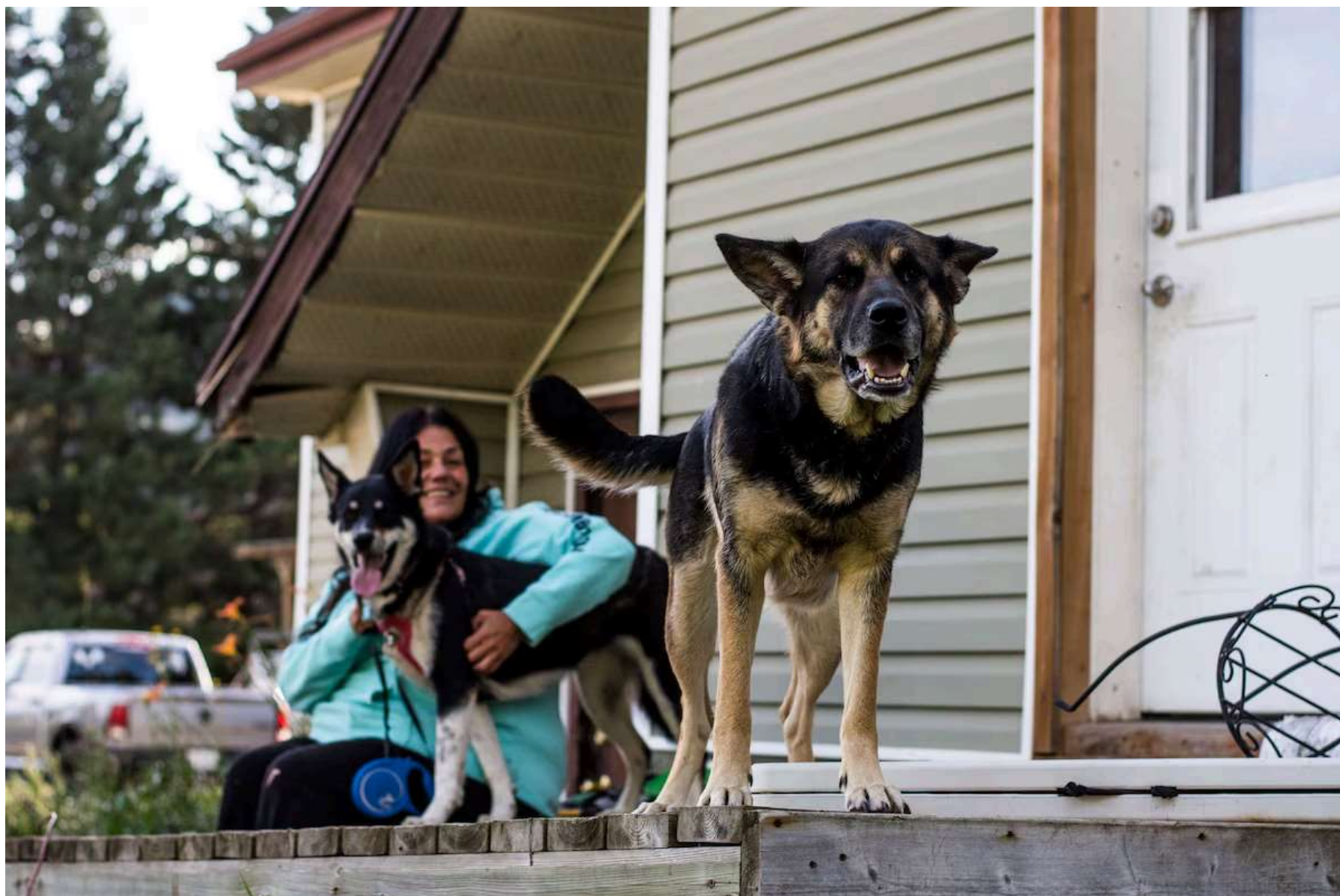
Apache has an owner who loves him, says the owner’s cousin Helen Pelletier. (The owners did not respond to a request for comment from the Globe). But last year, a group in Thunder Bay decided he needed to be rescued and Apache was taken into the city and fenced in a yard. He quickly escaped and made his way home to Fort William.

“I warned them,” said Ms. Pelletier, who has two of her own rez dogs, Nico and Zaagi (short for love in Anishinaabemowin).

She says dogs such as Apache should be left alone by outside rescue groups who aren’t familiar with their community. When Apache showed up at her door (one of her dogs was in heat at the time), she would drive him back home.

Apache was fixed last year when the community held a spay and neuter clinic, but not in time to prevent him from siring a few Apache look-a-like puppies.

But not all rez dogs are the protective, free spirits Apache is.



Helen Pelletier from Fort William First Nation says her community has had issues with people taking free-roaming rez dogs because they think they're strays or abandoned. Most times rez dogs come from loving families and homes they return to at the end of the day.

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A lack of veterinary services in Indigenous communities means too many dogs are not spayed or neutered. Mating among a dog population that’s too large and stressed by food scarcity can cause packs of dogs to roam with aggression, threatening serious and potentially fatal attacks on people.

Statistics from the 1990s and 2000s indicate dog biting incidents occur 20 to 200 times more often on reserves than the rest of the Canadian population, and that children aged five to nine are most commonly bitten by dogs.

Indigenous communities such as Fort William are grappling with what to do to control too many dogs – the First Nation’s recent animal bylaw states that free-roaming dogs will be seized and impounded – while still honouring the cultural place the dogs have within the community.

Ms. Pelletier’s daughter Daanis Pelletier wrote a poem about rez dogs in high school, noting the animals aren’t simply pets but friends who “connect us to ourselves and the land.”

“They have always been there. In our legends and stories, they have been there,” the poem reads.

Patrick Collins is one of Apache’s caretakers who used to work at one of the local gas stations the dog frequents. He said every community needs a free-roaming dog like Apache. He recently witnessed Apache walking with a group of teenage girls when they encountered a coyote.

“The girls started yelling as a coyote came running out towards them. Apache took care of that coyote before he had a chance to harm anyone,” Mr. Collins told the Globe.

Leah Arcand is the founder of Save Rez Dogs, an advocacy group she started in 2016 aimed at supporting ethical animal welfare in Indigenous communities.

Ms. Arcand, a teacher from Muskeg Lake First Nation in Saskatchewan, said too often, Indigenous communities have little choice but to surrender dogs and puppies to rescue groups or resort to controversial measures such as dog culls.

“It’s inflicting trauma on everybody,” Ms. Arcand said.

She added there is a historical relationship between Indigenous communities and dogs that have been destroyed through colonization.

For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, thousands of Inuit sled dogs were slaughtered by police in the Eastern Arctic. Many Inuit felt it was a strategic act of colonization by the federal government to force the nomadic Inuit to live in settlements and under federal programming. A 2006 RCMP report found no evidence the slaughter was an organized effort by the federal government but rather was caused by starvation and disease. The subsequent Qikiqtani Truth Commission’s report in 2010 led to Quebec acknowledging and apologizing for the impact the slaughters had on the Inuit in the province.

Ms. Arcand had hoped to present a resolution to the Assembly of First Nations at its recent annual general assembly, calling the AFN chiefs to make a national strategy on animal care and control in Indigenous communities. The resolution never made it to the floor for discussion because of time constraints.

But some individual Indigenous communities are already working to bring in more animal supports and resources. The Matawa First Nations in Northern Ontario submitted a proposal to Indigenous Services Canada to co-ordinate sustainable animal services in each of its communities in a one-year pilot project.



"Rez dog" Zaagi (short for 'love' in Anishinaabemowin) sits outside her home in Fort William First Nation.

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Judi Cannon is the animal services co-ordinator for Matawa First Nations who is leading the “animal guardians” hired in each of the communities.

As of Aug. 11, they have co-ordinated animal wellness clinics in four communities, working with animal rescue groups and veterinary experts such as the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph and PetSmart Charities to complete close to 294 spay and neuter surgeries, 516 exams and more than 1,024 vaccines to mostly dogs.

In one community, the spay and neuter services are expected to prevent more than 320 puppies from being born this year alone.

Ms. Cannon said access to veterinary care is a priority for pet owners in the North, particularly as communities see an increase in small dog breeds that may need particular grooming habits and care.

Other priorities identified by community members include more resources, including dog houses, education and “getting back to the traditions of that relationship with the animals, because it is a reflection of the health of the communities,” Ms. Cannon said.

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