

The wild dogs of Shuwaikh



KUWAIT: Stray dogs walk around Shuwaikh Industrial. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh



Scribber's Notebook

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Across from my office lies an empty patch of desert, flat and littered with trash. Heavy trucks often park in zigzagged lines on the edge of it. Workers crisscross it on their way to the car garages, welding shops and printing houses of industrial Shuwaikh. The place seems empty, abandoned but it isn't. A pack of wild dogs with loose jaws, hungry eyes and the ferocity of a hibernating bear woken in winter have staked out this no-man's land as its own.

The dogs are not really wild. Not the lean, graceful salukis native to the Arabian Peninsula. They are not Arabian wolves, *canis lupus arabs*, found in the deserts of Saudi Arabia, Egypt or Jordan. The wild dogs of Shuwaikh are mostly strays, mixed-breed mutts or former pets abandoned on the sides of the road or escaped from the pet souq in neighboring Al-Rai. Of course there aren't just roving packs of street dogs in Shuwaikh. There are increasing numbers of them to be found in all areas of the country - from Salmiya to Kabd, from Ahmadi to Kuwait City.

Most have carved out a niche territory from the

desert lots left undeveloped and serving as illegal parking lots, alleyways and the spaces behind buildings where dumpsters overflow and food might be found.

In Shuwaikh, the dogs help keep rats in the area to a minimum because they are hungry. Many of them starve or suffer because they actually are domesticated pets, not wild animals prepared for living the hardscrabble existence of feral pack life.

They are rarely fed by the people who work here and as a result, the dogs hunt for whatever vermin skulk around the edges of dumpsters and in the back alleys. The dogs are also hyper territorial and only allow the members of their own pack into the area. Stray dogs from other parts of Shuwaikh or across the highway in Al-Rai seldom venture here.

But they can be a menace. These street dogs have become feral and sometimes attack humans. Staff members of our newspaper have been bitten trying to get to the bus or going to their cars at night. The dogs roam freely up and down the roads and though they seem wary of cars, they still can get hit sometimes. These dogs are not meant to be living outdoors, on their own, in the wild.

The suffering of these animals, their abandonment, is the failing of society. It is well known that people buy pets from the souq when they are small, cute puppies and then dump them when they become older and require more effort.

Beyond our own individual failings, there is a failing of stewardship. The pet industry is poorly regulated and harmful to animals. The government needs to establish an

authority that can oversee the entire industry, especially now as dogs as pets has become a more common reality in Kuwait. Rather than the Municipality poisoning them, there needs to be a comprehensive plan for rehoming pets, spaying and neutering and caring for those that are abandoned.

We also need to change our mindset, to recognize that it is our responsibility to care for this planet - and its diversity of life.

Take this example: In 1995, after 70 years of absence, caretakers in Yellowstone National Park in the United States reintroduced wolves. Within a few years, biologists and ecologists began noticing an entire cascade of effects that included changes to elk feeding patterns, beaver populations, riverbank reeds, grasses and plants, fox, mice and even the path and flow of rivers.

The reintroduction of wolves in Yellowstone is now a widely studied case for ecologists interested in understanding how connections between individual animals can impact an entire ecological system. This may seem far removed from Kuwait, but there are lessons to be drawn from this experience applicable to anywhere in the world.

But before we begin to assume this stewardship, we need to become more educated and knowledgeable about the planet, about ecosystems, about animals and caretaking. We need to shift from piecemeal, reactionary thinking to a holistic viewpoint that considers not only our survival and flourishing, but how we as a species can support all life on this planet.