

Subject: This Tail Docking Discussion, And What It Means To You

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The Vizsla Newsletter

This Tail Docking Discussion, And What It Means To You

[By Steve Peacocke](#)

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A few short years ago when the New Zealand Government introduced the Animal Welfare Bill, it asked for submissions from the public. I, as a private citizen of this country, placed a [submission before the government select committee](#) on the Bill as one of the stated aims was to ban tail docking for all breeds of dogs in New Zealand. Thankfully the bill was passed but without the docking clause.

If you are like many dog owners in New Zealand, you've never thought about the reasons behind tail docking, you've never had to ... until now.

The SPCA have launched a media campaign with such emotive headlines as: "Every day helpless puppies lose their tails in the name of fashion."-"Some puppies tails are hacked off with a kitchen knife."-"Others are painfully docked with a tightly wound rubber band".

The SPCA have certainly gained public support to outlaw this practice and even the veterinary profession has been vocal on banning tail docking except where a vet may decide that it is in the dog's interest to dock.

So why don't we ban tail docking if it's such a barbaric practice? The answer is plain and simple, it is detrimental to the health and welfare of some breeds of dogs not to dock their tails - **i.e. it is cruel not to dock.**

Let's examine each argument against docking that I have heard to date and perhaps this will allow us to also examine the reasons behind why docking is still done today

Myth 1: Docking puppies is cruel and painful

The tail bone of a pup at less than 3 days old is still soft and the nervous system undeveloped.

Consider that a young lamb or calf is so developed at birth that they can stand and walk besides their mothers within minutes of being born; a human, although not able to stand for many months, is still fully formed at birth; a pup though is essentially still developing after birth, the

eyes, for example, do not open for many days. The pup is still developing hearing, sight, and the nervous system for many days after birth.

As a hunter and scavenger, the dog has developed the ability to carry pups for only 63 days before giving birth to allow to mother to venture from the den to obtain food. The pups are still forming after birth, docking at this age causes only a momentary discomfort that is almost instantly forgotten.

The following is a report on the only scientific study that is generally accepted by the universities, the veterinary profession, the Australia and New Zealand body for animal research, the New Zealand Parliament and even the SPCA.

**Professor Dr. R Frisch, Leader of the Clinic of Veterinary Surgeons
Justus-Lieberg University Germany -wrote**

The docking of tails and the removal of dewclaws in puppies less than 4 days old without anaesthetic, is not connected with any serious pain in such a way that it cannot be allowed from the point of view of protection of animals.

There are two expressions in German for which there is no English equivalent 'Nestfluchter' which means a young bird or animal which will very soon leave its nest or its mother and will therefore have to find its own food; and 'NESTHOCKERN' which means a young animal that stays for a long time in its nest with its mother and is fed by her - new born up belongs to the Nesthockern, in comparison to the horse cow pig and goat which are regarded as Nestfluchter.

The Animals in the Nesthockern group are born relatively immature, completely naked, blind, deaf very immobile and very helpless. Their nervous systems at birth is not even fully developed. There are still cell divisions in the brain and some of the nervous threads are not fully developed. In psychological tests it has been detrmind that the time between the nervous impulse and reaction (chronaxie) takes 3-4 times longer than it would an adult. After about 10-14 days when the animals eyes are opened (until then it has been more like an embryo) it is possible to determine the normal value of the impulse.

In 1941 **Volkhov** determined that animals, at this period of life, had very little feeling of pain. The concious feeling of pain is still not very likely at that age.

Schmidker wrote in his doctorate in 1951 about the feeling of pain in new born puppies: "Incomplete development of the nervous system at the time of birth and the very high chronaxie value in connection with thefact that the animal is not able to react effectively to pain gives us every reason to believe that the actual feeling of pain is very low in the newborn of this group of mammals (dogs). In other words,at this age and biological condition, it would have no absolute meaning to talk of pain."

Myth 2: There is no reason to dock dogs tails

The Hungarian Vizsla is a hunter, pointer and retriever with 1 third docked from the tail. Although the remainder of the tail is strong, the third docked is thin and whip-like and is open to damage in the field. The Vizsla holds it's tail horizontal to the ground and wags it forcefully while charging through rough scrub and undergrowth.



The unprotected tip is docked to keep it from splitting and bleeding. Once damaged, the tail is extremely difficult to heal, sometimes requiring amputation later in life when the dog must be placed under general anaesthetic causing undue stress and pain.

Myth 3: Tail docking is completed only to win shows

There is no rule made by the New Zealand Kennel Club that requires any breed to be docked to allow it to show. The Hungarian Vizsla has been around since the 10th century and earlier and even early records show a docked tail yet, other than a brief test at showing in the early 1900s in Hungary, the first Vizsla to show anywhere in the world was in the mid 1960's.

Docking is performed to save the dog pain and hardship.

Myth 4: Tails are required to aid in swimming

Many docked breeds including the Vizsla, and even fully docked breeds, are excellent swimmers.

Myth 5: Tails are required for balance

Despite this seemingly plausible argument, no dogs to my knowledge, have ever fallen over due to the lack of a tail. Wobbly dogs are almost non-existent.

Myth 6: Tails are required for expression

The tail is immediately seen by humans but the full body language is used by other dogs. Even a fully docked dog can easily give the full range of emotions to both other dogs and to humans. Arguments to the contrary usually go along the lines of "why then are most aggressive dogs the ones with the docked tails?".

When the word "aggressive" is used people usually conjure up images of the American Pit Bull Terrier (which is not docked), the Rottweiler and the Doberman. These latter dogs are bred to

be guard dogs and have their tails docked to prevent intruders gripping the tails making the dog ineffective. Docking their tails didn't make them aggressive, they were docked because they were trained to be aggressive.

Stanley Coren, a human psychologist with an interest in dog training has written many articles of interest. I have many times been referred to a particular article regarding tail docking. You will find the link to his article [here](#).

Dr Coren talks about a Labrador retriever named Transit who, through an unfortunate accident, had his tail amputated later in life. This previously happy and outgoing dog then became a changed dog when greeting other dogs. Other dogs took longer in their greeting and snapping and biting sometimes ensued.

Although Dr Coren has impressively published over 300 items (only a handful on dogs), his qualifications are in "human" psychology only and his studies in dogs only go as far as club level. It must be noted at this stage that my own household covers fully professional dog training as well as nationally recognised qualifications in 'Animal Training' and 'Dog Handling and Training Management'. Add to that many years of experience in dog training, breeding, obedience, tracking, agility, showing, gundog trials (mainly pointer setter trials), farm dog training, veterinary assistant, and club obedience and agility teaching.

If you read further into Dr Coren's article, you will note that he discusses the need for docking in certain gundogs and mentions the Hungarian Vizsla as particularly at risk. He also discusses the Swedish "experiment" related in another part of this (my) page.

If Transit, the Labrador, had lost a leg later in life instead of a tail, would the same change in greeting rituals have been seen? Transit has been through heavy trauma with both a damaged tail and major surgery involving amputation. It is almost expected that he may have lost some of his confidence and will take that out in aggression towards other dogs. Other dogs also may feel his lack of confidence when they meet him and react accordingly to ensure their position in the greeting, Transit may well react to this in an attempt to retain his pack standing. This will differ from dog to dog, but to take a single dog's reaction and at losing a healthy grown tail and state it as proof that all dogs need a tail to greet other dogs is patently ridiculous. This, I note, is not what Dr Coren did, but asked the question and therefore asked us to think.

Myth 7: Docking tails is "Cosmetic Mutilation"

This is the "catch-phrase" of the SPCA. It means nothing and is specifically designed to bring emotion into the argument. It is hard to argue against as it contains no facts to argue. It's like saying "I think you're ugly", it's designed to get an emotional response.

Apart from intending to be provoking and emotional, this statement assumes that all docking is cosmetic. Mutilation? Well I am uncertain, can you state that your nails are mutilated after you cut them? Only if you make a botched job of it and I would definitely be against any mutilation in the docking procedure.

That cosmetic word is another thing to think about. It means aesthetic, or to beautify. My stand here is definite: If the tail is docked for the sole reason of making the dog look good, then I am heartily against it.

So I guess that I am very much against cosmetic mutilation. However, that most certainly does not mean that I am against docking.

Myth 8: Other hunting dogs don't have their tails docked

The practice of docking some hunting dog's tails was done for practical reasons, if there is no practical reason, why dock at all?

There are so many different types of dogs and so many different types of tails; tail carriages (high, low, over the back, under the belly etc); tail actions; tail lengths; tail coverings (course hair, long hair etc) ; tail thicknesses etc. Even amongst seemingly similar gundogs there are a vast array of tails.

Consider that there are also a vast array of hunting types that gundogs are bred to be used for. Examples are lowland duck hunting (rivers and marshes), upland game hunting (pheasant and quail) , brush hunting, flushing, deep bush stalking, birds, rabbits, deer etc. All sorts of different types of game in all sorts of different types of terrain.

A breed of gundog bred for lowland duck retrieving would be unlikely to suffer tail damage swimming out to retrieve shot birds when compared to a gundog bred for charging through thick scrub sniffing a hot trail. The Vizsla is bred as a versatile hunting dog with abilities of hunting, tracking, pointing and retrieving through all terrain bred to go through, rather than around.

Similarly, a tail that is covered in course or long hair (eg. the Irish Setter), or one fully protected in a layer of fat and muscle (eg. the Labrador Retriever), is less likely to sustain damage when compared to a tail that has no protection.

The English Pointer is often mentioned as similar to dogs like the GSP, Vizsla and Weimaraner, yet it does not have a docked tail. What people fail to take into account is that, unlike these versatile (bred to hunt, point and retrieve feather & fur game on land and water, and often working in dense scrub and bush) the English Pointer was originally bred to simply POINT birds and the English used other specialist dogs to flush, retrieve and track. English Pointers are more commonly used for versatile work nowadays and it is not unusual to hear an owner bemoan the lack of docking due to tail injury their dogs are receiving.

The Vizsla's tail is very thick and powerful at the base giving tremendous strength to the tail action that increases dramatically in forcefulness when on a hot trail. The end of the tail tapers off to thin with no muscle or fat, only thin hair.

Without any protection at all, the tip (under very little control as there is no muscle at the tip), will shatter when connected with an object much like the tip of a fly rod connecting with a tree when given a flick.

Myth 9: Other countries are banning tail docking

While this is true for a very small number of countries, this experiment has proven disastrous

for working dogs such as the Hungarian Vizsla, the Weimaraner and the German Short Haired Pointer. Most countries that have banned tail docking are currently considering, if not totally reversing the law, allowing docking of hunting breeds for humanitarian reasons.

In Denmark, the Anti-docking law specifically excludes five hunting breeds, the Hungarian Vizsla is one of those five. Even there, the law is being reconsidered due to the number of reported tail damages in all traditionally docked breeds.

In Sweden, a disastrous experiment resulted in tremendous pain and suffering for German Shorthaired Pointers when Sweden placed a ban on tail docking.

In 1989, a group of 26 litters consisted of 191 individual dogs were tracked when the docking ban began and statistics were kept up to date over the following few years. In 1990, 72 individual dogs had received tail injuries, corresponding to 38% of the group. The year after, the number of tail-injured dogs had increased to 92, corresponding to 51% of the group.

Let's place that statistic in perspective. If a docking ban were placed into New Zealand now, one in two GSPs will have a tail injury in the first few years of their life, of those, 1 in 13 will be severe enough to require amputation.

Tracking individual dogs over two years it was found that the tail injuries sustained in 37 of the dogs were unchanged. In other words the injury had still not repaired after two agonising years. Tail injuries on 47 of the dogs had become worse.

Further detail can be gained from a report [here](#)

I have heard many very cruel attempts to ignore this valid statistic including "It was 10 years ago so can no longer be used" and most commonly "It was gathered by the GSP Club and therefore cannot be valid". This last is particularly disturbing as the statistics from veterinary bodies and anti-docking organisations like the SPCA are decidedly missing. The point being that only the dog owners themselves had enough care about their dogs to go to all the work of collecting, collating, and publishing the information, the anti-docking brigade would rather that this statistic disappear, and dogs continue to suffer than to admit that tail docking, at least in some cases, could benefit the dog.

Myth 10: But the vets themselves (who know best) are against docking

I must correct this statement. The Vets are not united in this call, only the Veterinary Body is. In this issue the Vets simply do not know best. The only education that most vets ever get is to be told never to dock?

It gets even worse than that. It seems that the Veterinary profession is the only profession that actively discourages their members from even discussing the subject. Not only are vets not taught docking, they cannot even learn it from their peers and are frowned upon if they bring up the subject. No wonder there is so much misinformation even among well trained and otherwise respected veterinarians.

I ask you to consider why the veterinary association, when it has publicly agreed that there is overwhelming evidence that there is no discernable pain; when it has stated in their own

minutes that there is a noticeable rise in tail injuries in traditionally docked breeds in countries after tail banning has been in place for a short time; when it has publicly done these things why still ask for a tail docking ban?

The answer is either one of two things: either they look favourably on the projected income from prolonged repairing of damaged tails (I doubt it, most vets I know are genuinely caring people); or their body is taking the stand of the "politically correct", making themselves look good by appealing to the unknowing public who have been fed on the false advertising by the likes of the RSPCA.

Conclusion

Now that we have discounted the main arguments against docking, let me place a few arguments for docking.

No-one I've heard, including the most vocal SPCA, the Vets, or the Government, are even considering banning the docking of lambs tails. Why? Because there are very valid reasons why lambs should be docked. Why then are we considering banning docking the tails of the working gundog who has just as valid reasons?

The inconsistency of the veterinarian profession is extremely puzzling. They have decided that they are against docking dogs, yet many will dock when asked by a breeder, even though they have received no training in the procedure. They have also been known to perform unnecessary cosmetic surgery on dogs simply to improve the looks of a dog such as neutical implantation. How can then the veterinary profession justify it's politically correct stand on tail docking?

At the same time, I stress that there are some very worthy vets out there but ask you to note that the remarks are made about the veterinary profession in general.

Docking pups at 2-3 days old, before the nervous system has developed in the tail, causes the dog little to no pain and no lasting health or psychological problems, this is generally accepted now by the scientific community, along with the statement that few complete studies have been made on the effect of docking, or indeed, not docking.

Not allowing docking on a traditionally docked gundog may cause pain and suffering from constantly re-opening wounds to the tail. This demoralizes the dog and makes it shy from the brashness required in the field.

There is a concerted anti-docking campaign around the world to place pressure in governments everywhere to ban tail docking. When this bill was presented for hearing we suddenly found that we were against some very strong opposition. Opposition that has been in committees and private meetings with MPs and government offices.

Dog owners were dismayed and caught completely off guard by the intensity of the opposition within the select committee when we began our submissions. The money spent on false advertising by the SPCA was astounding. I say false as even the Government publically told the SPCA that it was to cease the advertising showing obvious errors designed to misinform the public. The SPCA continued.

Reader's can follow This link for the [New Zealand Council of Docked Breeds](#) that will give some further insight into other breeds and submissions both for and against docking.

Also, an excellent discussion on the New Zealand Kennel Club discussion forum gives some interesting insights into tail docking. [Follow this link](#) to view the discussion.

Readers may also email Steve Peacocke, the writer at steve@trader.co.nz with any comments or requests for permission to reprint in your local newsletter.



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