



DISPELLING THE MYTHS OF CROPPED EARS, DOCKED TAILS, DEWCLAWS, AND "DEBARKING"



Purebred dogs are purpose-bred dogs: They come in all shapes and sizes. The characteristics that make each of these dogs unique also help them perform the functions for which they were bred.

The physical appearance of the dogs illustrates this, and is also an important part of each breed's history. For example, the thick body and heavy fur on a St. Bernard make it the perfect dog for mountain rescue. The short legs and long, narrow body of a Dachshund (German for "badger hunter") allow it to burrow underground to hunt badger.

Many owners of specific breeds wish to maintain their dog's historic practical function by having their puppy's ears cropped, tails docked, or dewclaws removed.

While some people unfamiliar with the breeds believe that these practices are purely aesthetic and question their necessity, these procedures often actually enhance the dog's ability to perform the tasks it is meant to do, and in many cases protect the dog from serious injury later in life.

Bark softening (often inaccurately called "debarking") is another hotly debated procedure. This is not purely a procedure of convenience, but rather a viable option that allows a dog in certain circumstances to remain in its loving home rather than being sent to a shelter.

Ear cropping, tail docking, dewclaw removal, and bark softening are not procedures of convenience, but rather safe and standard animal husbandry practices designed to protect the safety and welfare of dogs.

Understanding the Procedures

Ear cropping, tail docking, dewclaw removal, and debarking are procedures that are increasingly debated in the general public and in public policy. To help gain insight on these issues, let's begin by defining these terms:

Ear cropping is a procedure by which a dog's ears are trimmed, or "cropped", so that they can stand erect rather than flop over. Common breeds of dogs with cropped ears include Great Danes, all three sizes of Schnauzers, and Doberman Pinschers. The American Kennel Club (AKC) currently recognizes 20 breeds with cropped ears.

Tail docking refers to the removal of a portion of the tail. The length that is docked varies depending on the breed. Dogs with docked tails include Cocker Spaniels, Rottweilers, and Yorkshire Terriers. Currently, 63 breeds recognized by the AKC have docked tails. Some dogs, such as the Old English Sheepdog and Australian Shepherd, may appear to be docked, but may have actually been born with a "bobtail", or naturally short tail.

Dewclaw removal is a procedure by which the dewclaws, which are essentially extra claws that are located higher up the leg than the rest of a dog's claws and serve little to no purpose for the majority of breeds, are removed. Most dogs are born with dewclaws.

While a few dogs, such as the Norwegian Lundehund, use them to scale rocky cliffs, the dewclaw serves virtually no purpose for most dogs. Active dogs are prone to getting them caught and torn, causing extreme pain and significant injury. For these cases, it is better for them to be removed shortly after birth when little or no pain is experienced, rather than to risk serious injury and infection later in an injured mature dog.

Tail docking and dewclaw removal are performed shortly after birth, when the puppy's nervous system is not fully developed. As a result, the puppy feels little to no pain, has no resulting pain memory, and experiences no lasting negative health issues. Some lawmakers have sought to require anesthesia for these procedures. However, since they are performed so soon after birth, anesthesia should not be required, as this could be life-threatening for the young puppy. Waiting until they are old enough to handle anesthesia would actually result in a more painful and traumatic procedure.



“Bark softening” (often inaccurately called “debarking”) is a veterinary procedure that softens a dog’s bark by altering a dog’s vocal cords with a laser or biopsy tool. The dog may still bark, but at a softer volume. When performed correctly by a veterinarian, the most common method is minimally invasive and takes just a couple minutes to perform.

Bark softening is a veterinary procedure that may ultimately prevent a dog from ending up in a shelter or euthanized. Both the American Kennel Club and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) believe that this is a viable veterinary procedure that may be an option for some owners when other efforts to correct excessive barking have failed. This safe, viable procedure will soften the dog’s bark to a level that will not be a disturbance to the neighborhood, thereby allowing an owner to keep a dog whose excessive barking could otherwise be considered a nuisance. The AKC and the AVMA also agree that this procedure should only be performed by a qualified, licensed veterinarian.

Much of the opposition regarding these procedures comes from a misunderstanding of why and how they are performed. Many believe that these procedures are painful, performed purely for convenience or cosmetic reasons, and have no value. This is completely false. In fact, when properly performed, these practices are significantly less painful and much less physically traumatic for the dogs than other common elective surgeries such as spaying and neutering. Each of these procedures is a safe, humane standard practice that serves a practical purpose, and in the case of ear cropping and tail docking, may preserve a dog’s ability to perform its historic function.

Ear Cropping and Tail Docking: A Historical and Practical Perspective

All dogs recognized by the American Kennel Club (AKC) are placed in one of seven groups based on the functions for which they were developed and often continue to perform. Ear cropping and tail docking are historical procedures, performed in some breeds for over 100 years, that can help dogs better and more safely perform the functions for which they were originally bred.

Dogs in the Working Group, for example have traditionally been used for a number of important tasks including serving as guard, search and rescue, and seeing-eye dogs for the blind. As a working breed, the Doberman’s cropped ears help enhance its hearing, thereby helping it perform its tasks to the best of its ability. According to the Doberman Pinscher Club of America, “An erect eared dog can localize the source of a sound to within a 5-degree cone, whereas a drop eared dog can only localize a sound source to within a 20-degree cone. Since Dobermans do search and detection as well as search and rescue, cropped ears are a decided advantage.”*

Other dogs, such as the Bouvier de Flanders in the Herding Group, were traditionally used for many purposes on farms, and “tails and ears were routinely cropped because they were easy targets for farm predators.”**

Sporting Group breeds, such as spaniels, often go into thick brush to track game. While some of these breeds (such as a Labrador Retrievers) have thick, strong tails or tails with thick hair, other breeds have weaker tails with often wispy hair that are prone to injury when they run through thick brush or brambles.

In the same way, a docked tail on a Terrier makes it stronger, which in some situations can help protect the dogs. For example, the bottom two-thirds of the Airedale Terrier’s tail is incredibly strong and may be used to help pull this largest of the terriers to safety in certain circumstances when they are performing a variety of activities including hunting animals in the ground or water, or serving as a working dog. The last third, however, is very weak and fragile. When not docked, the tail is prone to breaking, splitting, or other serious injuries.***

Public Policy Considerations

The American Kennel Club and its local dog clubs throughout the United States are extremely concerned about animal cruelty and are dedicated to the breeding and raising of healthy, happy dogs.

We strongly support laws that target irresponsible owners and those who would mistreat or harm animals. Likewise, it is important that any legislation seeking to protect dogs not arbitrarily ban these or other procedures that can protect a dog’s safety and welfare. Standard, safe animal husbandry practices that preserve the ability of purpose-bred dogs to excel at the functions for which they were bred should remain legal and never be construed as cruelty.

In the same way, bark softening (“debarking”), which can preserve the home and the life of a noisy dog when other remedies fall, should not be banned. This decision, like other health care decisions, is one best left to the dog’s owner in conjunction with their veterinarian, and should not be subject to arbitrary government regulations or restrictions.

Clearly defining animal cruelty, neglect, and mistreatment in statute will protect the safety of dogs and hold owners accountable without placing arbitrary restrictions on safe, accepted procedures that allow dogs to excel at the tasks they were bred to perform and ensure their welfare, health and safety throughout their lives.



*Theresa Mullen, DPCA Public Education Committee, “Living with a Dobe”, published on <https://dpca.org/publiced/living-with-a-dobe/ears/>

**Kitty Korth for the ABdFC, “Beginner’s Guide to the Bouvier”, published on <https://www.bouvier.org/beginner-guide-to-the-bouvier.html>

***Letter from the Airedale Terrier Club of America, Inc. to the American Veterinary Medical Association, June 6, 2009.