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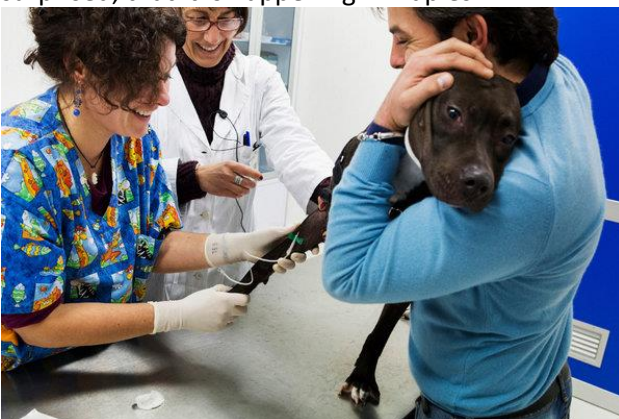
A Forensic Approach to a Sidewalk Nuisance -

By JIM YARDLEY FEB. 22, 2014



A dog named Daisy and its owner in Naples, Italy, which has started a DNA database to find owners who do not pick up after pets. Credit Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times
NAPLES, Italy — Problems? Yes, conceded Tommaso Sodano, the vice mayor here, Naples has problems. Unpaid debts have reportedly topped \$2 billion. Many streets are pocked with potholes. The police department is underfunded, organized crime operates like a shadow state, and illegal dumps are scattered around what is still a grittily beautiful port city. And then there is what dogs leave behind on the sidewalks. Naples has no shortage of that, either. Yet to the surprise of some people, including more than a few Neapolitans, the municipal administration is trying to stake out a reputation as a civic innovator by positioning Naples at the cutting edge of dog-waste eradication. By taking DNA samples. Of dogs. “I know some people find it funny,” Mr. Sodano said, smiling, “that with all the problems the city has, we would focus on dog poop. I know that.”

Well, yes, maybe it is a bit funny. But another thing also appears to be true: For many Neapolitans who must navigate the city’s sidewalks, the initiative is far from unwelcome. In the affluent neighborhood of Vomero, which is serving as a testing ground for the cleanup campaign, many residents are quite pleased, if surprised, that it is happening in Naples.



Veterinary workers in Naples drew blood from Fiona, a pit bull, for the DNA database. Credit Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

“This seems more German or Finnish than Italian,” said Virpi Sihvonen, a Finn who moved to Naples in the late 1980s after marrying a local man. In the mornings, Ms. Sihvonen said, she often watches a man release his three dogs into the streets to run off to do their business. He whistles, the dogs return, and their waste is left behind. “He’s not the only one,” she added.

The problem is as universal as cockroaches, and seemingly as unsolvable. Urban dog ownership demands a balance of love and duty, and not everyone is dutiful about cleaning up after the morning walk. Cities have tried everything from the postal service (a Spanish mayor mailed the stuff back to dog owners) to shaming (some cities have publicized the names of offending owners) to bribery (some parks in Mexico City offered free Wi-Fi in exchange for bags of waste).

Naples has opted for science and technology. The idea is that every dog in the city will be given a blood test for DNA profiling in order to create a database of dogs and owners. When an offending pile is discovered, it will be scraped up and subjected to DNA testing. If a match is made in the database, the owner will face a fine of up to 500 euros, or about \$685.

The DNA initiative might seem a tad ambitious for Naples, a city that struggles to collect the garbage. Apartment complexes and condo associations across the United States are increasingly using similar programs, but Naples represents a much bigger canine population, with estimates of more than 80,000 dogs in the city.

Mr. Sodano and other city employees are confident the program will work, noting that a similar campaign has been successful on the nearby resort island of Capri. In Naples, the campaign so far is limited to Vomero and the adjacent neighborhood of Arenella, and costs more than \$27,000. Teams of police officers and health workers started joint patrols in January to spread awareness of the program and hand out a few fines. At the city's veterinary hospital, technicians have taken blood samples from about 200 dogs, many of them accompanied by owners who were appalled by the problem.

"It's really disgusting," said Dr. Maria Teresa Ceccarelli, who came to the hospital with her rambunctious yellow Labrador, Tommy. "I don't see people walking their dogs. I just see the results in the street."

On a recent drizzly morning, Capt. Enrico Del Gaudio of the Municipal Police led a patrol down Via Luca Giordano, a major commercial street in Vomero, where several residents were walking their dogs before work. Dressed undercover in jeans and hiking boots for the patrol, Captain Del Gaudio is diplomatic — he describes dog waste as "presences" — and finds nothing silly about the campaign. At his children's school, he is known as the dog-waste cop.

"I'm a hero," he said, laughing.

He was especially proud of the condition of Via Luca Giordano, which was unscathed for blocks. Even though the city is still building its DNA database and has yet to start testing what it finds, he said, the program is already influencing public behavior.

"Now, when I walk the streets, the presences have greatly diminished," Captain Del Gaudio said. "Before, it was like an obstacle course. Every day, a child would walk into school with a little gift under her shoe."

Admittedly, there are still gifts to be discovered. An unguided tour along Via Aniello Falcone, a residential street here, revealed a proliferation of presences, including a few mashed with the footprints of unlucky pedestrians, evidence that Captain Del Gaudio's work has only begun.

Daniele Minichini, an official with an independent police union, is not amused by this use of policing resources, especially in a city that is the headquarters of the Camorra mafia. For two decades, Officer Minichini has argued that money should be spent on better equipment or even uniforms for officers. He said Naples must improve the sewage system, the roads and other infrastructure — not focus on what dogs leave behind. He also predicted that costs would rise sharply once the program was expanded to other parts of the city.

"When you have a house to restore, do you first build a parquet floor?" he asked. "Or do you repair the walls and the windows?"

Mr. Sodano, the vice mayor, said the concerns about finances and administrative focus were understandable but misplaced. He said city officials were already trying to claw out of debt and address the city's major problems. But he said the cleanup enforcement program was a chance to demonstrate municipal problem solving and to remind citizens that they have responsibilities, too.

"The main goal is respect for the rules," he said. Nor, he added, should the city's huge problems preclude Naples from doing the small things that keep it beautiful.

"Governing Naples," he said, "certainly requires a sparkle of madness."

Gaia Pianigiani contributed reporting.