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## REVIEW ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# An Exploration of Dog-Related Policy Through a Legal Animal Geographies Lens

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## ABSTRACT

This article employs a legal animal geographies lens to redefine dogs as more-than-property, focusing on the UK's legislative shift from the Theft Act 1968 to the Pet Abduction Act 2024, recognising their sentience. We explore how evolving societal values reshape legal frameworks, emphasising dogs' emotional and social significance in human-dog relations. The study examines three legislative approaches - controlling out-of-place animals, regulating animal materiality, and protecting against harm - revealing their spatial and political dimensions. By analysing geographies of UK dog theft, we highlight patterns, victim experiences, and the property-companion divide. This shift challenges anthropocentric and speciesist legal systems, offering a model for multispecies justice with global policy impact. We envision future research, including non-western and indigenous perspectives, to advance ethical human-animal governance. Bridging animal and legal geographies, this study provides critical insights for students, researchers, and policymakers to understand and reform human-animal relations worldwide, advocating for ethical, evidence-based policies.

## 1 | Introduction

Worldwide, there is an estimated 700million domesticated dog (*Canis familiaris*) population, made up of around 25% (~175million) owned pets and 75% (~525million) free-roaming unowned strays (World Organisation for Animal Health 2023). These human-dog relations have been shaped by cultural, economic, individual human, and individual canine factors (Nast 2006), which in turn have informed the status and treatment of dogs in policy and practice at national, regional, and local levels (Serpell 2017). Within western cultures dogs now take up many roles in society, as pets and companions (Haraway 2003; R. Fox 2006; Power 2008; Irvine 2013; R. Fox and Gee 2019; Irvine and Cilia 2017; Schuurman 2021), assistants and guides (Eason 2019; Pemberton 2019; Arathoon 2022), and border officers and police officers (Knight and Sang 2020). As pets and companions,

dogs share our homes and are considered 'family' or even 'children', as people form emotional bonds to them (Charles and Davies 2008; Charles 2016; Irvine and Cilia 2017). Their loss is also grieved, reflecting the depth of these connections (Lorimer 2019; Schuurman and Redmalm 2019). One key aspect of companionship are the mental health and social benefits of pet ownership such as reducing loneliness (Franklin 2015; Han 2022) and increasing socialisation of the human owner through practices such as dog walking (Amberson 2023). For dogs, companionship entails 'significant otherness,' a mutually beneficial bond creating meaning and connection through shared lives and mutual care (Haraway 2003, 2008).

With the multitude of important roles, and the cultural, social, and emotional bond we now have with dogs, there has been a considerable increase in legislation on dogs in the UK and its

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devolved nations (Weir et al. 2025). The prevention of harm and promotion of welfare for owned dogs is generally covered in animal welfare legislation (see World Animal Protection 2020); however, as property of humans, owned dogs often have ‘little material difference or increased legal protection than an inanimate object’ (Allen and Wyatt 2024, 181). A prime example of this comes from the US as Bloch and Martínez (2020) discuss pet dogs as legal property in the context of police action in which dogs are killed and owners reimbursed for ‘damaged property.’ They directly address dog ownership from a property perspective and legal violence against dogs by police. They further outline how these actions of canicide are ‘clustered to a statistically significant degree in predominantly low-income communities of colour’ (p. 142) in Los Angeles County. Bloch and Martínez (2020) argue that canicide is part of wider state violence and needs to be included in analyses of such violence even when humans are not directly involved.

As geographers, a legal geographies framework offers us the ability to investigate ‘the co-constitutive relationship of people, place and law’ (Bennett and Layard 2015, 406) through a spatial lens. Braverman et al. (2014, 1) explain that ‘the where of law’, the lived places and social spaces which are inscribed with legal significance, ‘are not simply the inert sites of law but are inextricably implicated in how law happens’. In this sense, the law shapes space and space shapes law. There has been a push to understanding the legal lives of more-than-human others in legal geographies, including animals (see Braverman 2011, 2013, 2016; Ojalampi and Blomley 2015; Delaney 2015, 2017). As Andrews and McCarthy (2014, 9) state: ‘There is much to be gained by encouraging legal geographers to pay greater attention to the ways in which non-human species, entities and systems provide metaphorical and sometimes literal ground for formal legal struggles, and, in turn, are profoundly affected by the outcomes of those struggles’. One example of legislation in the UK-context around dog ownership in (elderly) care home settings show this relationship between space and legislation (M. Fox and Ray 2019; Toze et al. 2025). M. Fox and Ray (2019) argue that there is a disjuncture between the legal and social understandings of dogs where, in law, dogs are objects whereas for many people, dogs are living beings. In care homes this ontological divide is especially prominent where many elderly people are forced to give up their pets upon entering a care home, signifying a loss of family, companionship, and home (M. Fox and Ray 2019). Ideas of animal companionship combatting loneliness and fostering health and wellbeing are dismissed through the lens of ownership and ageist concerns of ‘capacity’. M. Fox and Ray (2019, 218) thus contend that legislative initiatives should ‘recognise the value of inter-species attachments and the limited opportunities for older people to ‘exit’ the services and go elsewhere’. This example shows, within one space, how legislation and space shape one another. Building on this example, we aim to bring together animal and legal geographies by situating stolen and abducted dogs at this research nexus, to interrogate the legal status of dogs as more-than-property.

In recent years, the tension between the legal status of pets as property and social understandings of individual companion animals as family members has been increasingly challenged by academics and animal advocates. In England, for example, stolen dogs were traditionally regarded as stolen property under

the Theft Act 1968, with sentencing dependent on monetary or retail value of stolen property. Pet Theft Reform (2025), an evidence-based campaign founded in 2018, challenged this, arguing pets are more-than-property (their economic value in law should not be prioritised over the social, cultural, and emotional role of pets), and pet abduction should be a specific criminal offence. Between 2018 and 2024 their five government petitions gained a total of 734,563 signatures—with four passing 100,000 signatures in four consecutive years (2018–2021) - triggering parliamentary debates. This led to the offence of ‘pet theft’ initially becoming part of the *Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill* introduced in May 2022 before being withdrawn in June 2023. Anna Firth MP introduced the *Pet Abduction Bill* as a Private Members’ (Ballot) Bill in December 2023, the Pet Abduction Act 2024 gained Royal Assent in May 2024 and became law in England and Northern Ireland in August 2024. Announcing the new legislation, which provides a 5-year maximum prison sentence for dog and cat abduction, Defra (2024) explained: ‘The new law recognises that cats and dogs are not inanimate objects but sentient beings capable of experiencing distress and other emotional trauma when they are stolen from their owners or keepers’.

The offence of pet abduction is currently unique to England and Northern Ireland,<sup>1</sup> stolen dogs (and cats) remain stolen property everywhere else in the world. The shift from theft to abduction in law reflects evolving societal attitudes towards companion animals.<sup>2</sup> This article argues that legal animal geographies provide a critical framework for rethinking the legal status of dogs as more-than-property, particularly in the context of pet theft and abduction, by highlighting the interplay of law, space, and nonhuman lives. By examining the UK’s recent legislative shift from treating stolen dogs as property under the Theft Act 1968 to recognising their sentience through the Pet Abduction Act 2024, we demonstrate how evolving socio-cultural attitudes towards human-dog relations can reshape legal frameworks to better reflect dogs’ emotional and social significance. This is significant because it challenges anthropocentric and speciesist legal systems, offering a model for multispecies justice that could influence global policy. To build this argument, the article is structured as follows: first, we situate the legal and political geographies of dogs, exploring three key legislative approaches - control of out-of-place animals; regulation of animal materiality; and protection from harm. Second, we analyse emerging geographies of dog theft in the UK, examining patterns, victim experiences, and the property-companion divide. Finally, we propose future trajectories for legal animal geographies, advocating for expanded perspectives in future research. This approach not only bridges animal and legal geographies but also demonstrates their relevance for students, researchers, and policymakers seeking to understand and reform human-animal relations in policy and practice across the world.

## 2 | Situating the Legal and Political Animal Geographies of Dogs

In discussing the connection between law and animals, Braverman (2016) argues that we need to envision legal frameworks that move beyond human perspectives. It is in this essence, where law

has been so strictly wedded to human actors, that we can see law as ‘an anthropocentric terrain ... it entrenches the interests of humans over virtually all others and centres the reasonable human person as a main legal subject’ (Delaney 2003; Deckha 2013, 1; Nurse and Ryland 2013; Jeffrey 2020). Others build on this claim, arguing that the centring of the rights of people in animal law has led to a criminal justice system that is speciesist (Nurse and Wyatt 2020; Allen and Wyatt 2024). Further, critics claim that marginal welfare improvements for animal lives can benefit human ‘owners’ economically, perpetuate animal exploitation, and prevent animals from being afforded rights (Francione 2007). This is despite a recognition that animals are ‘implicitly political’ (Hobson 2007, 251; Srinivasan 2016) and should ‘be viewed as dynamic beings, inextricable to political processes, and integral to the formation and operation of the political networks that regulate, protect and exploit them’ (p. 250). Building on the species justice approach, which takes into account the rights of all living things (White 2008); Braverman (2016, 3) contends, we should think about, ‘what, in legal terms, it means to be human and nonhuman, what it means to govern and be governed, and what are the ethical and political concerns that emerge from the project of governing human as well as more-than-human life’ (Braverman 2016, 3).

When mentioned in relation to law, animals tend to be either vilified or valorised. This is done through processes of categorisation, where laws position animals as: wild, domestic, agricultural, or pests, or placed in lab and zoos (Braverman 2013) with each category manifesting differently spatially, temporally, and materially. Urbanik (2012) discusses how the very definition of an ‘animal’ is complicated by politics. In an example of the US, Urbanik shows that half the states exempt humans from ‘animal’ categories, and many exclude whole groups of animals such as fish in Arkansas and Alaska, insects in New Mexico, livestock in Iowa, and agricultural animals and wildlife in Utah. The reasons for this are because the categorisation of animals is linked to their treatment and exclusion from certain welfare laws, to help local animal industries, and due to a lack of knowledge of different species. We can see this further in the exclusion of horseshoe crabs so their blood can be used for vaccinations (Gorman 2024), poorly suited regulations and welfare guidance for fish in scientific research (Greenhough et al. 2024), and the political manoeuvres and bureaucratic codes that shape animal laws (Myelnikov 2024). Many legal issues surrounding dogs, and pets more generally, often centre around their bodies and their encounter-ability within different human-controlled spaces. This can be seen in three ways: (i) laws that seek to control out-of-place animals; (ii) laws that seek to regulate the materiality of animals themselves, and (iii) laws that seek to protect animals from bodily harm, each of which will be explored below.

## 2.1 | Law, Control, and Out-of-Place Animals

First, some laws seek to *control animals* within human spaces. These laws and legislation centre dogs as needing to be under human control in ‘animal spaces’ (Philo and Wilbert 2000) and public spaces. The control of animals can be linked more broadly to biopolitical projects in which the subjugation of bodies and control of populations occur (Gibbs 2024). Biopolitical control

takes place due to several reasons such the need to control ‘wild’ or ‘invasive’ populations that may be harming or killing local wildlife or be a cause to human health and wellbeing. This can be seen through Howell’s (2015) work on increasing regulation of dogs in Victorian Britain, due to fear of diseases. Alongside a broader movement of cleansing the city that led to a mass exodus of working animals, such as cattle, from cities to peripheral areas (Philo 1995), a fear of rabies and hydrophobia challenged the place of the dog in Victorian Britain and increased regulation of free-roaming animals (Pemberton and Worboys 2007; Howell 2015). Pemberton and Worboys (2007) outline the history of rabies in Victorian Britain, the differing opinions on rabies from political elites to the public, and preventive measures such as muzzling and eventually the vaccination for rabies and hydrophobia by Louis Pasteur. The idea that emerges is the need to control animals to limit risk to humans.

### 2.1.1 | Safety in Public Space

Legal frameworks, such as Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) in England and Wales, mandate dog control measures, including compulsory leashing in designated areas to safeguard public safety and protect wildlife. Recent scholarship on the geographies of dog walking illuminates the interplay between human-canine interactions and control practices, shaped by spatial contexts (e.g., urban, rural, dog parks, or nature reserves), legal regulations, social norms, and the behaviour and characteristics of dogs.

Fletcher and Platt (2018), for instance, conceptualise dog walking as more than a mundane activity, framing it as a culturally significant practice where human-animal relationships are negotiated and frequently contested. Their work highlights how divergent expectations regarding dog behaviour, responsible ownership, and control generate socio-spatial tensions. Complementing this, O’Hare (2024) explores the socio-spatial challenges faced by owners of “problematic” dogs - those exhibiting unwanted or aggressive behaviours - who often strategically select isolated routes, such as industrial estates, to avoid confrontations in public spaces. Similarly, Walliss et al. 2025 emphasise the exclusionary impacts of breed-specific legislation, notably the UK’s 2023 XL Bully ban, which marginalises caregivers and dogs and restricts their access to shared spaces, further complicating the socio-spatial dynamics of dog walking.

Dog walking can foster a strong sense of community, belonging, and self-expression, with owners often strongly identifying as “dog people” (Amberson 2023). However, this social practice is frequently situated within contested urban spaces, where competing expectations and uses of public areas, such as dog parks, generate tensions. Although intended as spaces for canine exercise and socialisation, dog parks often emerge as sites of conflict driven by clashing expectations surrounding dog behaviour, owner responsibility, and spatial access (Tissot 2011; Urbanik and Morgan 2013; Instone and Sweeney 2014; Wolch and Owens 2018; Włodarczyk 2021).

Disputes over unleashed dogs, perceptions of “misbehaviour,” and inadequate waste management, reflect deeper socio-spatial



struggles over inclusion and belonging in shared urban environments. Tissot (2011), for example, demonstrates how dog parks mirror broader social dynamics, including class-based exclusion, where owners of certain breeds or socioeconomic backgrounds dominate interactions, marginalising others. Similarly, Instone and Sweeney (2014) highlight how such spaces reveal power imbalances, exacerbating exclusion for owners navigating stigmatised breeds or behavioural challenges. These contested dynamics illustrate that dog walking, while fostering community for some, simultaneously generates exclusion and negotiation, shaping the socio-spatial contours of urban public spaces.

### 2.1.2 | Control in Rural Spaces

Control of dogs also expands from public spaces in cities to the countryside. In examining practices of dog walking in the Cairngorms National Park, Brown (2015) illustrates how imaginaries and experiences of landscapes and animals combine to shape interspecies co-existence. In Scotland, outdoor access with dogs is legally permitted over virtually all land, through the *Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003* and by the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, where these rights are exercised through ‘responsibly’ and the need to keep dogs under ‘proper’ or ‘close control’, to stop wildlife and sheep being harmed by dogs (Brown and Dille 2012; Brown 2015). However, Brown (2015, 39) finds that ‘a tension emerges between well-being and countryside regulation: the well-being associated with experiencing “freedom”, freedom of dogs to run and human’s to experience nature, ‘and the “control” required by law for multispecies flourishing’, where the health impacts of freedom are limited due to dogs needing to be on a leash. This highlights how imaginaries of the National Park and human-animal relationship can lead to moments of rupture (e.g., a dog off-lead chasing a sheep) and reveal that the outdoors is not an escape from regulation, constraint, and ‘control’.

Pet theft works in a similar vein, where regulation is in place to keep dogs and cats in (the correct) human(‘s’) control but challenges the sole idea of human ownership of animals by translating the social, cultural and emotional relationship humans have with their pets into the Pet Abduction Act 2024. Rather than being based on fear of disease, the Pet Abduction Act 2024 can be seen through the need to protect the human-pet relationship, and to keep pets safe from harm.

## 2.2 | Law and Regulating Animal Materiality

A second approach to animal law is the *regulation of animal bodies* themselves, the material of what makes that animal, what it is. Work by Srinivasan (2013) has examined the regulation of ‘stray’ or ‘street’ dogs in both the UK and India, to interrogate conventional understandings of dog (well)being. Investigating how dog control laws converge with the spaces and lives of stray dogs, Srinivasan (2013) shows how legal definitions and legislation in the UK is ingrained with dogs as property whereas in India ABC rules, separate dogs into pet and street dog categories, where ‘street dog’ legitimises the dog’s position in the street rather than as a pet that is out-of-place. However, in both the UK and India ‘dogs that are on the street are regarded as potential threats to

human health and safety’ (Srinivasan 2013, 110) as ABC rules<sup>3</sup> have neutering and vaccination strategies built into law in India, and larger capture, neuter, vaccinate programmes are underway in different countries (e.g., Willetts and Beck 2020; Arluke and Rowan 2020; Savvides 2013; Yıldırım 2022). This history and ongoing fear of animal-related disease can be seen in the increased securitisation of animal bodies through animal travel quarantines and the introduction of pet passports in 2000 (Pemberton and Worboys 2007). Control measures for public safety continue to be widespread across the world. In Roumania, for example, the fatal mauling of a child by stray dogs in 2013 intensified the perceived threat of street dogs to human life, leading to wide-scale dog culling across the country (Crețan 2015). Breed specific legislation, which categorises, regulates, and controls ‘dangerous’ dog types, is also common at national, regional, and local levels. For example, McCarthy (2016, 560), discusses the introduction of the *Dangerous Dogs Act (1991) (DDA)* in the UK, and a move from controlling dogs due to fear of disease (like discussed above with rabies and hydrophobia), to instead focus on controlling dogs due to supposed ‘biological dangerousness of certain dog breeds’. The outcome of the DDA (1991) in the UK was to introduce the banning of owning, selling and breeding of the Pit Bull Terrier, Japanese Tosa, Doga Argentino and Fila Brasileiro breeds. The banning of these breeds is entangled with class ideologies (McCarthy 2016), perceived fear and social anxieties, media representations (Cohen and Richardson 2002), and targets dogs because of how they look (Parkinson 2024). This is expressed by Dickey (2016, 43) who argues: ‘When a cocker spaniel bites it does so as a member of its species. It is never anything but a dog. When a pit bull bites, it does so as a member of its breed. A pit bull is never anything but a pit bull’. This is problematic, when in the UK, during the implementation of the DDA, there existed no definition of pit bulls from The Kennel Club, and instead there was a focus on if a dog looked like a pit bull, then it would come under these rules and be either euthanised or placed on a register, neutered, and ordered to be muzzled and leashed in public places (Parkinson 2024). This process was replicated with the American XL Bully ‘type’ dog, which was banned in England and Wales in 2023; and Scotland and Northern Ireland in 2024. In the US, breed specific legislation is attributed by individual cities, American Indian Reservations, and military (Alonso-Recarte 2020; Arluke and Rowan 2020; Parkinson 2024), whilst other countries such as Canada, Ireland, France, and Spain, all have differing breed specific legislation spanning from restrictions to bans. These breed specific laws thus work to regulate the animal body itself, making particular animals ‘killable’ (Haraway 2008). The Pet Abduction Act 2024 does not control or alter the materiality of animals’ bodies but alongside this act there is a greater push for pets to be microchipped to help prevent abduction and improve the chances of reunification (see Allen et al. 2022).

## 2.3 | Law and Animal Protection

The third approach is animal law which seeks to *protect animals from harm*. Whilst the above two forms of law seek to control animals, and regulate animals’ bodies, these laws situate animals’ bodies as potential sites of violence and aim to illegalise, and reduce the risk, of violence to animals occurring.

An example of law seeking to protect animals is the UK Animal Welfare Act (2006), in that it places a duty of care on humans to 'ensure that the needs of an animal for which [they are] responsible are met to the extent required by good practice', including the need 'to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease' (§9:1, 9:2) (see Nurse 2016). Section 8 of the Act covers dog fighting, making it a criminal offence to, among other things, cause an animal fight to take place, publicise or knowingly receive money for admission to such a fight, or make or accept bets on its outcome. It also criminalises the keeping or training of dogs for fighting as well as keeping any premises used for fighting. In wider global contexts, the *Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act* (2007) (H.R. 137), prohibits dog fighting within the US (Walliss 2023). This is to protect dogs and members of the public from physical violence. This act grew out of the history of dog fighting in the US, with the practice exported over from the UK as a way to display masculinity, achieve status, and gamble (Kalof and Taylor 2007; Nast 2015). As a form of legislation centred on protecting animals, the UK Animal Welfare Act (2006), seeks protections to animals from bodily harm, from tail docking, and ear cropping, to death.

The four nations of the UK also possess legislation, such as the *Animal Welfare (Breeding of Dogs) (Wales) Regulations 2014* and the *Animal Welfare (Licencing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018* that aim to restrict the unscrupulous breeding and sale of dogs. Those breeding/selling three or more litters of dogs in any 12-month period and/or breeding and advertising the selling of dogs must have a licence to do so. Licensed breeders are expected to adhere to several conditions, such as providing a suitable environment and diet for breeding dogs and their puppies, protecting both from pain, suffering, injury and disease, and implementing a suitable socialisation and habituation programme for puppies. In addition, licenced breeders must ensure that a dog is not mated if aged less than 12 months, does not give birth to more than one litter of puppies every 12 months, nor give birth to more than six litters in total. Breeders who fail to maintain minimum standards can have their licence either suspended, varied, or revoked and are also liable to a fine and/or up to 6 months imprisonment. However, as is also the case with the Animal Welfare Act (2006), prosecutions for animal cruelty under this legislation are rare (Walliss 2024).

Pet theft law takes the incentive that pets will be in harm's way if they are taken out of their regular more-than-human home. Pet theft law thus ties together the need to control animals through specific 'animal spaces' with the idea that this will protect them from potential harm.

### 3 | Emerging Geographies of Dog Theft/Abduction

Dog theft has a long history in the UK, with socio-spatial and legal implications that predate modern legislation.<sup>4</sup> Howell (2000) illustrates how dog-stealing in Victorian London was a widespread concern, driven by the economic value of dogs as property and their cultural significance as companions, reflecting tensions between their legal status and social roles.

Before the Pet Abduction Act 2024 (see Section 1), dog theft was recorded under general theft categories (e.g., theft from a person, from a vehicle, in a dwelling, robbery, burglary), limiting data accuracy and victim recognition due to inconsistent police reporting practices (Home Office 2021).<sup>5</sup> Although police FOI data for dog theft can be 'inconsistent, incomplete, and must be approached with caution' (Walliss et al. 2025), scholars and policymakers have found them useful for understanding the nature and extent of the crime.

Dog theft in England and Wales increased nearly 20% from 2015 (1545 cases) to 2018 (1849) across 41 police forces, and 3.5% from 2019 (1452) to 2020 (1504) across 33 forces (Allen et al. 2019; Selby-Fell and Allen 2021; Walliss et al. 2025). Media-driven moral panic during COVID-19 lockdowns amplified perceptions of a dog theft epidemic, yet data show a modest 3.7% rise in recorded dog thefts from 2020 to 2022, with estimates suggesting a more significant 44.9% increase per force (Walliss et al. 2025). Thefts spiked during the first and third lockdowns but averaged slightly higher outside these periods. Police data showed a statistically significant peak in dog thefts during July–September each year, likely due to increased dog accessibility during summer holidays (e.g., garden use). 65% of police-recorded thefts occurred from residential homes (41.5%) or gardens (23.5%), with home thefts increasing and garden thefts decreasing from 2020 to 2022, possibly reflecting recording ambiguities or shifts in access. Fewer thefts occurred in public places (7.1%), during walks (5.9%), or outside shops (1.3%), challenging perceptions of public spaces as high-risk. The overall rise in dog thefts was likely driven by a combination of opportunity (more dogs, higher value) and situational factors (accessibility, low guardianship) (Walliss et al. 2025). The significance of sensationalist media reporting and the associated moral panic on policy decision-making is an area which requires further investigation.

As well as these statistics that describe the patterns and trends of dog theft in the UK, scholars have also attempted to understand the experiences of the (human and nonhuman) victims of pet theft. Allen et al. 2022 examine the practices of searching that human victims of dog theft undertake when a dog goes missing or is stolen. They found that searching practices have a spatial-temporal logic, starting from the immediate event of theft or a dog going missing which is tied to searching local areas, to broadening out the search and involving local agencies such as police, vets, and charity liaisons, with some broadening the search nationally, over time, through print and news media. The practice of searching thus goes from a local nucleus outward over time. The role of social media in searching for lost and stolen pets was also explored by Arathoon et al. 2024. The aim of social media posts was to make the lost or stolen pet 'too hot to handle' (p. 1), that is by sharing images, information, and emotional narratives about lost or stolen pets, to go viral, and thus the pet's presence in virtual space is so overwhelming, that people return the pet for risk of arrest. Both Allen et al. 2022; Arathoon et al. 2024 outline the value of community in virtual space, in sharing and making people aware of their missing or stolen pets, but also the negative of being potentially scammed.

Literature also outlines that a pet going missing or being stolen is an emotionally challenging experience, filled with 'dread, fear, loss, love, and sadness, reflecting what many argue is a traumatic experience' (Allen et al. 2022, 523). These findings draw on the emotional relationship between humans and animals (Charles 2016; Irvine and Cilia 2017), with the idea that a

pet going missing or being stolen is like losing a member of one's own family. Furthermore, for many people, this loss is akin to an 'ambiguous absence' where animals are 'physically absent but psychologically present for their families' (Parr et al. 2016, 68). This unknowingness of what has happened to a missing or stolen pet been characterised as similar to grief (Allen et al. 2022; Arathoon et al. 2024; Venaktramanan and Roberts 2024). Building on the property-companion tension (Section 1), the unrecognised harm to stolen and abducted dogs underscores their lack of 'victim' status in property-based laws, exacerbating the trauma of 'ambiguous absence' for owners (Parr et al. 2016; Allen and Wyatt 2024).

Growing calls for reconceptualising nonhuman animals within victimology, personhood, and relational geographies emphasise their agency, emotional capacities, and ethical significance. Gillespie (2018) critiques property laws as barriers to multi-species justice, advocating for legal recognition of animal sentience. It is important to note, however, that this recognition is selective, shaped by socio-cultural and political relations that privilege companion animals like dogs and cats (although the DDA means only select breeds), as seen in the Pet Abduction Act 2024, while often excluding livestock, wildlife and other species from similar protections (Deckha 2021; Urbanik 2012). This malleability of sentience in law reflects broader power dynamics, where human preferences and economic interests determine which animals are deemed worthy of legal recognition as victims capable of suffering harm, highlighting the need for a critical approach to challenge speciesist hierarchies.

Flynn and Hall (2017) and Flynn (2024) propose a nonhuman animal victimology within criminological frameworks, recognising animals as sentient, vulnerable victims of systemic and individual harms to challenge anthropocentric biases through interdisciplinary justice approaches. In a different approach, Jones (2017, 2023) redefines animal and human personhood as a co-created, affective, and embodied process, viewing animals as agentic co-creators of place with emotional and social roles, using innovative methodologies in human-animal studies to transcend human-animal binaries.

As more research continues in this area, connecting the experiences and welfare of pets that have been stolen (Flynn et al. in preparation), there is a continued need to reflect on pet theft through a broader legal geographies framework. This is because pet theft in geographical work has so far been largely treated as separate from other pet animal law (e.g., Dangerous Dogs Act) or other geographical pet animal related topics (e.g., puppy farming, stray/street dogs and cats, dog fighting, or banned breeds), and has worked within the binary of pets as property versus pets as family. In the following section we therefore draw some future trajectories across geographical space and species for future engagements between animal and legal geographies.

#### 4 | Future Trajectories of Legal Animal Geographies

Currently, around a quarter of all domestic dogs in the world are regarded as being 'owned' (World Organisation for Animal

Health 2023). Although the cultural significance of these human-dog relations may vary globally and individually, the lives of stolen and abducted pets are entangled with laws that govern human ownership; seek to control animals within 'human spaces'; aim to regulate the materialities of animals themselves; and directly protect animals' bodies as potential sites of violence where the risk of harm can be prevented or reduced. The new pet abduction offence in England and Northern Ireland is an example of how changing socio-political attitudes towards human-animal relations and practices can transform the legal lives of animals in policy; while offering a useful insight into the legal inconsistencies for companion animals across the UK and beyond.

The Pet Abduction Act 2024, by recognising pets' sentience (Section 1), offers a model for challenging the property-companion binary in global legal systems. Although situated in a particular national context, the emerging work on dog theft and abduction clearly demonstrates how legal animal geographies can be integral to evidence-based animal advocacy, science-policy communication, and national policy change. This builds on M. Fox and Ray's (2019, 218) claim that legislative proposals should be 'empirically informed and attentive to cultural attitudes'.

We recognise that our paper takes a solely dog-centric view in analysing public policy and human-pet relations. There are of course issues with this in those other animals categorised as pets, particularly cats, will have their own unique relations with humans. We decided to focus on dogs as most pet-related policy is centred on dogs (see Weir et al. 2025). We also focussed on dogs as dogs are the focus in pet theft legislation, and there is greater debate over whether to include cats (see UK Parliament 2024).<sup>6</sup> Cats are often seen as "independent" animals in UK law, with fewer regulatory controls compared to dogs, and a less restrictive legal framework (Nurse and Ryland 2013). There are arguments that cats might more clearly challenge the property-companion divide due to their ability to have seemingly more choice on what spaces to occupy due to their free roaming nature, and their greater level of independence attributed by humans. Future studies should explore how cat-human relations challenge the property-companion divide and how this differs between the places and spaces attributed to cats by humans, for example, outdoor versus indoor cats. Furthermore, future research could explore the theft of animals that straddle the divide between worker and companion such as horses, cows, and other livestock and farm animals in rural spaces (Clack 2020). Cows, horses, and pigs are traditionally seen as commodities but there is increasing research on the value of these animals as companions which would challenge this property-companion dichotomy (see Goldie and Roe 2025).

We recognise that geographical work on human-pet relations is heavily weighted towards experiences with and of 'owned' domestic dogs from a western perspective. This work must be extended to non-western contexts and indigenous relations; not only to help decolonise the sub-discipline (Hovorka 2017), but to better understand these relationships from human and animal perspectives. The diverse, often precarious legal lives of unowned domestic dogs (and cats) considered 'stray' or 'feral', would also benefit from wider scholarly attention through a legal lens (Srinivasan 2013). Despite all mammals, birds, reptiles, fish and invertebrates having agency and welfare requirements, and most



being entangled in legal and illegal commodification networks (Collard and Dempsey 2013; Wyatt et al. 2022), few of these human-animal relations are present within animal geographies literature. Legal animal geographies, presents itself as an area where these human-animal relations can gain increased scholarly presence, with outputs potentially impacting policy. Animal geographers are well placed to continue contributing to this area, exploring policy in relation to spaces and experiences of animal breeding; imports; fighting; neglect; abuse; abandonment; invasive procedures; banned breeds; and extending this approach to illegal human-animal practices involving other kept and wild animals. Legal animal geographies could also engage with emerging technologies, such as GPS tracking, microchipping, and DNA identification, to consider animal agencies and develop evidence-based recommendations for crime prevention.

A lively legalities framework (Braverman 2016) and species justice approach (White 2008) will not easily translate into the national and regional legal systems across the world, as most systems are speciesist, laws are wide-ranging and anthropocentric, and legal rules are generally entrenched. However, from an academic-advocate perspective this framework and approach can help challenge the binary role of pets as property or family in western-centric policy and amplify the everyday experiences and welfare of animals in relation to potential law reform. Furthermore, we can examine work on animal legislation in the Global South, such as that in India by Srinivasan (2013), that takes into consideration animals' rights to space, and different socio-cultural understandings of human's relationships with animals, when shaping legislation, as a way of challenging anthropocentric laws. As can thinking more broadly with indigenous scholars such as Country et al. (2015), who centre animals, plants, winds, processes, people, and things, as emerging together through a process of co-becoming that shapes Bawaka Country. Legal animal geographies critically centres what it means to govern and be governed and what ethical and political concerns emerge from governing more-than-human life (Braverman 2016). Applying these questions to legal animal geographies through the lens of legislation, can lead to helpful critique on how legislation positions animals, whether as objects with economic value, part of the family, or as actors with agency, and lead to work that can inform reshaping of legislation.

To conclude, legal animal geographies offer a critical lens for rethinking the relationship between animals and policy as exemplified by emerging geographies of dog theft and legislation. We urge geographers, lawyers, criminologists, policing scholars, and advocates to unite in mapping animal crime and legislation, challenging speciesist frameworks, and fostering ethical governance for a more just, multispecies future.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As animal welfare is a devolved matter, the Welsh government chose not to go forward with these measures. In Scotland, the proposed Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill 2025 would make 'dog theft a specific statutory offence'.

<sup>2</sup> For consistency, we use 'stolen' generally and 'abducted' specifically for the Pet Abduction Act 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Part of the PCA Act, ABC rules specify capture, neutering and vaccination as the approved strategy for street dog control.

<sup>4</sup> Until the eighteenth century, under common law, dogs were classed as *ferae naturae* - animals deemed wild by nature - and thus not recognised as property or protected under larceny statutes (Blackstone, 2016[1766]). This anomaly was partly addressed by the 1770 Act for Preventing the Stealing of Dogs (10 Geo. III c.18), which created a summary offence punishable by fine or imprisonment, but without granting dogs the full legal status of property. The Larceny Act (1861) (s.18) further extended protection by making dog theft a misdemeanour, effectively recognizing dogs as property for the purposes of larceny law.

<sup>5</sup> There are 45 territorial and three special police forces in the UK—each has its own reporting and recording practices. As police records on dog theft are not included in crime statistics, they can only be accessed through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to individual police forces. Police Scotland, for example, rejected requests due to time and cost.

<sup>6</sup> Compulsory cat microchipping was introduced to the UK in June 2024, compared to 2016 for dogs, making individual cat identification more difficult. Cats are also excluded from Section 170 of the Road Traffic Act 1988, which requires drivers to report accidents involving certain animals, including dogs, to the police.

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