

A helping hand

While visiting Rarotonga in 2005, I met a very special canine friend that I nicknamed Bumpy. His short little legs would tear along the sand trying to catch up with me, and his soppy eyes would look up at me with gratitude when I shared food with him.

My experience echoes that of American psychologist and animal welfare advocate, Cathy Sue Ragan-Anunsen, who was holidaying in the area more than 10 years earlier. She befriended a homeless dog called Honey, and this charming animal became her constant companion. Each day, Honey would walk Cathy Sue to and from the tourist bus-stop, and they would enjoy swimming in Rarotonga's warm waters together.



BY KAREN GALVAN

Photo by Caryl Jade St Clair

interns have travelled to the Cook Islands, treating more than 18,000 animals and desexing more than 8,000 at no charge. EHF's patients are primarily companion animals, but the veterinary teams have also treated pigs, goats, horses, birds, fruit bats and the odd seal.

In 2005, with the support of the local government, the EHF opened its new clinic and volunteer residence. Although basic, it has everything that is required to run a successful and effective vet service, including a three-bedroom residence that houses up to seven volunteers, a consultation room, an operating theatre, pre- and post-operation recovery rooms and an outdoor cattery.

On Boxing Day 2006 – a year after my initial introduction to this inspirational organisation – I boarded a flight to Rarotonga to volunteer as Outreach Coordinator at the EHF. The purpose of the role is to keep the clinic functioning so the medical staff can concentrate on the animals. Duties include answering the phone, booking appointments, managing the books, collecting and banking donations, managing monthly reports, fundraising, arranging delivery of medicinal items and meeting new volunteers at the airport. It also includes clinic maintenance such as feeding the animals, cleaning their cages, hosing down the floors and washing vet scrubs and surgery cloths. Some days the animals take priority and this can result in a very late night catching up on paperwork!

My day began each morning around 6.30am, although sleeping a full night was a rarity, what with the cries of frightened animals, and puppies and kittens crying for their breakfast in the early hours. The official clinic hours are 8.30am to 5.00pm Monday to Saturday, but I was always required to be on call.



Kuri – one of the EHF's cutest patients to date.



Some of the signs the EHF has put up to protect animals from road accidents.

EHF volunteer Pam Meldrum with house dogs Cali and Mama Dog.



Photos by Lesley Walker



Cali, one of the house dogs at EHF.





*It's not uncommon for the local dogs to join people for a swim.
Photo by Trent Parke, Magnum Photos*



EHF volunteer Morven MacLean with Remy, the three-legged cat.



EHF house dogs Mama Dog and Charlie.



The local children love playing with the animals at the EHF.



A cat and her kittens are cared for by staff at the EHF.

The little puppies that had been separated from their mothers tugged at my heartstrings. Like human babies, it is hard to leave them, and often, after half-asleep muttered consultation with my room-mates and a bare-footed tip-toe out the front door, one or two orphans managed to find their way into our bunks. I should note that this is against the house rules, but sometimes our nurturing spirit would over-ride obedience!

Another poignant experience I will always remember involved a little Jack Russell who was poisoned by eating fish from the lagoon. Lagoon fish eat algae that is toxic, and this poison is passed to the animals that eat them. The entire team cared for this little dog, hand-feeding him and gently stroking his aching body. Day by day, he got stronger until eventually he could crawl on the grass, lifting his shaking little head to take some food from my hand without a syringe, then eventually one step in front of the other, until he was finally able to run up to his owner with his tail wagging.

A local also spent some time explaining to me the logistics of trying to prevent animals from being involved in road

Malnutrition and scarcity of fresh drinking water are common, as are appalling skin diseases, flea infestations, belly-bulging parasites, debilitating fish poisonings and road accidents.

accidents. Before the outer ring road was built in the 1970s, dogs just wandered happily across to the beach. Now there is a busy road between them and the lagoon, and many are killed when they cross it. The EHF, with the support of the local police, has erected special

'Dogs Crossing' signs all over the island in a bid to encourage drivers to slow down and look for animals crossing.

On some days more animals were brought to the clinic than we had room for, but we never turned away a single patient. We simply built more enclosures using corrugated iron as walls, newspapers for flooring, flax to tie it all together and banana leaves as roofs. Resources, lifestyle and the climate on the island allow some flexibility and while perhaps not suitable in cyclone season, make-shift DIY housing was often necessary during frequent periods of overcrowding.

Each year, up to 50 people give their time and expertise to volunteer at the EHF. My personal experience was that the benefits of volunteering at the EHF definitely outweighed the difficulties. I found the experience so rewarding that I'm planning to go back – you can't keep me away!

