



Street Dogs in Paradise

Grass-roots efforts to improve the lives of dogs

by Cynthia Mills, DVM

Led by Jacqueline, a small brown street dog, I walked the streets of Bora Bora. I had a purpose; so did she. Mine was to count dogs for a population estimate. Hers was to convince any cat foolish enough to show his face that keeping a low profile was wise. Jacqueline effectively yet benignly dispatched each one into hiding. Each time she did so, she looked back at me. By her expression I guessed that she appreciated I was there for back-up, but was a bit disappointed by my lack of enthusiasm.

I call Jacqueline a "street dog," and by that I mean she is one of those ubiquitous dogs lining the streets of developing nations. Not quite stray, not quite owned, these dogs may have undetermined parentage but they probably aren't mutts. Instead, they represent dog as "original dog": Scientists now think they are the descendants of the first creatures who choose to depart the wild in favor of living with us. We are the "environment" to which they've adapted, and they have done so perfectly. They scope out the best sites for garbage, the safest routes across roads and which of us are the softest touch.

Street dogs are the reason I was in Bora Bora. This famously beautiful French Polynesian island is a resort paradise except for one thing: There are too many dogs. Tourists enjoy them, but they don't like to see them sick, injured or neglected. Hotel managers often hear complaints, and can quote guests who swear they will never come back—"I can't stand to see such suffering!" So places like Bora Bora realize that there are benefits to controlling dog populations: Fewer dogs mean fewer skeletal, lame, mangy blemishes on paradise.

I arrived as one of six veterinarians on a mission to spay and neuter as many dogs (and cats) as we could in one month. Our project was a combined effort of the US-based Esther Honey Foundation, the Tahiti-based Fenua Animalia and the local tourist commission, all of which were supported by Humane Society International (**sic please see following letter to the editor, BARK June 2006**) and the French Polynesian government. But in truth, the real people behind the project were a handful of local residents and a tourist or two who refused to sit by and do nothing. These few propelled the project past two years of bureaucratic hem-hawing, stalling and plain old uncertainty that dogs were important enough to be seen caring about. There are, according to Kelly O'Meara of HIS, thousands of similar spay-and-neuter projects worldwide. Often on islands, often with tourism as incentive, many (if not most) are the result of a few local people stirring up support from other residents and tourists, and garnering the support of large international organizations like HIS and Pegasus International. While population control has long been an issue for these

places, choosing humane and effective methods has not. For over a century, local governments have tended to wait for crises like disease outbreaks, fatal car accidents caused by dogs or just too many complaints of scattered garbage before they stepped in. Then, typically, they've chosen to use methods like shooting, poisoning or electrocution to deal with the problem.

These methods have had the benefit of being visible—people know their governments are acting—but besides being inhumane and dangerous (children have been poisoned, as have dogs with homes), they simply haven't worked. Indeed, we have 150 years of experience proving they don't work. It is a seemingly paradoxical fact that a sudden onslaught of canine killings results in a spurt in canine population growth. But there's a rational reason for it: As adult dogs are removed from the population, competition for food is reduced, and the female dogs who survive these canine extermination efforts can sustain litters that would have otherwise died.

The earliest successful spay-and-neuter project was conducted in Jaipur, India, run by a chemical engineer named S. Chinny Krishna. Rabies is a serious problem in India, killing 20,000 to 30,000 people every year, and most cases result from dog bites. Krishna's organization, Blue Cross for Animals (Help in Suffering), concentrated on vaccinations, but they also spayed and neutered. Since 1994, they have kept a record of every animal they've treated, and can document a dramatic decline in the number of human rabies cases in Jaipur, from several hundred a year to zero. Their work has been so successful that the Indian government has adopted their methods and extended its support to programs in other cities.

India may be a special case. As a predominately Hindu country, they value all animals and humane treatment. And India is a nation with considerable resources. But Help in Suffering was the result of a few individuals' efforts, and its success is a consequence of their persistence and determination.

The island of Abaco in the Bahamas is the site of more recent project in a tougher society. Bahamian street dogs are not valued by the residents, who call them "potcakes," a reference to the hard disc found on the bottom of cooking pots. This burnt residue of dozens of meals is what they toss to the dogs as food.

Fortunately, the potcakes' plight touched Kathy Hargreaves. Her personal turning point to activism came when she found herself planning her trips to Marsh Harbor, the island's big city, to avoid driving past the dogs.

"It was the starkest of visions," she says. "Animals run over by the side of the road, dogs that were skin and bones that could barely walk, litters of puppies, some dumped in boxes, all near death. I said to my husband, 'We have to do something about this.'" But what could two people do?

She started by surveying her neighbors. She tells of going into dozens of houses, asking the residents, "Do you own any dogs?" No, they'd say, but she'd just walked past two or three potcakes in their yards. So she'd ask about the dogs in their yards—while they wouldn't admit owning them, they did admit feeding them. But when it came to doing something to control their numbers, the dogs belonged to no one.

So Hargreaves tried a new strategy: bribes. Her new organization, the Spay and Neuter Incentive Program (SNIP)—which received funds from HSI, Pegasus and local (mostly expatriate) donors—offered \$10 for every male dog brought in, and \$15 for every female. Local vets agreed to do the operations at discount prices (the Bahamian government prohibits visiting veterinarians from doing any work, even on a volunteer basis). The bribes worked, and 138 animals were brought into the first clinic, the most ever for a Caribbean island. Their project is now five years old, and because people can see the results, the number of clinics has dropped from three a year to two, and they don't have to offer bribes anymore. Where Hargreaves could once count on seeing at least one dead dog a day, she now sees none.

The genesis of my own group, the Esther Honey Foundation, was a vacation a fellow Oregonian, Cathy Sue Anunsen, took in the Cook Islands. She stayed in a resort on Rarotonga, fully intending to rest and relax. While there, she met Honey, a sort of "resort" dog. Like other street dogs on the island, she'd adopt tourists for the duration of their visit, and this time, Cathy was her new "family." Honey slept outside her bungalow and accompanied her to the beach every day.

But only a few months before, a tourist had died in an auto accident caused by the driver trying to avoid a dog. In response, the police had been shooting all "stray" dogs; any dog not locked up was a target. When Anunsen found out about this, she was appalled. Then she read an article about a local resident, Tom Wichman, who was starting the Cook Islands SPCA.

"I contacted Tom," she recalls, "just wanting to make a donation. He came to visit at about 10 AM and stayed until after midnight." What was the best way to do fund-raising, he asked, and did she know any veterinarians who would be willing to come to Rarotonga to treat animals? From this discussion—and a few dozen more over the years—a free clinic was born, staffed by volunteer veterinarians from all over the world. The main mission is to spay and neuter, but no animal is turned away. Every year or so, "Vet Treks" are organized, in which veterinarians and vet students travel to one of the other 15 Cook Islands to sterilize dogs and cats, using picnic tables, community centers and churches as their surgical suites.

Anunsen keeps track of how many animals are treated. Since Rarotonga had never done a canine census, she has no way of quantifying the effects of the clinic's work. But she knows that residents report that dogs are being treated better, and she has other evidence: When she first got there, stores didn't carry dog food—the island's dogs ate garbage, coconuts and fish they caught. Now, the stores carry canned dog food and kibble.

Dog food sales may be an odd way to measure success, but it's one tangible marker. India looked at the number of rabies cases, other communities count complaints or dog-bite reports. However, actual counts of dog populations are rare to nonexistent. The priority placed on *doing something* seems to overwhelm the effort required to prove that what is being done is effective. Which means, unfortunately, that there are no real guidelines for what works and what doesn't. For example, do you need to sterilize two-thirds of the animal population, or just two-thirds of the females? Or, do you need to sterilize all dogs, or just dogs with homes, since strays often don't have the nutritional wherewithal to reproduce.

In Bora Bora, I counted dogs to try to get some baseline estimate, using what are essentially wildlife-monitoring techniques to statistically guess at population numbers. This lack of quantifiable data is also of particular concern to one of the leading practitioners of spay-and-neuter medicine, Eric Davis, DVM, director and founder of Rural Animal Veterinary Services (RAVS), which concentrates on serving this country's rural areas, such as Native American reservations and Appalachian mountain communities.

"Who the heck knows how many dogs there were to begin with, and who knows how many dogs there were five years later?" he says. But to him, what is most shameful is the apparent lack of interest in this problem among the veterinary science community. As he points out, if as many dogs were dying of a disease as are euthanized as strays, attention would be paid and funding for research would be forthcoming. Instead, there is little to none of either. "You look in veterinary journals and try to find articles on population statistics for dogs and the effects of spay and neuter—they are nonexistent."

The veterinary community is not entirely remiss, however. There has been considerable research into nonsurgical alternatives. The most anticipated is immuno-contraception, which uses a vaccine against the egg, sperm or reproductive

hormones; several methods have been tried, and one is available in Australia. Another is Neutersol, a chemical that, when injected, destroys sperm-producing cells permanently. Any of these would vastly increase the numbers of dogs or cats it would be possible to sterilize.

By whatever means, sterilization promises not just population control but other more abstract but equally important results. It is the contention of activists such as Merritt Clifton, editor and publisher of *Animal People* and a spay-and-neuter advocate, that by simply making dogs scarce, we can increase their value. And if dogs live longer, people will bond with them and learn to care about them. Not to mention that by setting an example by volunteering, and by the care we expend on the animal's behalf, we can inspire others to care as well. All are good reasons to do what we are doing.

The *real* reason we do these things is more simple. As I look at Jacqueline, who is so patient with my cat-control deficiencies, I know that really, there is one reason I am there. As Davis said: "If I can make the life of one dog better, if I can keep one female from a short life of endless pregnancies and starvation, then I've done enough."

Letter to the Editor of **The BARK Magazine**

The Esther Honey Foundation (EHF) is grateful to Bark Magazine and Cynthia Mills'(Jan/Feb "Street Dogs in Paradise") for letting your readers know about recently developed programs that aid island nation homeless dogs. The Esther Honey Foundation was one of the first such organizations, establishing the Esther Honey Animal Clinic in the Cook Islands in 1995 after learning that there was no veterinarian for the country's thousands of companion animals. That same year, EHF conducted the first of 90 EHF VET TREKS™ (including Bora Bora 's free sterilization clinic attended by Dr. Mills) to reach animals in need on remote South Pacific Islands. To date, the foundation has treated more than 16,000 animals, including spaying and neutering 6,500 at no cost to the islanders.

Although the article stated that EHF's VET TREK™ Bora Bora Sterilization Clinic was supported by Humane Society International (HSI.) that organization was not a partner in this project. It is important that readers wishing to donate to such efforts and individuals wondering how they can make a difference in the lives of the animals that they see while traveling understand that it is the small organizations, commonly formed by concerned individuals, who initiate, develop and maintain these projects. The large organizations are excellent resources and may even offer very small grants to qualifying applicants but they would agree that they do not provide significant financial support for the majority of these island nation programs.

On Bora Bora, for example, laws that prohibited "itinerant" vets and importation regulations that increased the cost of drugs and supplies tenfold prevented even the large organizations from providing assistance to the French Polynesia animals. It took a handful of determined individuals representing two small animal protection organizations, working without financial compensation for more than two years, to overcome the legal and financial obstacles and form the partnerships with government and business (each of the 4 partners contributed between \$50,000-\$100,000 in a combination of cash, goods and services) to provide the desperately needed veterinary and education services. None of the large organizations provided financial assistance to the first sterilization campaign in French Polynesia history.

Each of these small organizations has its own story but what most have in common is a volunteer staff working on a shoestring budget to improve the lives of animals largely regarded as a disposable nuisance. Funds donated to these groups generally go directly to pay for the basic needs of the animals they serve: drugs, shelter and food. I urge your readers to support the efforts of these small organizations by donating funds, supplies or their time and by letting the government officials of these island nations know that the humane treatment of animals is an important consideration in determining your travel itinerary.

Sincerely,

Cathy Sue Ragan-Anunsen
President and Founder
The Esther Honey Foundation

www.estherhoney.org