

WildAid & Animal Balance

Jan. 2005
text by WildAid

“Conservation Without Cruelty” - - a humane project to control dogs and cats in Galapagos

Shelley Thomas has good news when looking back upon Year 2004. As co-ordinator of a spay and neuter project run by WildAid, recently partnering with US-based animal welfare group Animal Balance, she is thrilled with progress in the aptly entitled humane project “Conservation Without Cruelty”.

This project, which kicked off in January, 2004, offering free sterilisation clinics backed up by education campaigns pushing responsible pet ownership, is turning the tide on an over-population of dogs and cats in Galapagos and a history of inhumane treatment.

Sadly, dogs and cats have all too often been treated as “pests not pets”, given their introduced species tag, matched with an absence of responsible owners. They have been dumped on the street, allowed to breed out of control and poisoned.

As Shelley Thomas says, many dogs and cats (even those with owners) live or roam freely on the street and are caught in a vicious cycle of uncontrolled breeding and neglect. The dogs run in packs, fall victim to a host of viruses, scavenge from garbage, prey on endemic creatures, create noise and present a potential risk to the public.

But Thomas says it is encouraging that local people who now walk into the WildAid office, more often than not with pets in tow, are also learning about wider conservation issues and the need to work together to save Galapagos.



There is also a municipal ordinance for domestic animals, including dogs and cats that are termed “pets” so long as they have responsible owners, who in 2005 will be bound to register their pets and pay an annual licence. In a positive move, the cost of these licences will be significantly reduced if pets are sterilised.

In only one year the Conservation Without Cruelty project, together with Animal Balance, has sterilised 388 dogs and cats in the township of Puerto Ayora on the island of Santa Cruz. Furthermore, Animal Balance has sterilised a further 476 dogs and cats in the township of Puerto Villamil on the island of Isabela. Both projects have started the process of registering pets, inserting identification micro-chips, giving owners collars and leads and other incentives such as flea and tick treatment.



There is no question that sterilisation of dogs and cats has an immediate impact and positive results in terms of conservation goals. Obviously, the key benefit can be seen in a reduction in the population of strays. But, Thomas is also convinced that compassion for one animal, leads to greater compassion for all creatures.

Here, she says WildAid is heavily involved in pushing global campaigns to stop the illegal trade in wildlife, including the cruel practice of slicing fins from sharks to feed Asia’s consumer demand for shark fin soup. In the Galapagos Marine Reserve (the third largest in the world), it is illegal to fish for sharks. Nevertheless, they are the number one target of poachers who finance local fishermen to do the dirty work.

Returning to the issue of dogs and cats, Thomas says there is no question they pose a serious threat to endemic creatures of Galapagos – something she says can be remedied via responsible pet ownership.

“Dogs and cats were brought to Galapagos by humans and should not be treated as the scapegoats,” she says. “This is a human problem and should be handled in a responsible, humane manner. Fortunately this is now starting to happen in Galapagos and we need to keep the momentum going.”



Not too long ago her dog, Floyd, was an abandoned street dog. He was dumped after contracting a severe case of sarcoptic mange. His body was a large festering sore; the skin around his eyes scaly and hairless, giving him the appearance of an iguana rather than a dog.

Today, he is a pampered pooch. After rescuing him, Thomas counts herself the lucky one. Put simply, Floyd has been a constant source of inspiration, winning hearts and crossing cultural boundaries. He is pictured in the marine iguana project.



Floyd was one of the first dogs sterilised in the Conservation Without Cruelty campaign. Today, he is not the only dog that can be seen walked on a leash. Indeed, there has been an explosion of owners walking dogs on leads and the sudden appearance of pet products – shampoo, flea collars, kitty litter, pet food – on supermarket shelves.

It's thought domestic animals were first introduced into Galapagos - part of Ecuador - by English pirates and privateers who sought refuge in the “Enchanted Isles” from the Spaniards in the 16th and early 17th centuries.

Numbers of dogs and cats have since sky-rocketed, evident in a recent census placing the population at 2,500 in Puerto Ayora alone, where, with other “introduced species” such as rats, goats, donkeys, pigeons and pigs (and humans), they threaten future sustainability of

unique ecosystems.

Aside from continuing spay and neuter clinics and pushing community education, the Conservation Without Cruelty project is now looking for funding to ensure any local capture and control measures that target dogs and cats are in fact humane, including the chance for animals to be adopted to good homes.

Funds are also continually needed for veterinary supplies to continue free spay and neuter clinics and help the community with basic pet care products, covering everything from flea/tick treatment to collars and leads.

The biggest problem, aside from differing cultural attitudes towards pets, is the stark lack of finances available to most Galapagueña families. Food and care for pets is therefore a luxury that cannot be entertained without outside help.

Organisations like Animal Balance and WildAid are there to help.

Contact Shelley Thomas on:

shelseytom@yahoo.com

Contact Animal Balance founders Emma Clifford and Alice Ng on:

clifford@animalbalance.org

or

ng@animalbalance.org

www.animalbalance.org

www.wildaid.org