

A chance encounter with a stray dog on holiday led to one woman setting thousands of other island dogs, and controlling the population through

Photo ©Trent Parke/Magnum Photos



The Dogs of Paradise

FOR ANY TOURIST stepping on to the white sand beaches of the Cook Islands, the feeling of arriving in paradise is overwhelming. From the sweet fragrance of frangipani lingering in the breeze, to the sparkling turquoise waters of the lagoon, these tiny volcanic islands in the South Pacific offer an enchanted haven away from the world. And for animal lovers, there is the final touch of magic: the friendly island dogs coming to welcome you to their home. Tails wagging, they trot on short, stumpy legs to greet the vans of tourists, eagerly searching for a family to 'adopt' for the duration of their stay.

On one of these vans was American Cathy Sue Ragan-Anunsen, arriving with her family in 1993 for a four-week holiday in Rarotonga - and there to

greet her was a golden female 'Raro' dog named Honey. It was one of those encounters that would change a life forever - in fact, not just one life, but thousands.

Cathy Sue was delighted with her new canine friend and Honey soon became her constant companion, escorting her to her room and then accompanying her each morning to await the island bus for sightseeing. Evenings brought Honey to her side as Cathy Sue strolled down to the beach to watch the sunset, both wading through the warm lagoon waters before returning to the bungalow where Honey stood guard outside the door until morning when she joined Cathy Sue for breakfast.

When the time finally came to say



Photo courtesy of the EHIF

Cathy Sue was further shocked to discover that the islands did not have a single vet and therefore animals were left in agony when sick or injured, with no help or relief available

up a foundation in the dog's name, helping neutering - rather than by the gun

goodbye, Cathy Sue wanted to honour her newfound friendship by making a donation in Honey's name. Recalling an article in the local papers about a resident who was starting an animal welfare group, she contacted Tom Wichman and invited him over at 10am, to get some donation details. The brief chat turned into hours of discussion and when Tom finally left, long after midnight, Cathy Sue was shocked at what she had learnt about the plight of the friendly island dogs.

Although not strictly feral, the free-roaming dogs were generally left to fend for themselves. They were charming, dwarf-like creatures with sweet dispositions that belied their quick intelligence and incredible resourcefulness. Like Honey, they had deftly adapted to the role of ambassador for the islands, quick to assess which tourists are likely to be a 'soft touch', thus providing them with food, play and affection.

Unfortunately, not everyone shared the tourists' delight in the dogs. Worried that they would affect the islands' main industry of tourism (particularly following a fatal car accident caused by a collision with a dog) and anticipating complaints from guests about disease or the sight of many neglected dogs, the authorities decided on an eradication campaign - by shooting. The many horrifying incidents that followed - such as dogs being gunned down in front of shocked tourists in the busy shopping areas or beaten to death in front of terrified schoolchildren - provoked a spate of furious letters to government officials and complaints to tourist publications and international animal welfare organisations. This public outrage resulted in a temporary ceasefire, but the law that allowed the brutal killings remained. Like the other island nations in the South Pacific, such as Fiji and Tahiti, the Cook Islands government just could not conceive of another way to deal with the problem than by shooting, poisoning or electrocution.

Cathy Sue was further shocked to discover that the islands did not have a single vet and therefore animals were left in agony when sick or injured, with no help or relief available. The islands' many dogs were suffering from parasites, skin diseases, poisonings and untreated injuries, while the cats were malnourished and suffering from a variety of diseases.

In response, a group of Rarotongan residents, led by Elmah McBirney and Tom

Wichman, had formed an anti-cruelty group to look for more humane ways to deal with the over-population problem. They hoped a spay-and-neuter programme - as adopted in other countries - would be the solution and also hoped for the introduction of some kind of veterinary care for the companion animals of the islands. The long discussion between Tom and Cathy Sue crystallised these hopes into a single dream: a permanent veterinary clinic on Rarotonga, which would offer free services to all who needed it and be the basis of a spay-and-neuter programme to start controlling the islands' population of stray animals.

Cathy Sue took on the challenge of finding a vet to volunteer his services to the Cook Islands. Following her return to the United States, she established the Esther Honey Foundation Inc (EHF) - a non-profit organisation named in honour of her grandmother, Esther, and Honey, her Cook Island companion - and started contacting her colleagues from her years of work with US animal protection organisations. The enormity of the project dawned on her when she faxed Tom for a list of the veterinary equipment he had to support the new clinic and received a one-word reply: "forceps".

Joint effort

The first contingent of EHF veterinary professionals and other volunteers, as well as supplies, arrived in the Cook Islands in 1995 to establish the first and only companion animal veterinary hospital in the South Pacific. The Esther Honey Foundation Animal Clinic is located in Rarotonga, which, at 32km in circumference and with a population of about 9,000 permanent residents, is the largest of the 15 tiny Cook Islands. Without the help and support of animal advocates, vets, pharmaceutical companies, Air New Zealand, The Humane Society of the United States and a handful of Cook Islanders, such an initiative would not have been possible.

Since the clinic opened its doors, the EHF has treated almost 18,000 animals. They all receive the same level of veterinary care and no healthy animal is ever euthanased. Despite the basic conditions, lack of resources and the long, demanding hours, the all-volunteer staff work tirelessly, treating 1,200 to 2,000 animals a year for everything from traffic injuries to reef fish poisoning. >

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Honey's story

For the dog that inspired it all, life didn't change much in spite of her sudden elevation to celebrity status on the island. Honey continued to welcome visitors to the island, to share breakfasts and sunsets with her adopted families, and guard them while they slept. Her smile and antics with the mynah birds made people laugh and her intelligence and resourcefulness drew great

admiration and affection. However, with 'her motel' just down the road from the new EHF clinic, Honey now benefited from regular check-ups, as well as flea and worming treatments, while tourists who'd read about her flocked to see her and to send news of her back to Cathy Sue in America.

Years passed with little change other than Honey slowing down and showing some of the stiffness of age-related arthritis. The clinic that she had inspired helped to give her comfort with pain medication, and they were also there for her when she was finally brought in by her 'motel family' and the EHF doctors agreed on a kind end to relieve her pain. Cathy Sue was grateful that, as a result of Honey's inspiration, compassionate and skilled care was there to help this wonderful dog when she needed it most.

Honey died in the summer of 2001, at the age of 15, after many years of welcoming visitors to her home in the Cook Islands. Her spirit lives on in the foundation that bears her name but also in a little homeless puppy rescued from the streets of Fiji, while Cathy Sue was there as part of a recent EHF Vet Trek. Honey Deux Too is also a beautiful golden island dog and was cared for by the Fiji Islands SPCA until a permanent home was found with a new family.

Cathy Sue is convinced that it was always Honey's grand plan to bring veterinary care to the Cook Islands and that she was simply the most receptive person for the little golden dog's schemes. She feels honoured to have helped Honey achieve her goal.

Education is also vital and the EHF organises various initiatives to teach the islanders about the benefits of de-sexing and the importance of compassionate treatment of animals

< A decision was made to allow all operations at the EHF clinic to remain free (donation only), as Cathy Sue and Tom felt it important that all residents of the Cook Islands have access to veterinary care. The grateful residents often give fruit, vegetables or even labour in lieu of cash, but the EHF cannot pay the clinic's rent or the volunteers' airfares in coconuts! Financial pressure on the EHF remains heavy, particularly as it struggles to obtain funding from large US animal-protection organisations due to its overseas status. It relies completely on the generosity of individual donors to raise the funds that go directly into providing the drugs, shelter and food for the animals, as well as minimal amenities for the volunteers.

Photo ©Trent Parke/Magnum Photos



Local government officials, businesses and community members have come to rally behind the EHF, as they have seen how it has benefited the islands' economies, particularly by addressing the tourists' ever-increasing concerns for the welfare of the animals they meet on the islands. The government has helped smooth Immigration and Customs clearance for EHF volunteers and incoming supplies, while local businesses and others have offered discounted airfares, housing, meals and transportation.

The EHF's main mission is still the spay-and-neuter programme, and it has sterilised more than 7,700 animals - and not only through its Rarotonga clinic. Each year it organises 'EHF Vet Treks®' where vets travel to the remote outlying islands to treat and sterilise dogs and cats, using anything they can find for surgical sites - from churches to picnic tables! These Vet Treks have covered the islands of Aitutaki, Aitu, Mangaia, Mauke, Mitiaro and even extended to other nations, such as Bora Bora- where the Esther Honey Foundation and its partners organised and implemented French Polynesia's first-ever sterilisation campaign.

There would be no need for roundups and mass killings of dogs or overflowing pounds if the island dogs could be de-sexed, explained Cathy Sue. It is certainly not a quick-fix solution, but it is the only permanent and humane solution. In fact, experience and history shows that the usually brutal methods favoured by many governments are ultimately ineffective. As adult dogs are culled, competition for food is reduced and any surviving females can raise more litters that would otherwise have died from lack of resources. So, paradoxically, these killings usually result in a spurt of canine population growth - as well as being dangerous in themselves, with reports of children

being poisoned during such eradication campaigns.

Education is also vital and the EHF organises various initiatives - such as a weekly newspaper column, clinic tours, village visits and school presentations - to teach the islanders about the benefits of de-sexing and the importance of compassionate treatment of animals. This can be a daunting task in a country where pets are still fed poisonous fish entrails; goats and pigs are tethered with no food or water, and dogs are still being raised for food! In fact, the arrival of animal-loving volunteers was first viewed with extreme suspicion, but it is a testament of the EHF's work that these volunteers are now treated as respected members of the community, with businesses even offering discounts after learning that their customer is an EHF volunteer.

Fitting memorial

Even more encouraging is the fact that stores are now beginning to stock several brands of dog and cat food, flea control and other animal-care products when such things would have been unheard of a decade ago. Changing people's perception of the value of animals and the importance of humane and responsible care can be a slow process, but the EHF seems to be taking powerful steps in the right direction.

The EHF's most valuable resource is its wonderful volunteers. These come from all around the world to work for no pay. They stay from two weeks to a year and include vets, vet nurses, technicians, students and also non-veterinary professionals who simply care deeply about animals. For many, it is the ultimate experience, even after a lifetime of working with animals.

"I have been a vet for 20 years and have been involved in many projects," says Kyle, an American volunteer, on the EHF website. "This experience rates



Photo ©Trent Parke/Magnum Photos

right up there as the epitome of what we do for animals and their owners.”

But this is no relaxed beach holiday on a tropical island. Volunteers have to work seven days a week and be on-call 24 hours for emergencies, often staying up all night to care for distressed animals. The work can be extremely exhausting, particularly when there is an influx of fish-poisoning victims. A condition unique to the tropics, this occurs when dogs eat reef fish that have been feeding on algae that contain the ciguatera toxin, a powerful poison that affects the animal’s nervous system, cardiovascular system and gastrointestinal tract. The dogs lose the ability to walk, eat, control their bowels or regulate their body temperature, shivering despite the sweltering heat and vice versa. They cry continuously and inch along the ground, flailing around helplessly. Unfortunately, there is no cure and volunteers can only give intensive nursing and supportive care. Most cases require two to three weeks of nursing before the dog is well enough to be released. What is most frustrating about such poisonings is the fact that the same dogs are often seen repeatedly for the same condition, despite many EHF public announcements and one-to-one advice sessions with the locals on the dangers of feeding reef fish to dogs.

Thankfully, the most common problems are usually worm and flea infestations. However, although these conditions are easy to treat, they require

a large supply of medication to be donated regularly and are also hindered by poor owner understanding about parasites. A similarly frustrating situation exists with de-sexing, as many owners just can’t seem to be bothered, despite the EHF offering a free service and being available at all hours. Sadly, traffic injuries are also common, which is a surprise considering that the island only has one main road, running around its perimeter.

But despite these frustrations, there can be immense personal satisfaction. Vet Ben Clarke and his vet nurse partner, Anna Coe, recently returned from a two-month stint volunteering at the EHF clinic. “We did not say no to any animal that required care or surgery, and possibly our spare time suffered proportionally, but it was worth it,” Ben said.

Ben and Anna’s feelings are echoed by all the other volunteers who feel that the rewards of helping animals that would otherwise receive no care far outweigh the hard work, long hours and sleepless nights.

What began as a little ‘thank you’ to a local dog has turned into a unique animal welfare organisation with volunteers spanning several continents and successes that have changed the face of history in the South Pacific. For the many thousands of tourists who visit the Cook Islands each year in search of a slice of paradise, it’s good to know that these beautiful islands are now becoming a lot closer to paradise for the many dogs and cats that inhabit them too. ::

Can you help?

The EHF has developed an ingenious system of networking to meet the foundation’s ongoing supply needs. Perhaps you’re planning a holiday in the Cook Islands and have some extra space in your luggage? If so, contact the EHF for information.

Money is always desperately needed and donations can be made online at the Esther Honey Foundation website via Paypal.

Even just spreading the word about the Esther Honey Foundation can make a huge difference, as it does not have the publicity and marketing resources available to the larger animal welfare organisations.

For more information about EHF, visit www.estherhoney.org

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