



GOOD Karma

HSI helps implement first-ever nationwide spay/neuter program

text by KAREN E. LANGE ■ photos by KATHY MILANI

The cream-colored mutt lingering around food stalls at the checkpoint in Bhutan was not much different from thousands of other “community” dogs who roam the Buddhist kingdom, lazing in the middle of roads, congregating in school yards, and standing sentinel outside shops in the hope of handouts. But Rahul Sehgal, India director for Humane Society International, and Sunil Chawla, HSI’s lead veterinarian in Bhutan, caught sight of a mark on the dog that amazed them: His ear was notched, a sign that HSI’s sterilization and vaccination program had stretched all the way to this isolated location, at least an hour’s drive from the town where a veterinary team had set up a temporary clinic. Chawla squatted to check the animal’s health. It was good—being neutered had kept him from getting into fights with other males over females in heat. The vet was thrilled: “Our staff are reaching into every corner. They are doing very hard work,” he says.

HSI aims to spay/neuter and vaccinate 50,000 dogs across Bhutan’s small but rugged territory, where traveling a dozen miles takes a couple of hours along narrow, winding roads that hug the sides of cloud-crowned mountains. Sehgal says reaching that goal—estimated to be at least 70 percent of the country’s dogs—will stop the quick growth of the population, which has swelled in recent years as economic development brings more and more refuse—including scraps from meat shops. Unsterilized, unvaccinated street dogs (below, in the capital of Thimphu), don’t actually bother most Bhutanese. The dogs are a familiar and mostly friendly presence, one encouraged by Buddhist beliefs that people can be reincarnated as animals and feeding dogs can earn a person good karma.





Bhutanese often “own” specific dogs, like this one (above), undoubtedly fed by the business owner. When too many dogs proliferate in an area, residents drop off females at monasteries, where monks (above, right) feed them from their communal tables, demonstrating the Buddhist virtue of compassion. But to the Western tourists who are now a mainstay of the economy, Bhutan’s ubiquitous street dogs can be annoying. They bark all night near hotels. Until recently, the sound echoed off the scenic hillsides, making sleep impossible. Guides suggest visitors bring ear plugs.

In 2008, to get dogs off Thimphu’s streets before the coronation of a new king, the government put them in pounds. It was a short-term solution—one that led to fighting and disease and many deaths. In 2009, HSI approached Bhutan with a better idea, and the government, concerned about the welfare of the dogs, emptied the pounds and committed to a three- to five-year catch, neuter, and release program.

So far, HSI staff have reached more than 16,800 dogs. Success will require persistence: Puppies are still being born in areas already covered by the program—for example, in Paro (below, left). The process takes a full day for each dog, and each HSI clinic can handle just 20





animals a day. In the morning, staff collect unsterilized dogs in large nets (below, second from left). Then they anesthetize the animals and perform surgery (third from left), wait for the dogs to recover (fourth), and return them to their original territories by evening (far right). HSI is on schedule to achieve the 50,000-dog goal by 2014, and is training a cadre of Bhutanese to take over once it leaves.

Sehgal has never before seen a program like Bhutan's—with a national government committed long-term, instead of for so short a period the effort is doomed to fail. The country is providing half the funding for sterilization, and government extension aides help spread the word. "Bhutan is the rarest of rare situations," he says. "The first of its kind." Hoping the program will serve as a model, Sehgal is carefully documenting HSI's work. He can see the approach being adopted in Bangladesh, perhaps, or in India's cities, where millions of dollars are spent giving people post-bite rabies vaccinations when a fraction of that amount could prevent the spread of the disease. "We face a lot of opposition with people from government quarters who would rather have money spent on other issues," he says. "Bhutan understood that helping animals is directly helping humans."

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