

A photograph of a slum street. In the foreground, a brown and white dog stands on a dirt path. The background shows a cluttered street with people, including a child sitting on the ground, and buildings made of wood and metal. The overall scene is one of poverty and urban decay.

SLUM DOGS BY THE MILLIONS

In developing nations throughout the world, Humane Society International helps animal lovers reach out to some of the weakest members of their communities

by JULIE FALCONER

When Rahul Sehgal traveled to the Philippines last year, his original purpose was to teach animal shelter workers a better way of killing dogs removed from city streets—by helping them replace electrocution methods with lethal injection. But in a country with an estimated 10 million stray dogs, Sehgal knew a more radical approach was needed.

“I told them that while humane euthanasia was a worthy goal, it would be an endless process,” Sehgal says. “All they’d be doing is killing a lot more animals but doing it more humanely.” And he presented an alternative: high-volume sterilization modeled after successful programs recently launched in India.

His words had an impact, and in March, the first municipal spay/neuter clinic in the Philippines opened in Taguig City.

As director of Humane Society International India, Sehgal is a recognized leader in Asia’s animal protection movement, able to influence animal care and control strategies in rural areas, large cities, and even entire countries. But just nine years ago, he was in the same position as most of his students: an unseasoned advocate in a country where large numbers of free-roaming dogs fend for themselves on the fringes of urban and rural communities.





Street dogs who survive to adulthood face malnutrition, disease, cruelty, and in the case of females, the birthing of endless litters of puppies.

Emaciated dogs sleeping on rubbish piles, injured dogs limping across market squares, and dogs so afflicted with mange they're basically scratching themselves to death—these are commonplace sights in India's Ahmedabad, where Sehgal has lived for nearly two decades.

These images were once a shock to Sehgal, who'd grown up in the nation's military housing compounds, insulated from the civilian world and surrounded by pets, green spaces, and wildlife. Only after his father retired from the army and moved the family to Ahmedabad did Sehgal start to witness the suffering of his country's unwanted canines.

"The situation was really bad. I was a part of it; I was in the middle of it. Though I had no experience, I wanted to make a difference," he says.

It's a goal he shares with compassionate people throughout the developing world, where animal protection groups are

gaining in strength and number. Many were founded on behalf of their communities' most visible victims: the dogs who live, breed, and die on the streets. By learning from one another and their Western allies, dedicated activists are overcoming barriers to humane dog control in even the poorest and most tumultuous nations—and making inroads in a problem long considered too huge to tackle.

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

In most developing nations, only about 5 percent of dogs have owners in the Western sense, compared to 95 percent in the U.S., says Andrew Rowan, president and CEO of HSI, the global arm of The HSUS. The rest can be loosely classified as community dogs, who typically hang out in human-popu-

lated areas and rely on handouts; strays, who have no fixed neighborhood ties; and true ferals, who feed at landfills, vacant lots, or slaughterhouse waste piles and seldom interact with people.

Local governments typically resort to poisoning, drowning, clubbing, or other inhumane methods to control their free-roaming dog populations, but even in places where the animals are tolerated, their lives are often short and plagued with parasites, disease, and constant breeding. And while many of the puppies die young, enough survive to bring more animals into a dangerous and fickle environment.

When HSI began addressing the problem in the 1990s, it was obvious that U.S.-style animal care and control—where homeless dogs and cats are



Rahul Sehgal

housed in shelters for potential adoption—wasn't a realistic solution. It was equally clear that mass cullings weren't effective in reducing populations over time or protecting people from disease.

A growing consensus developed among animal protection and public health organizations that a nonlethal approach—based on the trap-neuter-return model used for managing feral cat colonies in industrialized nations—held the most promise for effectively addressing the global street dog problem. Known as “catch-neuter-return” or “animal birth control,” these programs involve removing dogs from the street, sterilizing them and vaccinating them for rabies, and returning them to the place of capture. Some of the earliest programs to apply this method—including HSI-funded efforts in Indonesia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, and the Bahamas—soon began proving their worth.

“Each project produced information that we were able to build on and add to, so we could finally say, ‘This is how you do it,’” says Rowan.

But having the blueprint is just part of the answer; the larger challenge is creating environments where spay/neuter programs can be sustained. To that end, HSI partners with animal care organizations in other nations, working with local advocates to help them tackle the barriers to successful street dog management in their own communities.

One of these barriers has been the shortage of veterinarians trained in small-animal medicine. Vet schools in developing countries tend to focus on agricultural animals, so finding someone who can perform a simple neuter operation isn't as easy as it may sound, says Jessica Higgins, HSI program manager. Most new graduates, she says, have never performed surgery or touched a dog or cat. Some are even taught that a sterilization procedure is too dangerous and takes hours to perform.

In the past, Western animal organizations have typically brought in their own people, but the benefits are temporary, says veterinarian Barry Kellogg, an HSI consultant. “It does no good to swoop in with a crew of vets and techs and spay every dog you can get your hands on and then leave,” he says. “Even though it makes us feel great



DESTINATION: KATHMANDU, NEPAL



ORGANIZATION: Kathmandu Animal Treatment Centre, which sterilizes, vaccinates, and treats up to 1,500 dogs a year

CHALLENGES: Outside the program area, strychnine poisoning is the government's M.O. for animal control

REASONS FOR HOPE: Fewer puppies, healthier dogs, and changing attitudes: Residents who once looked the other way have begun caring for neighborhood strays



Living in Kathmandu since 1968, British artist Jan Salter had a bittersweet relationship with Nepal's capital city. She was drawn to its ornate temples, its ethnic diversity, and the beauty of the surrounding Himalayas. But she was repelled by the city's methods for controlling its free-roaming canine residents.

“It was a ghastly situation,” she says. “The government put out the strychnine at night, dispersed in lumps of meat, and you'd get up the next morning and see all the dead dogs everywhere. There was so much suffering, and I hadn't a clue what to do about it.”

When she learned about the success of a street dog sterilization program run by a group called Help in Suffering in India, Salter became convinced that she could accomplish the same in Kathmandu. In 2003, with the support of Humane Society International, she founded the Kathmandu Animal Treatment Centre. Now with 11 full-time staff, the KAT Centre sterilizes and vaccinates up to 1,500 dogs a year within the Kathmandu Ring Road—which has an estimated population of 20,500 street dogs—and provides emergency treatment for sick or injured animals. The organization has also developed a flourishing volunteer program, using the skills of locals, tourists, veterinarians, and veterinary technicians who are interested in assisting a hard-working animal welfare team.

Outside the KAT Centre's target area, the government continues to use strychnine to deal with unwanted dogs. But Salter is encouraged by the progress made over the past five years. Litters of puppies have decreased dramatically, and the dogs on city streets are visibly healthier. Smaller spay/neuter projects have sprung up in other parts of Nepal, and residents from other cities have expressed interest in following Salter's example.

But perhaps the most promising development has been the change in attitudes toward the dogs. Every day, the KAT Centre receives calls from people who have spontaneously taken on the task of monitoring neighborhood strays. A local restaurant donates leftover food scraps, and some residents pledge monthly bags of rice to feed the animals.

“It's completely changed my perception,” Salter says. “I thought that Nepalis just didn't care about dogs. I never realized that they cared but, like me, just didn't know what to do about it.”



A new dog: Lucy suffered from head-to-tail mange before she was treated at the KAT Centre.



to spay or neuter a couple hundred dogs, it doesn't take long to wipe out the progress you've made."

Because of HSI's training of local vets in spay/neuter operations and surgical hygiene, a growing cadre of skilled companion animal vets is helping to alleviate the suffering of street dogs throughout the

developing world. Not all vets can perform high-volume sterilizations right away, says Kellogg, "but even if you've simply enabled them to perform six surgeries a day rather than three, you've already doubled their capacity."

Gaining official support is also critical. As the leader of the first stand-alone ani-



DESTINATION: ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA



ORGANIZATION: Homeless Animals Protection Society, which promotes spay/neuter and humane treatment

CHALLENGES: Poverty and human suffering; animal protection concepts still a novelty to most people; a common belief that helping animals is mission impossible

REASONS FOR HOPE: As the country's first animal charity, HAPS signed the first animal welfare project agreement with local government and launched a spay/neuter program for street dogs

In a country with widespread poverty and unemployment, where large extended families often rely on one person's income, putting your job on the line for the sake of animals is largely unheard of. But that's exactly what Hana Kifle and Efreem Legese did when they protested the killings of stray dogs outside Ethiopia's Bale Mountains National Park.

Kifle and Legese had spent their entire careers as park employees. They had also helped organize the sterilization and vaccination of owned dogs in nearby communities to prevent hybridization and rabies transmission between domestic canines and the endangered Ethiopian wolf. But when park authorities and wildlife conservation groups insisted on shooting unowned dogs, the coworkers formed the Homeless Animals Protection Society, the country's first animal charity, in 2001.

"People used to tell us that we are mad" to do such a thing, says Kifle. "We just wanted to stop cruelty against animals and to tell people that all animals should be treated equally."

Soon after Kifle released pictures of dogs suffering from gunshot wounds, the two advocates were fired, and Legese was forced to take his children out of school for a time. Fortunately, the U.S.-based nonprofit Animal People came to their aid and pledged to fund salaries equal to the park employees' former earnings.

Devoting themselves full time to HAPS, Kifle and Legese moved to Addis Ababa to launch a revolution in public attitudes toward owned and stray dogs. They outfitted a truck with banners promoting spay/neuter and kindness toward animals—and a megaphone blaring "Who Let the Dogs Out"—to reach as many people as possible with their message, stopping to distribute leaflets and discuss animal issues with the crowds they attracted.

Several years later, a high-profile rescue of three dogs from a manmade cave brought HAPS international media coverage. When they learned of the



Efreem Legese (left) and Hana Kifle (middle) encourage humane treatment of Ethiopia's street dogs.

deep concrete pit, where for decades unwanted dogs were tossed to die of starvation, Kifle and Legese located the cave and peered inside at four desperate dogs surrounded by rotting carcasses and piles of bones. "Though death is inevitable for any of God's creatures, we were sick of what we observed at that particular moment," says Kifle. With funding from the Amsale Gessesse Memorial Foundation—founded by Houston, Texas, doctor Anteneh Roba, who was born in Ethiopia—the dogs were removed from the pit and transported to Houston for adoption; HAPS returned to the site soon after and permanently closed the cave.

In other parts of Ethiopia, humane organizations have been formed, inspired by HAPS' example. "There are many people [in Ethiopia] who like animals," says Kifle, "but they were not confident that it is possible in our country to establish an animal welfare organization."

HAPS' work also paved the way for a much larger street dog sterilization effort in Ethiopia's capital city—a 9-month project that was launched in March by Humane Society International, Best Friends Animal Society, the Amsale Gessesse Memorial Foundation, and city officials.

There's still a lot of progress to be made in Ethiopia, and raising money within the country for animal protection work is difficult, but HAPS' founders have already shown what can be accomplished with a tiny staff and a small budget. "Our family is very much proud now," says Kifle. "We did something which they think is impossible."

mal protection organization in India to get government funding for street dog sterilizations, Sehgal is uniquely suited to teach advocates how to approach their municipal officials and avoid some common missteps.

“What most people do is go to the government and on an emotional note they’ll say, ‘You’re killing dogs and they’re so sweet and they’re man’s best friend,’ and they’ll shed a few tears and they’ll talk about a protest march and they’ll antagonize,” he says. Sehgal instructs them to put aside the melodrama, research all aspects of the situation, and present the hard facts.

“There’s no reason why the government won’t work with you if you have a sensible thing going for them,” he says.

CHALLENGE OF COMPASSION

Sehgal has come a long way from his days as an energetic but naïve animal lover who quit his job to found the Animal Help Foundation in Ahmedabad nearly a decade ago. Then 23 and not long out of college, he forged ahead despite his family’s misgivings. During the next three years, he would be arrested and falsely accused of kidnapping six



snake charmers, severely beaten for euthanizing monkeys infected with tuberculosis, and forced to dodge rocks and sticks hurled at him in the streets. He would also build a shelter, go bankrupt, and live off his wife’s income for several years.

These experiences didn’t shake his determination to help Ahmedabad’s animals, but they pushed him to focus his goals and change tactics. “I realized that if we can’t get the [dog] population under control, we can’t get to the point of actually carrying out welfare,” he says. Soon after, he met with HSI staff, who helped evaluate his program and provided veterinary training.

With \$420,000 in local government funding, in 2006 the Animal Help Foundation sterilized and vaccinated 45,000 of Ahmedabad’s street dogs in just nine months. By comparison, all of India’s animal organizations at the time were averaging a combined 70,000 sterilizations a year.

The high sterilization numbers derive from the group’s pioneering protocols that allow dogs to be released the same day they are spayed and neutered—a method that could enable other countries to sterilize five to 10 times as many animals and finally bring their street dog problems under control, predicts Rowan.

Despite all the obstacles they face, animal advocates in developing nations have more reason than ever to be hopeful, says Sehgal, who’s been taking his street dog know-how to cities throughout Asia and Africa since joining the staff of HSI in 2007. Support for nonlethal animal control strategies is growing, encouraging more people to help out with the guidance of mentors like Sehgal.

For Western advocates, such programs are a way to improve countless animals’ lives with relatively small investments. In most developing countries, their money goes far. For example, \$10,000 will pay the annual salary for a skilled vet in India, and \$5,000 will do the same in Afghanistan, says Kelly O’Meara, director of international companion animals and engagement for HSI.

It’s also a chance to tackle a significant public health problem. Approximately 30,000 to 50,000 people die from rabies each year, the vast majority in developing nations and as a result of dog bites. Postexposure vaccination treatments are expensive, when they’re even available, and drain already overburdened health care systems.

Beyond protecting people from dog bites and transmissible diseases, sterilization



Veterinarian Jack Reece (left) works for Jaipur-based Help in Suffering, one of the most successful street dog sterilization programs in India. About 70 percent of the city’s female dogs are now spayed, and for the past seven years, the number of human rabies cases reported at the local hospital has dropped from 10 a year to zero. With funding from HSI, Dr. Reece and senior veterinarian Sunil Chawla teach vets, shelter managers, dog catchers, and representatives of nonprofits how to launch similar projects and improve existing ones. Read more about Reece in our web extra at humanesociety.org/magazine.

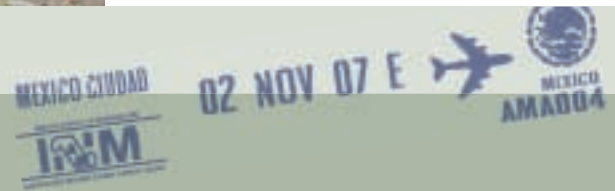


programs can ease emotional suffering in the world's poorest and most disenfranchised communities. Last year, Higgins coordinated a spay/neuter and training clinic in a remote island village in Patagonia, four hours by boat from the nearest vet. The local pet owners' gratitude and relief were overwhelming, she says. One woman was moved to tears when she realized she'd no longer have to drown her dog's puppies, her only option until then. "The puppies shouldn't have to suffer," she told Higgins, before joyfully spreading the word to all her neighbors that there would be no more litters.

"All the stories you hear about that people don't care, that they're too poor, aren't true," says Rowan. "They may be too poor to do anything, but they do care."



DESTINATION: MEXICO CITY



ORGANIZATION: Gente por la Defensa Animal, an all-volunteer group that rescues dogs, lobbies for better laws, investigates cruelty cases, and raises awareness

CHALLENGES: More than 2 million homeless dogs in the city; widespread poverty; entrenched lethal animal control system

REASONS FOR HOPE: Growing awareness and activism: "Ten years ago, the media would never, ever pay attention to an animal welfare topic," says GEPDA president Mónica Pineda. "Now we have a good response."

It's the indifference that really hurts her, says Mónica Pineda. When she picks up a stray dog begging for scraps outside a restaurant, she can't help but feel angry with the people who are ignoring a hungry animal. "I tell them, 'I can't believe that you don't dare give him a piece of taco,'" she says. The common response is, "I can't believe you don't help children instead."

Mexico has a lot of problems, says Pineda, including violence against women, drug trafficking, and child homelessness. Well over half the population lives in poverty. But the president and cofounder of Gente por la Defensa Animal (People for the Defense of Animals) doesn't feel the need to justify her passion for helping animals. "Those who suffer the most in Third World countries are the weakest," she says, "and animals are the weakest of the weak."

Though Mexico has institutionalized animal control, the system involves government workers

rounding up and delivering dogs to "rabies control centers," where nearly all are electrocuted after a short holding period. Adoptions are rare; as in many nations, puppy mills and the demand for "breed" dogs work hand-in-hand to keep street dogs on the streets until they're captured and killed.

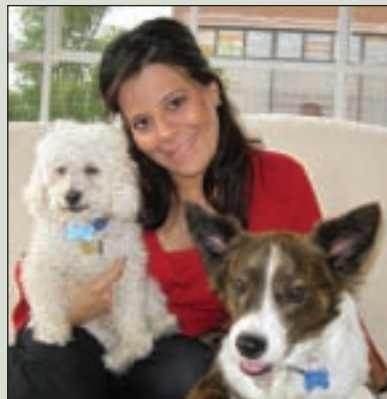
Because of the government's entrenched lethal approach to street dogs, Pineda's group doesn't operate a sterilization-release program for canines. Instead, volunteers rescue street dogs for adoption while raising awareness of pet overpopulation, investigating cruelty cases, lobbying for better laws, and bringing humane education to the schools.

After GEPDA joined forces with Humane Society International to rescue animals affected by flooding in 2007, the two organizations began a closer association. HSI provides guidance, training, and grant funding, and GEPDA contributes volunteers and knowledge of Mexico's animal protection issues.

Pineda is now working on an HSI-funded study of the government's animal control methods, and she's helping to coordinate the second HSI Forum on Mexican Animal Welfare in 2010.

By creating a culture more supportive of spay/neuter—and intolerant of animal cruelty—she hopes to change the fates of strays in Mexico City.

Still, when she thinks of the numbers of animals who need help, she sometimes feels despair. "But the next day I say, 'I'm alive, I'm healthy, I can do many things for them, and I will to the end,'" she says. "The worst you can do is to stop the fight and close the book."



In every street dog project he's worked on, Rowan has seen how these programs can gradually awaken compassion for animals and respect for animal protection work. They can give hope to people who despair of the animal suffering around them and dispel their sense of isolation.

Later this year, Sehgal hopes to show an even closer link between animal protection and the alleviation of human suffering. India's streets aren't just home to millions of dogs; homeless children often scavenge right alongside the four-footed for survival. HSI envisions a program that will enlist the help of street children to monitor recently sterilized street dogs, while repaying them with education, food, and shelter.

The ambitious project isn't Sehgal's only agenda item this year. He's working in seven other cities in the Philippines to establish spay/neuter clinics, and he's helping to launch street dog sterilization programs in Ethiopia, Bhutan, and Nepal. At the same time, he's looking at possible openings to introduce humane animal control concepts in other countries.



"It's very empowering," he says, "because I'm able to affect the lives of many more times the number of animals as before."

And no matter where he is, Sehgal says he has no problem overcoming language and cultural differences to establish a rapport with his audience. "Even though I'm now the teacher, in some ways, I'm still them." ■

LEARN MORE about Humane Society International at hsi.org.



DESTINATION: LIMA, PERU



ORGANIZATION: Grupo Caridad, an all-volunteer group that promotes pet adoptions and spay/neuter; sterilizes and vaccinates animals; protests puppy mills; and assists in disaster relief

CHALLENGES: Mass-breeding facilities, high shelter euthanasia rates, and 400,000 street dogs

REASONS FOR HOPE: Numbers of strays have decreased in some areas; government-funded spay/neuter services have increased



Even when the nuns celebrated a Mass for him before his school, praying he would turn his attention to child welfare causes, Fernando Moreno wasn't deterred. At 14, he'd already discovered his mission in life. And he was too busy promoting pet adoptions and spay/neuter to the rest of the student body to divert his energies elsewhere.

Growing up in Lima, Peru, Moreno saw dozens of stray dogs every day and a lot of animal suffering. "I couldn't stand being around it," he says. "And I decided to do something for them."

First, he did some research. He found out that Lima's few animal shelters had nearly 100 percent euthanasia rates, while mass commercial breeding facilities churned out "breed dogs" for the pet-owning public. Meanwhile, his city of more than 8 million people had a street dog population estimated at 400,000.

Now just shy of 18, Moreno already has an impressive résumé in animal protection. Grupo Caridad (Group Charity), the humane organization he founded four years ago, has expanded its public awareness campaigns to promote pet adoptions and sterilization throughout the city, organized protests outside pet stores supplied by puppy mills, and assisted in animal disaster relief work. With Humane Society International funding, the all-volunteer organization launched a spay/neuter program that has sterilized and vaccinated more than 1,000 animals in the last three years.

Like many others working to help street dogs, Moreno has discovered that compassion breeds compassion. In the areas Grupo Caridad targets for its spay/neuter work, there are fewer strays and people are kinder to the street animals, he says.

Still, he admits to sometimes feeling depressed because his organization is only able to help a small fraction of Lima's stray dogs. "But I know that we will manage to do much more in the future," he says. "We will learn more how to approach this issue and make more of a difference."

To this end, Moreno has twice attended The HSUS's Animal Care Expo, networking with animal protectionists throughout the world and sharing strategies. As he puts this knowledge into practice, he hopes Grupo Caridad will soon be able to achieve 1,000 sterilizations each year. And as the organization builds capacity, he plans to extend its programs to all of Lima and other cities in Peru.

Already, Moreno has had success working with local governments, talking one municipality into using humane euthanasia techniques instead of strychnine and persuading two others to offer free spay/neuter services.

And he's made a difference closer to home. Before he started working in animal protection, his grandmother hated dogs, and his mother was indifferent to them. But constant exposure to Moreno's foster animals had an impact. "My grandmother finally started to feel compassion for animals and finally she adopted [a dog]," says Moreno. "Then my mother adopted a dog, and my grandmother adopted another. Now she sleeps with a dog lying on her head."

Moreno recently entered the University of Lima, where he plans to study communications, publicity, and marketing—knowledge that he will put to use on behalf of Peru's needy animals.

"We have to change the people's minds," he says. "It's not right to have so many animals suffering."