

A Taste of Honey

By Rosanne McKenzie

(This article first appeared in ANIMAL VOICE in 2002 and has been edited by Rosanne McKenzie to reflect 2003 information.)



For a carefree tourist, stepping onto a palm-fringed beach after a swim in the lagoon, Rarotonga's native dogs are a friendly surprise. Mostly golden, long-nosed and with short bandy legs, they hang back hopefully until you toss them a bit of your picnic lunch. Then suddenly, you have a whole group of new friends. Many of the thousands of tourists from New Zealand, Australia, the US and Europe who visit the Cook Islands each year feed the dogs or play with them a little. Some even befriend one or two animals for a few weeks and in 1993, American Cathy Sue Ragan-Anunsen was one of those visitors, spending four weeks in Rarotonga with her family. Cathy Sue befriended a golden female "Raro dog" named Honey.



Two youngsters taken into the care of the Cook Islands SPCA.

But when it came time to go home to the US, Cathy Sue couldn't just hop on the plane and forget about the canine friend she'd made. The newspaper had run a notice about an anti-cruelty group being organized by Cook Islander Tom Wichman so she gave Tom a call. What was intended to be a brief conversation about where to send a donation, turned into an entire day and evening learning about the plight of the friendly, free-roaming Raro dogs. To Cathy Sue's shock she discovered that there was not one vet in the Cook Islands. Not even on Rarotonga, which, at 32 km in circumference and with about 9000 permanent residents, is the largest of the 15 tiny islands that make up the Cooks group. She also found out that local politicians, worried the dogs might impact on Rarotonga's main industry of tourism, had instructed police to shoot any unregistered dogs. Tom and his group of concerned Rarotongan residents formed the anti-cruelty group in response to the brutal killings.

Incidents of animals being gunned down in front of horrified tourists in the middle of bustling shopping areas and dogs being beaten to death before terrified school children provoked an avalanche of angry letters to government officials.



Island paradise ... holidaymakers come to the Cooks to relax on the beautiful beaches. Seeing dogs being shot to death does not feature in the tourist brochures.

The killing of Snoopy, a popular stray, filled an entire page with letters to the editor. Tourists returned home and wrote scalding letters to Cook Island government officials and included copies to tourist publications and international animal protection organizations.

The public pressure resulted in a temporary cease-fire but Tom's group estimated that 1000 dogs had been shot and the law allowing the killing of unregistered dogs remained on the books.

Not one to be daunted by a challenge, Cathy Sue decided she had to do something about the lack of animal protection services on the island. She went home to Oregon and founded a non-profit group, The Esther Honey Foundation, Inc (named for her Cook Island companion, Honey and Esther, Cathy Sue's grandmother).

In 1995, after two years of preparation and with the help of animal advocates, veterinarians,

**Volunteer Vets
Come To
The Rescue**

"I'm glad to be here because the animals' survival depends solely on our efforts"
Dr. Schand, volunteer veterinarian

The nonprofit Esther Honey Foundation began providing free veterinarian care for all animals in the Cook Islands in 1995. Since then 41 highly skilled vets from around the world have volunteered their time at our animal clinic.

We are the only source of animal care on the island, and our success is entirely due to the generosity of volunteers from around the world and donations from locals and visitors alike. Without EHF there would be no veterinarian care for the entire country. If you ever see an injured animal, please call us. We're here to help.

The all volunteer staff treat over 1000 animals/year free of charge (over 7,600 so far). EHF vets have also spayed and neutered over 3000 animals to date. And just last year the Clinic began providing animal care for the remote outer islands.

Why not come by our clinic and find out more about us? Our friendly staff would love to meet you and will be glad to show you around. Or visit our Web site:
<http://www.estherhoney.org>

Esther Honey Foundation Animal Clinic: Phone 22336,
Ovenuru Road, Arua, Arorangi, 1 mile north from the Rarotonga Beach Resort.

The Esther Honey Foundation spreads its message with advertisements such as this one.



ABOVE: The Cook Islands SPCA headquarters in Rarotonga.

BELOW: An Esther Honey Foundation volunteer and a local policeman with the first of a series of signs the foundation hopes will help prevent traffic accidents involving Raro's dogs.



pharmaceutical companies and Air New Zealand, the first contingent of volunteers arrived on the island and established the Cooks' first companion animal veterinary hospital. Veterinarians and veterinary nurses, primarily from the United States, New Zealand and Australia, spend two weeks to six months working without pay at the EHF Animal Clinic, bringing with them essential medical supplies and equipment sent by the foundation and its donors.

The foundation hopes to eventually solve the homeless animal problem with its extensive spay and neuter programme. "There will be no need for roundups and mass killings of dogs or overflowing pounds if the island dogs can be desexed," says Cathy Sue. "It's not a quick-fix solution but it is the only permanent and humane solution."

"Education is a primary concern," says Cathy Sue. Consequently, the foundation's programs include Humane Education to reach islanders through a weekly newspaper column, clinic tours, school presentations and EHF VET TREKS (remote island and village clinics). After eight years of the desexing programme, more than 4,000 animals have been spayed or neutered and the homeless dog population is now estimated to be between 1200-2000.

Operations at the EHF clinic currently remain by donation only, "Tom and I agreed there would be no charge as we wanted all the residents of the Cooks to have access to



An inspiration ...



Honey died in the summer of 2001, at age 15 after many years of welcoming tourists to her home in the Cook Islands. She shared breakfasts and sunsets with her guests and guarded them while they slept. Her smile and antics with the Mynah birds made them laugh. Her dignity, intellect and resourcefulness elicited admiration and affection. Cathy Sue has always been convinced that she was simply the most receptive conduit for Honey's plan to bring veterinary care to the Cook Islands and is honoured to have helped Honey achieve her goal.

veterinary care for their animals," says Cathy Sue. The clinic often receives fruit, vegetables or labour in lieu of cash. Conditions are very basic but each year, 1500-2000 animals are treated for everything from traffic injuries to conditions unique to the tropics, such as reef fish poisoning. Reef fish from the lagoon feed on algae which, when eaten by cats and dogs, acts as a toxin on the animal's brain and nervous system. The poison affects their ability to walk, to eat and to sense temperature. They will feel very hot even though their body is cold and vice versa.

Volunteers often stay up all night caring for distressed animals and keeping them company. Former clinic manager Ryan Brown recalls one of her first cases of reef fish poisoning. "I was in the kennel, syringe-feeding Rusty. I was hot and sweating but sitting there, in that instant I just realised that here's this little soul, totally dependent on me and if I weren't here, how would he survive?"

Thanks to the Esther Honey Foundation and its volunteers, Rarotonga is becoming a lot closer to a tropical paradise for animals as well as tourists.