

Dog numbers reduced to 1666, only 65 strays

Recent letter writers seem to have confused reports of undesirable dog behaviours (barking and chasing) with the actual number of dogs on the island.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no longer a significant number of stray dogs on Rarotonga. The overwhelming majority of dogs are now owned dogs. The Esther Honey Foundation 2011 island-wide census confirmed that the number of dogs on Rarotonga have been reduced from 6,000 in 1995 to 1,666. Only 65 dogs – or less than 4% of the remaining dogs on Rarotonga – were stray dogs.

We anticipate that a 2012 /2013 census will show similar results or even a further reduction in the total number of owned and stray dogs.

The community controls how quickly dog numbers drop. The more dogs brought to the Esther Honey Foundation clinic for sterilization the more quickly the overall numbers of all dogs will decline. There is no charge for this service.

One writer wrote, “regardless of figures quoted...” referring to census results, and called for a return of the dog ranger, and a pound. It may be helpful to remember that those old days included a dog population of 6,000, frequent articles about authorities shooting, hanging and bludgeoning dogs for population control often in front of terrified school children and horrified tourists, and tourism publications carrying stories and letters from angry travelers about the “sickening” events that they witnessed while visiting the Cook Islands.

Many people still think the dog numbers widely reported back in 2001 are accurate today. That year, a \$50,000 grant was solicited to hire a dog catcher

and build a pound. In spite of scientific evidence that mass killing was (and is not) an effective population control method, pound advocates vowed to, “put down the estimated 2,000 stray dogs on the island”. Officials estimated that there were an additional 2,000 registered dogs.

News stories again appeared describing injured and bleeding dogs running through public places trying to escape a second bullet from the dog ranger, family pets being shot in their own yards and anywhere else the ranger chose to exercise his legal right to eradicate unregistered dogs. The pound lasted little more than a year without, to our knowledge, providing any significant, documented effect on the overall dog population. Those failed and sometimes cruel methods used a decade ago did not work then and are not the answer now.

Everyone is of course entitled to their own opinion, but not to their own facts. Facts are required to make informed decisions, especially about critical issues. A census provides the facts about the sex, reproduction status, age, ownership and health status of island dogs. Conducting a door to door census takes lots of volunteers, considerable financial resources, and the cooperation of the entire community but it is worth the time and funds to replace opinions and estimates with verifiable data.

The community and the Esther Honey Foundation have devoted 17 years to humanely reducing the canine population on Rarotonga and the island program has been recognized as being the first in the region to succeed in sterilizing more than 70% of its dog population. Studies show that once this percentage is reached, the number of dogs will drop dramatically as long as spay/neuter services continue.

The results of our joint efforts must be able to be substantiated to continue to benefit the Cook Islands and others who struggle with dog population issues.

If the community decides that they no longer want to permit any free roaming dogs, no matter how few their number or ownership status, then decisions would need to be made about how best to reach this goal. The Esther Honey Foundation would welcome an opportunity to contribute toward this effort, perhaps by offering education and assistance to those deciding to keep their dogs at home, in addition to continuing to provide spay and neuter services.

We want to thank everyone who has been a part of humanely and significantly reducing the number of unwanted dogs on Rarotonga. We look forward to working together on the next step toward a permanent solution.



The EHF team in action



The heart of EHF: Volunteers