



## NZVNA Journal

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### Volunteering for the Esther Honey Foundation

By Sarah Lovett



When some family members told me about the vet clinic they had seen in the Cook Islands, I thought how cool it would be to work there, never thinking that I could. It wasn't until a vet I worked with gave me a pamphlet which described how vets and vet assistants from all over the world could volunteer there, that I realised I could.

The vet clinic, which is on the island of Rarotonga, is run by the Esther Honey Foundation, which established the clinic more than 10 years ago.

Before this, animals in the Cook Islands received no veterinary attention. The foundation depends entirely on donations, and on volunteers who give their time to help the animals on the islands.

I worked at the clinic for three and a half weeks, and had an awesome time. Most of the work at the clinic is desexing, but there are also a lot of hit by cars, as the dogs and cats roam free all over the island, and also fish poisonings. Cats and dogs (and humans) become infected with a toxin called Ciguatera after eating affected fish from the lagoon which surrounds Rarotonga. The toxin affects the nervous and cardiovascular systems, and the gastrointestinal tract, causing vomiting and diarrhoea, arthralgia and myalgia, temperature sensory reversal, vertigo, and muscle weakness. These animals were also at high risk for inspiration pneumonia, and hypothermia. The cases require intensive nursing, needing assisted feeding, physiotherapy, and a ton of TLC. Many take two to three weeks before they are well enough to go home. I loved working with these cats and dogs, and it was so rewarding to see them go home after so much work.

Many of the animals had no homes, and were brought in by tourists and business owners. These animals were treated, and adopted out. The foundation has a policy that no animals are to be euthanased unless they were not treatable. While there are recommended prices for owners to pay for procedures, some people could not afford to donate money and we were often paid with towels, cat and dog food, food for our selves, and sometimes just with a hug. One of our favourite clients would bake us huge, delicious cakes as payment for treatments.

The volunteers all live together in the foundation house (accommodation is free). As well as working in the clinic, there is plenty of time to explore the island. We went swimming, snorkeling, hiking, shopping, learned how to make sarongs and coconut bras, had bonfires on the beach at night, played a lot of darts and cards, and entered the local dance contest. The advantage of being a volunteer with the Esther Honey Foundation is that you get to know the locals, and see and learn a lot more than the average tourist.

The Esther Honey Foundation is always keen for more volunteers of all experiences and ages. I became a lot more confident at vet nursing, and had such a great time. I made friends with people from all over the world, and would recommend this experience to anyone. For more information on volunteering or donating supplies, check out the Esther Honey Foundation website: [www.estherhoney.org](http://www.estherhoney.org)

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