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It's Christmas in the islands for vet Alex

Alex Elson has dealt with most of the health problems that afflict small animals, but this summer, the Whitianga vet is likely to encounter a new one.

Ms Elson is spending three weeks over Christmas and New Year as a volunteer vet in the Cook Islands. She expects there will be the usual cases, such as skin problems, accidents and neutering, but has been told there could also be a problem with fish poisoning. In certain conditions, a disturbance on the reef at Rarotonga causes toxic plankton to get into the food chain.

Ms Elson has just finished a two-year stint as a part-time vet in Whitianga and left for the Cook Islands on Sunday. "I've decided that I'll do volunteer work from now on," she says. She began her career in England and has been a vet for about 35 years. After settling in Whitianga eight years ago, she initially worked part-time in Thames.

The idea of going to the Cook Islands came when she read about the Esther Honey Foundation in a vet magazine. The organisation was founded by American animal advocate Cathy Sue Ragan-Anunsen in 1994 after a holiday in the Cook Islands.



While she was in Rarotonga, Ms Ragan-Anunsen befriended a dog named Honey and learned that there were no veterinary services in the country for its thousands of cats and dogs. In 1995, the foundation opened a clinic in Nikao. It's staffed by volunteer vets from around the world and caters for animals in Rarotonga and outlying islands.

"I've never been to the Cook Islands and I thought it sounded like me," Ms Elson says. She hopes to do some diving and possibly some horse-riding. Back home, a house-sitter will look after her pregnant horse Charity, her cats Roland and Rupert and her chickens. Her three pugs, Milly, Stanley and Lenny, will go into kennels.