

ANIMAL Sheltering

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Slow but Steady Progress in Peru

Peruvian animal shelters make do without a “culture of adoption”

BY SARAH OSTMAN



Animazul focuses its energy on spaying and neutering. Surgeries are performed in the homes of volunteers throughout the city; veterinarians operate on the dogs atop tables, and the animals recover on cardboard sheets on the floor.

When Lourdes Chino goes to work selling cigarettes and candy bars on a hilly street off the Plaza de Armas in Cusco, Peru, she doesn't go alone. She brings her dogs, Chiqui and Beto, with her. While the 14-year-old girl sits, calling out to tourists who pass her cart, Chiqui and Beto run free in the streets, picking through garbage and ducking into open storefronts to beg for scraps.

So far the two dogs have been fortunate; like many other dogs in Peru, they seem to have a sixth sense that keeps them out of harm's way. But, Lourdes acknowledges, letting them run free is risky. “People leave their pets on the streets,” she says nonchalantly. “Sometimes, they are killed by cars.”

Such casual attitudes about pet welfare are common in the developing nation, where Chiqui and Beto are considered lucky to have even a casual caretaker. Thousands of *perros callejeros* (street dogs) are less fortunate,

roaming the country's streets, often matted and infested with fleas, surviving on garbage.

“Animal abandonment is a huge problem in Peru, as well as many lower-income countries,” says Molly Mednikow, the U.S. citizen who founded Amazon Community Animal Rescue, Education & Safety (Amazon CARES), an animal protection organization in Iquitos. “People that are struggling do not share the same bond with their animals as people in more industrialized nations.”

This attitude makes for a unique set of challenges for those determined to help Peru's animal population. Indeed, animal shelters are a foreign concept to most Peruvians. Still, a few committed organizations are working to carve out their niche, control the pet population, and change public perception about strays, one family at a time.

Animazul, a small shelter built on desert land an hour outside Lima, has provided

refuge for abandoned dogs for the past nine years. Sixty dogs currently live at the shelter, dividing their time between large communal kennels and a dusty outdoor play area tufted with grass. The entire operation is run by six volunteers and one onsite caretaker who lives in an adjacent home.

In a culture where adopting a mutt is akin to adopting a rat, Animazul asks tough questions of its potential adopters: “Are you going to walk your dog?” asks one question in a 21-part adoption questionnaire on the group's website. “If you go away for more than a day, who will take care of it?”

The questionnaire is largely symbolic, though—an endorsement of the values the group would like to see in its adopters. But those adopters are scarce; once a dog arrives at the shelter, she's pretty much there to stay. Animazul is lucky to adopt out one dog per year, says shelter volunteer Samantha Winter.

"It is so difficult because they are all grown up," Winter says. "And most of the dogs ... are a mixture of many breeds, so people don't like that." The shelter's intake numbers are on the rise, she notes; frequently, volunteers find a dog or two dumped at the shelter's door in the morning.

But necessity, as they say, is the mother of invention. With no adoptions to speak of, Animazul has developed a new approach to make ends meet: sponsorship. Sponsors—mainly animal-loving Peruvians—send 70 so/les (\$25 in U.S. money) per month to "adopt" a dog, underwriting the cost of that animal's food and veterinary care while he continues to live at the shelter. That program has proven more successful than traditional adoptions—nearly half the shelter's dogs are claimed by a benefactor, Winter says.

The group has also begun focusing on a larger mission: spaying and neutering. Surgeries are performed in volunteers' living rooms in neighborhoods throughout Lima; owners turn over their pets to a volunteer veterinarian who clips the dogs' nails, cleans their ears, and fixes them on the spot. The vets operate on the animals on folding tables, and the animals recover on sheets of cardboard on the living room floor—a less-than-ideal solution, but one that has enabled the organization to sterilize 120 dogs so far. The group hopes to reach more by going mobile. "Our dream is to have a van, to move from that street to this street and to have all the equipment and just operate and operate, one surgery after another," Winter says.

The group provides the surgeries at no cost to the owners—a crucial element. "If you say you have to pay 10 so/les or 20 so/les [\$4 to \$7 in U.S. dollars], the people won't pay that," she says.

It's not just a shortage of cash that's the problem, though. Cultural differences and a lack of education also lead to an exorbitant number of mistreated and abandoned dogs, especially in rural areas of Peru, says Mednikow.

In Iquitos, the humid jungle town where Amazon CARES is based, ill and stray dogs are especially common. Because the city is surrounded by water and is only accessible by boat or plane, Mednikow says, it's difficult for people to take animals with them when they move.

The city's distinct lifestyle adds to the problem. People in Iquitos are accustomed to living with open homes; doors are left ajar for ventilation, and children and pets alike spend their days in the streets. When they are inside, pets often serve a purpose, such as killing rats; when animals age and are no longer considered useful, Mednikow says, they are tossed into the street. These abandoned animals are left to forage for food and are infested with parasites, causing a health hazard.

In the years leading up to the founding of Amazon CARES in 2004, Mednikow says, these problems had grown out of hand. "It was impossible to walk five feet without stepping over a very ill, stray dog," she says. And many locals didn't just "step over" the dogs. Because the dogs were suspected of carrying disease, it was common for people to pelt them with rocks, beat them with sticks, or throw boiling water on them. One was doused in kerosene and set on fire. "Residents did this due to fear," Mednikow says. "People do not want these infirm dogs around."

Amazon CARES fought back with a campaign to educate the public, offering mobile veterinary and birth control clinics, humane education, and animal therapy for children with disabilities. Its success over the past five years, especially in the area of spaying and neutering, has been incredible: In 2009 alone, the organization sterilized more than 1,800 animals.

"When we started, we had to trap all the dogs and met with much resistance," Mednikow says. "Now we, sadly, have to turn people away from our campaigns, as we have people lined up to spay or neuter their pet."

The organization also keeps a shelter for abandoned dogs, many of whom are disabled. Most will stay there until they die—including the dog who, miraculously, survived the kerosene attack. But as with Animazul, adoptions are a constant challenge.

It's undeniable that Animazul and Amazon CARES are fighting an uphill battle. Jessica Higgins, former program manager for the Humane Society International's Latin American programs, explains that Peru does not yet possess a "culture of adoption." Therefore, Higgins cautions, those Latin Americans pioneering in animal protection

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- As a supplement to our Volunteer Management column on determining how to track information about your volunteers, go to animalsheltering.org/databases to read "Choosing a Volunteer Management Database," and go to animalsheltering.org/volunteer_application to read "The Volunteer Application."



The very idea of an animal shelter is often a foreign concept to people who are struggling themselves just to get by. But this little boy seems very taken with a tiny kitten at the site of a mobile clinic run by Animazul, an animal shelter located about an hour outside Lima.

[scoop]

need to put their energy where it will be the most effective—and that may not be an animal shelter.

“Don’t start an animal shelter,” Higgins says. “Essentially you’re going to be running a sanctuary.” That’s fine, she says, “but in terms of making the biggest possible impact for the biggest number of animals, put those resources into spay and neuter. That is going to prevent a lot more suffering in the long run.”


There’s no telling how long it will take to change the general attitude about animal protection in Peru.

For now, stray dogs are just a regular part of the culture—a part most Peruvians hardly notice and don’t see changing any time soon.

But, Higgins points out, it’s important to remember that the fight for animals has to start somewhere. In terms of animal over-



Animal abandonment is a huge problem in Peru, and street dogs are a common sight throughout the developing nation. One such dog watches the activity at a mobile spay/neuter veterinary clinic run by animal protection organization Amazon CARES.

population and abuse, Peru “is probably not too different to how the U.S. was 50 years ago,” she says. “It took a major effort to get to where there aren’t strays everywhere in the U.S. It was not something that’s just inherent here.” 

Sarah Ostman is a journalist and graduate student from Chicago, Ill. She enjoys writing, traveling, and trips to the park with her 2-year-old shelter dog, Bailey.

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