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Vets Venture Abroad

By **Aoife O'Sullivan**

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Vet Aoife O'Sullivan talks about combining work and play in the Peruvian jungle. An article from the Irish Veterinary Journal (22.01.07)

Sometimes it's easy to get bogged down by the 'day job'. But what happens when a vet is plucked from the relative still of Irish veterinary waters and transported to the challenging rapids of animal welfare in a developing country?

As a vet student, I was always fascinated when I heard stories of adventurous vets that travelled the world, treating animals along the way. Once I had gained a few years small animal experience, I became determined to explore my options in this regard. I came across a UK-registered charity called WVS (Worldwide Veterinary Service) which acts as a charity database, organising trips to many different continents while liaising with local charity groups. Initially, I chose trips that were well established to adjust to the differences between general practice and shelter medicine. These included three trips with the Twinkle Trust (a charity which treats and neuters feral cats on Fuerteventura, one of the Canary Islands) and one with Gaia Ambiente & Animali (an Italian-based charity with which I travelled to Romania, to neuter street dogs). I am continually surprised at the high clinical standards employed in shelter facilities, given the most basic equipment and limited space.

Beth, an Australian vet with excellent Spanish, became the public liaison officer and dealt with the difficult task of keeping a record of each patient and its treatment. As she had already been in Iquitos for five months spearheading the neutering campaign, and was always available to answer questions from the vet team and the public alike,

this worked really well. Once I had completed a few trips, I felt that travel and veterinary could be a fantastic combination. I had experienced cultural differences at a grass roots level while making a positive impact on the local community. Thus, I set my sights on more far-flung destinations in need of veterinary attention. When a trip to the Peruvian Amazon came up, I jumped at the chance. This trip, organised by the charities Amazon Cares (Amazon Community Animal Rescue, Education & Safety) and WVS, was aimed at neutering and vaccinating street dogs and cats in the city of Iquitos and villages in the surrounding jungle area.

IMMUNISATIONS IN IQUITOS

Iquitos, a bustling city in the heart of the Peruvian jungle, is in close proximity to the equator. Therefore, the sun was unrelenting, and the jungle humidity was a far cry from Dublin's fresh sea air. On arrival, our group travelled to the suburb of Bellavista Nanay and set up our mobile clinic. This involved borrowing floor space from a local resident so we could assemble our cages, operating tables and recovery area. The rooms we were given were basic but perfect for the job. Once our equipment was set up, dogs (both stray and owned) were brought in for treatment. All dogs were vaccinated for rabies, worms, fleas, mange and those that were sterilised were given antibiotic cover and analgesia. All of the sterilised dogs were given a right ear notch and tattoo and all of the dogs vaccinated for rabies were given a red plastic collar for identification purposes.

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Our anaesthetic protocol was excellent. It consisted of a xylazine premedication, and an IV diazepam/ketamine induction. All dogs remained on intravenous fluids for the duration of the anaesthetic and every bitch was intubated. Top-ups, when needed, were again diazepam/ketamine. This was by far the safest anaesthetic protocol I have used in a 'field' situation. While the vet team operated, Moly (Director of Amazon CARES) took local children in groups and

conducted education seminars so that they could be made aware of animal welfare.

The main disease we saw on the trip were skin diseases (mainly sarcoptic mange but also demodectic mange). We saw one case of distemper, which needed to be euthanised as it had neurological signs not compatible with life, and also one hermaphrodite, which was also neutered. We also encountered several patients with TVTs (transmissible venereal tumours), which were transported back to Iquitos for treatment, and in one village we encountered several dogs with larval cysts under the skin of their elbows. These were dissected and the larvae were removed - I believe the species to be a relation of either the warble or bot fly. Prolonged bleeding times were also noted on several of the bitch spays and dog castrates and this was attributed to ehrlichiosis.

MESSING ABOUT ON THE RIVER

My visit to Iquitos coincided with the Great Amazon Raft Race. At 142km, this is said to be the longest raft race in the world - and we were taking part. We caught a bus to Nauta, a town situated on the Amazon river, to meet up with our fellow competitors. Here, we climbed aboard the most overcrowded riverboat like sardines in a tin and found space to hang our hammocks. Despite the close quarters, and only one toilet/shower room between forty passengers, we all had a great time on the boat and it was an excellent way to mingle with fellow competitors.

Our raft race consisted of four female veterinarians: along with myself, there was Beth McGennicken (Australia), Jane Little (South Africa), and Sheraden Harvey (Hawaii). Our team motivator, photographer, entertainer and fellow Irish vet Lorna O'Dowd, cheered us on each day and kept our spirits high. Our rafts were made by tying seven logs together with vine - they were not the most aerodynamic of vessels and sometimes not the most buoyant. The river was brown (said to be silt but likely to include raw sewerage, Ecoli, Giardia, typhoid, spirochaetes, piranhas and cholera). The first day we paddled for eight hours on the trot - we were unprepared for the scorching sun or the physical exertion necessary for such endurance. There was vomiting, blisters, sunburn, heat stroke, delirium and power-napping but we struggled on and completed the 40km.

Day two was empowering - we rowed for nine hours through one tropical storm and many river dolphin sightings, completing the 60km in second place. Day three was difficult from an endurance point of view, but we managed to complete the remaining 42km in seven hours. The final kilometre, upstream into the mouth of the Nanay River, was definitely the most gruelling part. We finished a very respectable second place in the international section and received a beautiful wooden trophy made by a local craftsman. I think it is fair to say this was the hardest, most excruciatingly painful, mentally and physically exhausting thing I have ever done in my life, but in many ways it is also the most satisfying.

The next day we packed up our equipment and travelled on another river boat downstream along the Amazon to local villages. This boat was comfortable, we had lovely sleeping quarters, delicious food and I even had an impromptu birthday party complete with cakes! Each day we stopped at a different village to treat animals - Indiana, Mazan, Los Palmeras and Yanamono. While the vets operated, Molly, Tania, a local teacher, and Karina, an English girl we met through the raft race, held seminars in the local schools to educate the children. Bethjane and Ricardo, veterinary nurses from the clinic, also came along - they proved to be invaluable in terms of hard work but also liaising with locals. This two-pronged approach of education along with veterinary care is a far better approach than vet care alone and, in my opinion, will create a wave of change in the upcoming generation.

One of my funniest memories of this trip was visiting the home of one of the villagers to return their neutered dog and cat. When we visited, we explained that their cat would need to be confined overnight and after some hunting about, a large plastic tub was placed upside down on top of the cat. Problem solved - until the tub started moving across the floor! Everyone was in fits of laughter, apart from the cat of course! Sitting in the dim twilight with their whole family gathered around seemed a million miles from Ireland but in another way, I felt more at home than anywhere else in the world.

