



Animal Balance Project Report Galápagos Islands, September 2008

Summary

Animal Balance (AB) held a 2 week long campaign on Santa Cruz, San Cristobal and Isabela islands, the three main islands where humans live. 12 international volunteer vets, techs and helpers covered their own costs to help ALL the animals of the Galapagos Islands. We were supported by the Galapagos Conservancy and are indebted to them and the volunteers for allowing this campaign to happen. We worked collaboratively with the division of the Municipality which handles introduced species. Together we sterilized 308 cats and dogs, treated scores more for other ailments, carried out 2 amputation surgeries and helped an Owl who had been hit by a car.

It is a raw, awesome and ever changing archipelago, providing a home to not just the delicate endemic species such as; Marine Iguanas, Flamingos, Penguins and of course the infamous Darwin Finches, but also 40,000 humans. Humans live on just 4 of the 96 islands and islets. Today you find pizza restaurants, discos, hotels and a myriad of other buildings serving the never ending line of tourists. Humans brought their cats and dogs with them and now we are doing our part to clean up our collective mess. To ensure that the Marine Iguanas can sit on their favorite rocks in the sun in peace, the plethora of finches can continue to feed off the tiny lizards, and ALL life on the islands can live in balance. We do not wish the cats and dogs harm, it is not their fault they find themselves trying to survive in the harsh climate of the Galapagos. We employ humane methods to reduce their populations. In addition to the sterilization clinics, we carry out vet to vet training programs, humane education, dog training classes creating a sustainable solution. We have also joined forces with a new organization SPECIEES, whose goal is to relocate street dogs onto the mainland or to the USA, once they have been sterilized by AB.

The Current Situation

We arrived in Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz, the largest town in the Galapagos. It is the main center for tourism resembling any seaside town in the world; the only difference being the Marine Iguanas and the Blue Footed Boobies who hang by the dock hoping to keep their rocks free from concrete and the water free from gasoline. The clash of human interference is strikingly obvious. We found Siberian Huskies, who had been smuggled in and bred for sale, panting under park benches as the hot Equator sun beats down on their thick coat. Unfortunately for them, they have blue eyes, treasured by humans and so have been bred and sold throughout the islands. The customs and quarantine division, Sesa-Sicgal, do nothing to stop this influx of new dogs who will undoubtedly bring disease and other behavioral problems that will inevitably kill the shy, submissive Galapadonian dogs, who are not vaccinated. Vaccines are live and therefore it is illegal to bring them to the islands. The Galapadonian dogs have no resistance to the new diseases such as Parvo, Distemper and possibly Rabies. Quite simply, the Galapagos is on the brink of a disaster unless action is taken now.

AB has tirelessly worked to raise funds, collect donated supplies and equipment, find volunteers who are willing to cover their own costs, use their vacation time and work 10 plus hours a day in a hot, tiny space to sterilize the cat and dog populations. We started the campaigns in 2004 and by 2007 we had sterilized 96% of the populations on the 4 islands. We just returned to the islands a year after the last campaign and are stunned by the current situation.

The authorities have turned a blind eye, taken bribes and allowed pure bred dogs to enter the Galapagos archipelago at such a rate that we sterilized 308 animals in 10 days and had to turn away people as we could not cope with the numbers. In 2003 when we started AB, we never thought we would be sterilizing Cocker Spaniels and Siberian Huskies and their mixes in 2008. At this point we should be planning our exit strategy; instead we are focused now on providing evidence of this new problem to those who will take action.



Fecal Sample Study

Dr. Elise Gingrich, a shelter medicine resident from Colorado State University, collected fecal samples from all dogs treated during the campaign as part of an investigative study. The purpose of the study is to determine the prevalence of intestinal parasites in the canine population of the Galapagos. This study will aid in determining which parasites are present in the Galapagos canine population. These results will allow for use of appropriate anti-parasitics, which will help to protect both the dogs and their human companions.

The Clinics

We spent the first week sterilizing animals in Puerto Ayora with the CIMEI, the sector of the Municipality that handles introduced species. They have a Vet on staff, who worked and trained with the AB vets. AB had outfitted their clinic in previous years. CIMEI worked with us to sterilize 113 animals in 5 days, an impressive number. They will continue to sterilize animals when we are not present now that they have the skills, medicines and equipment necessary.

We sometimes receive other animals, this time an owl was brought in and luckily Dr. Byron Maas, a surgeon from Oregon, was on the team.

From Dr. Byron Maas:

I was asked to talk to a gentleman about a bird with a injury that he wanted to bring in to the clinic. As soon as I was done with the spay I was performing I went outside and found out the he had a barn owl that had been severely injured from a collision presumably with a vehicle. I told him that we would absolutely take a look at the injured bird and see what we could do to help. The challenge for us was how to care for a wild bird and be respectful of any regulations the Galapagos National Park may have along with the Municipality. It is generally is not appropriate to have wildlife in captivity unless they can be successfully released and have a normal life. But our mission with Animal Balance is to help the animals of the Galapagos so we wanted to do what was necessary for this owl.



A fortuitous piece of luck for both the bird and all concerned was that Gill De Roy was the person that had found the bird and wanted to have it examined and cared for. After a few calls to park

officials we were given the go ahead to examine and treat the owl and release it into the care of the De Roy family.

Upon examination, I could determine that the bird was very thin, emaciated, weak and had a two fractures, one of the wing and one high on the leg, causing it to be paralyzed from the knee down and not able to grip with its talons. The wing was hanging but there was no bone exposed. The leg injury was severe and I feared that it may be more than the bird would be able to live with. The femur was fractured and the resulting swelling and tissue damage caused the rest of the leg to dangle lifelessly. I explained the gravity of the situation and after we discussed and evaluated a plan we decided to try therapy if the bird would tolerate handling and treatment. We fashioned a figure of eight bandage for the wing to stabilize that fracture.



The leg was a big challenge as surgery would have been the best with an internal pin. This however, was not an option for our team which was prepared to do an aggressive domestic animal sterilization campaign. The leg needed to be splinted in traction to immobilize it and not cause too much weight or pressure on the nerves, while allowing the bird adequate mobility so it could learn to perch on its good leg. We improvised a splint fashioned with plastic from a syringe case and hand fashioned gauze bandages. Antibiotic, analgesic medications and information for care were given to Mr. De Roy with specific instructions that this was a long shot at survival and that if the bird were to deteriorate we would have to euthanize.

Two days later the owl returned and was doing much better, gaining weight and was getting stronger. So we continued therapy and care. As the week progressed the owl returned and we changed the wing and leg bandages. It seemed that the leg was improving and showing signs of function.

The Animal Balance team had to break down the clinic and was to return in a week's time so we scheduled a follow up. At the last check the owl was doing very well. We gave Mr. De Roy instructions to change the wraps and it appeared the leg would heal to the point that it could use the leg to perch but may not get complete return to gripping. Our hope was to have the wraps off in a few weeks.

Although most birds get stressed when handled, the positive side is that barn owls do very well with human interaction and adapt well to close interaction. This proved to be the case with this owl as it seemed to respond well to our handling and care. This was clearly apparent at the last follow up as it seemed to become part of the De Roy homestead and was exhibiting social behaviors of integration when cared for and fed.

This owl will not ever have a normal life of hunting but with the continued care it can live a good life.

The Team Splits

At the end of the week, we split the team into 2 and headed to San Cristobal and Isabela islands. We packed the tiny boats with H tanks, crates and all the supplies we would need and crossed the ocean to the 2 islands. As it was winter in the Galapagos, the seas were rough and after 2 plus hours in the boats, the teams were quickly realizing that their adventure had only just begun.

The Isabela team

The Isabela team was comprised of 4 AB volunteers. They set up their clinic at the Charles Darwin Research Laboratory just outside of town. Isabela is a very difficult place to work due to the political situation. The Mayor dissolved the CIMEI last year and since then there has not been a vet on the island. He appointed one person to handle introduced species and did not give him any assistance to make any effective change or help the community. The Mayor however, did agree to allow us on the island to hold the clinic. We believe that the community made this happen as they want the service and trust us. The team sterilized 67 animals in 3 days and then held an open clinic on the last day to address other issues. The team was completely overwhelmed every day and barley slept. The single reason why they were overwhelmed was the fact that pure bred puppies have been smuggled, bred and sold in the village. We will be making Isabela Island a priority in our next campaign.



San Cristobal

The San Cristobal team was met by the CIMEI staff at the dock. They helped unload and set up the clinic on Sunday afternoon. Their assistance and cooperation was the best we have ever received. The CIMEI Coordinator, Renato Herrera, had advertised the campaign on radio, TV and via a loud speaker. AB and CIMEI worked together for 4 days and sterilized 128 animals. Renato had enlisted the help of the local surfer community, who spent the 4 days on the truck picking up cats and dogs for us. They were the most enthusiastic pick up team we have ever had. Renato arranged 2 TV interviews for AB and CIMEI. The entire town knew who we were and why we were there. People came in droves to the clinic. CIMEI have a vet, who worked in surgery along side the vets, Dr. Byron Maas and Dr. Diego Barrera and was trained in the use of the anesthesia machine, spay/neuter technique and amputation surgery.



Dr. Diego is an Ecuadorian vet who has worked for 2 years for CIMEI San Cristobal and AB trained him in 2005. Dr. Diego joins us for each campaign to help train new Ecuadorian vets. He has now started a spay/neuter clinic in his home town of Ambato and in addition has spoken at many Latin American conferences about humane alternatives to lethal population control.

We always face some tough choices on the campaign and this time a friend of a guardian brought in a dog who had been hit by a car a few months before. Rosie's leg had been broken and Dr. Byron decided it was best that we amputate it or else she could die from an infection. The CIMEI Vet had never performed an amputation before so Dr. Byron was able to turn the surgery into a training session.



From Dr. Byron Maas

Rosie was presented to our team in San Cristobal at the CIMEI clinic location with an injury that had been sustained from being hit by a car. It was explained to us that she was not walking on her front leg and was presumed to have a fracture with open wounds. Upon examination it was apparent that her injuries were several weeks old and the initial external damage had begun to heal. Unfortunately Rosie had sustained major and irreparable damage to some of the nerves in her shoulder and forearm that rendered her leg partially paralyzed and without feeling. Thus when she used her leg she would limp and drag her foot to the point that she had wounds and skin ulcers that could not heal. Severe muscle atrophy was in her shoulder from lack of nerve supply was a contributing to her disfigurement. Rosie had a fantastic attitude and spirit to live, only she could not feel most of her lower leg and paw. We explained the situation to her caretaker and informed that the best treatment and outcome for her was to amputate the leg at the shoulder joint, enabling her to have as much a normal life as possible.

We were due to pack up the mash style clinic and move to a location in the highlands for one last sterilization clinic that afternoon but I felt that this was Rosie's only chance to get the help she needed. We discussed the situation and formulated a plan that would allow the veterinary team to finish sterilization procedures at the CIMEI clinic, move the clinic and get Rosie the help she desperately needed. So while half of the team began to disassemble the hospital and pack up the medical gear, the others anesthetized and prepped Rosie for surgery and kept one table in the OR functional to do the amputation. The surgical procedure was a straight forward approach to an amputation at the shoulder joint. The muscles were dissected and a skin flap preserved to close over the incision and give her a new lease on life running on the island of San Cristobal.

With the whole team moving immediately following surgery, it was necessary to transport her. Once she was extubated and stable we medicated her heavily with pain relievers and packed up the rest of the remaining surgery gear and headed into the hills. Rosie was essentially recovering along the way as we had patients waiting. Here we set up the new operating room, recovery, receiving and waiting room in a small room off an joining a school in El Progreso. Rosie finished her recovery under the watchful eyes of the Animal Balance and CIMEI team while we performed surgery on several more cats and dogs. At the end of the day, we broke down the surgery and returned to Puerto Baquerizo Moreno where she spent the night in the CIMEI office. The next day CIMEI made arrangements to have her returned to her caregiver and she is currently doing quite well three legged in the Galapagos.

Conclusion

On the last day, all the AB volunteers returned to Santa Cruz for one last clinic day together. We were able to divide up the left over supplies between the islands and send them via the Fibra boats. In total we sterilized 308 cats and dogs. An incredible effort!

Once the teams left I went back over to Isabela to assess the situation further. I talked with the community about the new dogs and why this was happening. We collected photographic evidence and conducted interviews on all 3 islands. This evidence will now be presented to the organizations that can stop the smuggling.

After the Galapagos campaign, I went to Quito and met with the representative of the PAHO, the Pan American Health Organization. They are researching strategies to solve the problem of rabies, which is spread by street dogs. They had heard about AB's work on the Galapagos and were interested in replicating the model on the mainland. Our goal is that they will 'use' Dr. Diego's clinic in Ambato as their model clinic. AB will provide guidance, Dr. Diego will organize the clinics and the dogs will be sterilized and vaccinated against Rabies. We hope to prove that this is the ONLY way to effectively solve the problem. Once the model is completed the PAHO would like to replicate it throughout Latin America where there are Rabies outbreaks.

Our goal is to return to the Galapagos in May 2009 and hold another campaign on all the islands, focusing primarily on Isabela. As there is no vet on the island, we are concerned about the welfare of the animals. We are hoping to find funding to send Dr. Ruben Aleman to Isabela for at least a month before May. He used to be the vet for CIMEI on Isabela and is trusted and liked by the community. However, this decision depends on the cooperation of the Isabela Mayor. We are also talking with CIMEI San Cristobal about a disease study. We would like to receive special permission to bring the DHLPP vaccine to this island and hold a free vaccine clinic. We would test all the dogs and build up a picture of which diseases are present and if the vaccine would be an effective tool.

We feel confident that we are putting our resources in exactly the right areas to ensure the long term humane reduction and control of the cat and dog populations of the Galapagos Islands. Thank you to the volunteers, the Galapagos Conservancy, the CIMEI's, the PNG and all the community members who helped make this campaign such a great success.



In memory of Osa, Isabela Island, 2008