

## KOH TAO PROJECT REPORT

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We staggered off the Koh Tao boat in peak season, sweaty with our bedraggled backpacks and not really sure what to expect. What we encountered was a large surplus of farangs (the Thai for 'foreigner'), bustling Thai and Burmese people peddling their diving schools/ restaurants and hundreds of stray dogs and cats. We arrived to a room containing one table for consulting and operating, a shelf of basic drugs, a kettle impersonating an autoclave and a very friendly (if rather harassed) British graduate. Having travelled non-stop for 2 days, we were whisked away on a motorbike to assist with an in-field spay at a nearby dive resort. 'In-field' was an accurate description. The theatre was a dusty table outside a bungalow, the recovery area was the beach and the anaesthetic of choice was pentobarbitone (used primarily to euthanase animals in the UK). This was Koh Tao animal clinic, our home for the next month.

It became rapidly apparent that the work would be abundant and improvised, and the number of volunteers was low. This slowed down progress of the education programme in favour of keeping the clinic open (we were the only veterinary volunteers present for the first week – the graduate left a few days after we arrived). But it gave us a good opportunity to assess the local and farang perspectives on pet ownership and stray welfare, as well as experiencing the main issues encountered in the clinic. After the first week we had targeted the main concepts:

- Local people having a limited knowledge about responsible pet ownership – but being very willing to learn (even if it was via sign language...)
- A very loose definition of 'pet' ranging from the conventional being cared for, fed, walked, living with the owner to being fed every 5 days or so. In both cases the owner claimed full control of decisions regarding the animal. This made elective or even clinical treatment difficult when we were unsure of the identity of the owner, as well as educating them on good pet ownership.
- Stray dogs being poisoned due to excess numbers, or because they begged for food from the locals, not aided by farang encouragement. The drug used is Strychnine, which leads to a slow and painful death.
- Many road accidents due to the abundant and often reckless motorbike driving.
- The great need to advertise the clinic for general treatment, neutering, mange treatment of strays and pet dogs and vaccination against Rabies and Parvovirus .

The original methods discussed to implement the programme were posters and leaflets in English, Thai and Burmese, lessons at the local school about good stray and pet animal welfare, walks around the island handing out information and answering any questions about the clinic and fundraising nights with stalls and people on hand to chat to locals and farangs. We managed all of these apart from lessons at the school due to the headmaster being permanently away or uncontactable, and as it was difficult to liaise with the school in the time available . The main thing realised was that, although we achieved a lot (and had a lot of fun!) we needed longer than a month to truly establish the programme, especially combining it with working at the clinic Monday-Saturday, including a 24hr emergency service. So many ideas we were brimming with just could not occur due to constrained staff and time.

This placement was a vertical learning curve, the main idea being that education is not just about a scheduled programme aimed at a quantity of people. It is about interacting with individuals, local and farangs, on a day to day basis in their community and their culture. It should be a completely mutual experience, not just 2-4pm in a school and brightly coloured posters. You need input from all areas; local and foreign volunteers, good marketing and enough time and people to make it happen. It was a realisation that it takes just a small contribution from many people to raise the standard of animal welfare across the globe.

Of course none of this experience would have happened without the generous grant of £500 from the BVA overseas group. They put time and effort into providing funds towards some highly inspiring projects, and make a large contribution to improving animal welfare around the world. Thank you, and I'm sure the stray dogs do too!

Captions for photos:

Me operating - lost my earring again...performing a skin graft on a wounded stray

Us in sidecar - returning a neutered stray back to his beach home

Clinic - the operating theatre, recovery, consulting room and pharmacy. Cosy.

Messy clinic - nothing starts a day of work like a euthatal anaesthesia

*Sept 2006*



