

THE SPCA'S CHALLENGES IN FIJI

by Christina May BVMS MRCVS

When most people think of Fiji, blue skies, vibrant coral reefs, swaying palm trees and romantic retreats spring to mind with a warm 'Bula' welcome from its friendly laid back inhabitants. Fiji is undoubtedly the most beautiful place I have ever visited but off the tourist trail this archipelago tells a deeper story with a rich and diverse history and many current challenges. Few visitors glimpse the social and economic problems that Fiji is struggling to overcome.



The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [SPCA] has been operating in Fiji since 1953 and has done a fantastic job of providing a shelter for stray and abandoned cats and dogs and where possible veterinary care. It is the only organisation in Fiji working principally in the area of animal welfare. The central clinic is based in Suva, Fiji's vibrant multicultural capital city on the main island Viti Levu, with a second in the tourist hub Nadi, adjacent to the main international airport. Outreach clinics are organised when possible to assist the outer islands with an emphasis on neutering but this stretches resources in every sense and is constrained to companion animals at present.

I began my volunteer work in January 2008 and two months later felt I was barely scratching the surface of what is a daunting but achievable goal to educate people about animal welfare and care, in a country where zoonoses such as Leptospirosis are a real problem. The SPCA shelter had been enduring without a resident veterinarian for over five months when I arrived, leaving the society solely dependent on volunteer vets such as myself from overseas. This was put into perspective by Fiji's current situation with only two permanent vets practicing, a Government vet [there should be eight appointed at all times] and a private vet in Suva. For a country with over 330 islands, of which roughly one third are inhabited, this is shocking leaving people and animals with very limited access to veterinary care. This keeps the staff at the SPCA exceptionally busy. The phone calls I received from remote islands were heart breaking. Often from inhabitants who had no basics such as paracetamol to treat themselves let alone access to antibiotics for their animals and no means to get the animals to the clinics.



Fiji is losing a considerable proportion of its skilled workforce including veterinarians overseas for better standards of living and potential for career advancement, something the Fijians themselves term as 'brain drain'. There are great disparities of income within their economy, with a significant number of the population still reliant on subsistence living, a situation, which is not uncommon throughout many of the other Pacific islands. A quarter of household incomes are below the poverty line and many sit on it. This was made very apparent when a number of Fijians had difficulties obtaining basics such as flour and water when Cyclone Gene hit this January, shortly followed by outbreaks of Salmonella typhi. On a greater scale there are continuing issues as a result of market prices surging globally creating many job losses plus steep increases in fuel and food costs. As a result for a good many families in Fiji, there is little disposable income for the care and treatment of animals. Pets are fortunate to be fed tinned fish, soaked 'long loaf', spicy curry remnants, raw bones and meat dust. Animals frequently look malnourished. Fiji gave me my first encounters with vegan cats owing to their owners' religious beliefs and dogs that wouldn't touch bland food!

The Fiji SPCA receives limited financial support from the government and is very dependent for its resources from the modest fees it charges for clinical and other services, membership fees, and mainly donations. It badly needs sponsorship for larger improved shelters and the development of measures to improve stray dog management in conjunction with the Government. Help is desperately needed on all levels from the training of nurses and kennel hands, to assisting the current clinics to achieve their full potential as well as expanding the services available through outreach clinics. There is also a need for more education programmes to promote the welfare of animals. Although a culture of compassion for animals is not yet strongly developed, this is changing for the better, and TV and tourism in particular are assisting.

Fiji is central to many countries in the Pacific Rim. For organisations such as Greenpeace, WWF, IUCN Oceania, UNDP and the regional University of the South Pacific, Suva is a focal point of activity. Fiji offers immense potential for inter-island and inter-country pooling of resources for both people and the islands animals.

The SPCA welcomes the services of volunteer veterinarians, nurses and welfare officers who would be interested in coming to Fiji and providing their services for the welfare of animals. My Fijian experience was a combination of

a charming culture, breath-taking scenery, delicious Indo-Fijian food and unforgettable hospitality. I would recommend this to anyone.



If you are interested in volunteering [both short and also longer term], at the Fiji SPCA, please send your CV with details of the services you can provide and your planned travel dates to:

Volunteers
The Executive Director
SPCA Fiji
P.O. Box 14216
Suva
Fiji
or email spca@connect.com.fj