



# Working for Change in the Caribbean

Puerto Ricans struggle with culture and economics to protect animals

BY AMANDA COLLAZO

For Americans seeking a sun-filled vacation with white-sand beaches and warm waters, who dream of a Latin American-style siesta for the summer, the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico often serves as an alternative to the spring break-clogged beaches of Cancun. The Caribbean island seems like a dream come true: Accessible and affordable, it boasts a thriving blend of African, Spanish, and American cultures, and—as an alternative to the exotic beach scene—visitors enjoy romantic Spanish-colonial architecture, stretches of rural countryside, a beautiful tropical rainforest, and one of the most spectacular bioluminescent bays in the world, glowing year-round on the island of Vieques.

But beyond the tourist's dream lies an unpleasant reality for many animals. The stray problem is large enough that even visiting tourists often see packs of dogs roaming the streets and beaches. Animal welfare has long been neglected on the island, and animal control methods often resemble protocols for pest management stateside. Roundups and extermination are standard practice.

And in October 2007, the dreamy vacation spot was the site of a nightmarish animal cruelty case. In the municipality of Barceloneta, approximately 80 dogs and cats who had been living with families—and outdoors, on the grounds of several housing projects that prohibited pets—were seized by employees of a government-contracted company, Animal Control Solutions. The animals never made it to a shelter. While some showed up alive up at their owners' doorsteps days later, most were found dead or dying at the base of a 50-foot bridge.

Interviewed in July 2008, Gwen Davis, a veterinarian who serves as president of the Puerto Rico Animal Welfare Society, could not withhold her disgust. "It's a heinous act, and I hope the man gets 100 years in jail," she said. "I think he is only going to get eight."

Davis soon found that her cynicism about the outcome of the criminal case was more than warranted: One year after the incident, both the owner of the company and the two employees directly associated with the animals' deaths were acquitted of charges of animal cruelty. As reported by the Associated Press (AP), prosecutors "did not show sufficient evidence to make a finding of guilt beyond a reasonable doubt," according to Puerto Rico's Superior Court Judge Miguel Fabre. The prosecution did not appeal the court's decision. The bereaved families' only hope for compensation rests in civil court. Sixteen families that lost their

pets have filed a \$22.5 million lawsuit against Animal Control Solutions, the mayor of Barceloneta, and the public housing directors.

More troubling still, an ensuing probe by the AP indicated that the case was likely not an isolated event: "Back roads, gorges, and garbage dumps on this tropical island are littered with the decaying carcasses of dogs and cats," wrote reporters Yaisha Vargas and Andrew Selsky. "Possibly thousands of unwanted animals have been tossed off bridges, buried alive, and otherwise inhumanely disposed of by taxpayer-financed animal control programs. Witnesses who spoke with the AP said that, despite pledges to deliver adoptable strays to shelters and humanely euthanize the rest, the island's leading private animal control companies generally did neither."



KIM INTINOTHE/ISTOCK

While the Barceloneta case was extreme, evidence seemed to indicate that the massacre was unusual only because of the amount of publicity it received. The massacre is only one of the many cases of animal abuse associated with Puerto Rico—cases that have earned the island a bad reputation when it comes to protecting its animals.

### Right Next Door—and a World Apart

Since 1952, Puerto Rico has held the status of a self-governing unincorporated territory (or commonwealth) of the United States. Ease of entry (no passport is required for U.S. citizens), coupled with a picturesque Caribbean landscape and ideal climate, make the island a popular vacation spot among American tourists.

The tourists who come to the island often have an idyllic mental image of their destination, but what

**The view from the balcony of the Condado Plaza hotel in San Juan shows a postcard-perfect image of Puerto Rico, but life for animals on the island is far from idyllic.**

glossy travel brochures fail to tell them about Puerto Rico is that it's not a wealthy place. Forty-five percent of the population lives below the poverty line (compared with around 12 percent in the U.S. proper). Often, low-income pet owners cannot afford to travel to veterinarians, let alone pay for their services; consequently, even owned animals who become ill or are injured are left to recover or perish on their own. And, as in many places where money is short, funding for animal protection and care programs is often an afterthought; by some estimates, there are more than 100,000 strays on the island—many sick, malnourished, and reproducing.

The fate of the stray animals of Puerto Rico lies in the hands of the island's few shelters. As of December 2008, there were three government-run and six private facilities; these include the nonprofit Asociación Pro Albergue y Protección de Animales (APAYPA), whose president, Hilda Ramirez, has lived in Puerto Rico her entire life and is well aware of the population's nonchalant attitude toward animal suffering. Ramirez attributes the island's seemingly intractable levels of animal cruelty to problematic cultural views of animals.

One egregious example she cites is the prevailing attitude toward cockfighting, a centuries-old blood sport in which two or more specially bred birds, known as gamecocks, are placed in an enclosure to fight. Spectators gamble on the fights, which usually end in the death of at least one of the birds. Illegal in all 50 states and a felony in 37, the blood sport still thrives in Puerto Rico. Most towns have an arena, and fights happen at least once a week.

"Cockfighting—that's a cultural thing," says Ramirez, who campaigned unsuccessfully against the popular and profitable sport for several years. "Here,

there are a lot of people that live [off of cockfighting]. So we just have to live with it, or I don't know how many thousands of people would be out of work."

While many Christians embrace a more progressive view of the proper relationship with animals—one often referred to as "humane stewardship"—that vision has yet to catch on in most of Puerto Rico, according to Ramirez. The population's more traditional beliefs and strong agricultural background contribute to a view of animals as commodities to be exploited when necessary.

Factor in the traditions of horses and cows living loose in pastures, and it's easier to understand why few locals seem unnerved by the sight of a wandering dog or cat. "In Puerto Rico we have never bothered with animal control," says Ramirez. "Animals are roaming around, and the people have gotten used to seeing them roaming around. They take it as implicitly correct."

### Where's the Money?

While the situation in the territory may sound dire, Puerto Rico is one of the few islands in the Caribbean where legislation protecting animals even exists. A new rule in support of animal welfare, Law 154, was implemented late in 2008, but the island's Animal Protection Act has been on the books for decades. Implemented in 1973, the Animal Protection Act defines the actions that constitute abuse and abandonment, and sets the penalties a perpetrator can expect to face. Attempting to obtain a profit by dogfighting is a felony, and attending an event is a misdemeanor. However, as with all legislation, effectiveness depends on enforcement.

"Enforcement is the key, and there is a lack of support to enforce animal welfare laws," says Barbara Rumore, president of the Vieques Humane Society and Animal Rescue Inc., a nonprofit animal welfare organization with a shelter on the island of Vieques. "Take dogfighting. There is a law prohibiting [it], but there are telltale signs people are dogfighting. They are spending a great deal of money for purebreds and walking these puppies with heavy chains and ropes around their necks—when there are perfectly good dogs in our shelter with no home."

Each of the island's municipalities is responsible for the welfare of the animals within its district. It is the municipalities' responsibility to enforce laws, control animal populations, educate the public, and provide financial support for private entities with these same goals. However, directors of animal welfare organizations throughout the island commonly complain of a lack of government support, and they are suspicious of the methods the government uses to control population.

The Barceloneta case and the subsequent investigation by the AP showed good reason for their suspi-

**Wandering animals are not an unusual sight in Puerto Rico, where animal control is notoriously lax. Here, a gang of dogs hangs out inside an old Port Authority structure in Playa Lucia, a beach in the municipality of Yabucoa.**



ELIZABETH C. KRACHT

cions. Whatever happened that day, the system clearly failed—and it was a system that provided no backup options. Many secluded small towns cannot afford to contract with animal control companies. Government workers are not given the necessary education, money, drugs, or equipment for proper administration of euthanasia, increasing the likelihood that workers will resort to inhumane methods to deal with the problem.

Humane Society International (HSI), the international wing of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), has been able to provide several small grants to the spay/neuter program Davis oversees, but the veterinarian has to work constantly to find more funding. It's an uphill battle: "We've been in business for eight years now. Last two years [the government] finally gave us some funding, but it was a very small amount. Small grants, ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000, are the most we've ever got. We had to fight tooth and nail to get it, and then go through all the hoops to get a city contract ... reams and reams of paperwork. And then it's not enough," Davis says. "The problem with stray animals is placed on the public, when it should be funded by state and local government. We have to put on bake sales, and we have to throw parties to get enough money. We have to be everything to everybody ... with very little support."

Animal activists throughout Puerto Rico are often forced to battle each other for the scant government funding that exists, and they share Davis' frustration. Many activists believe that the lack of funding is more of an excuse than the main obstacle. "There are funds that have been assigned to help with the problem," says Davis, referring to \$1.5 million that the government assigned to Puerto Rico's health department in 2000.

A department of animal control was created by the health department "due to the existing problem with strays on the island of Puerto Rico," says the office's executive director, Wilma Rivera. "In 2005, we decided to use the funds given to us to subsidize private and public initiatives directed at the rescue, control and adoption of stray animals, as well as the development of shelters and education of the community."

In August 2008, the animal control department revised the Animal Protection Act. "The new law is more comprehensive and specific," explains Rivera. "By increasing the severity of the penalties and fines for animal abuse, we have made it more effective."

While that move was well-intentioned and an obvious step in the right direction, the animal welfare community is not satisfied. The delay in distributing funds has caused much tension and animosity; shelter directors and volunteer leaders are suspicious of government officials' motives, and harbor divided opinions on how to spend the money. Should more go toward



**A kitten awaits a new family in the Humane Society of Puerto Rico cat adoption area.**

improving sheltering facilities, or would it be better to fund vouchers for sterilizations and vaccinations? Other options discussed include training police officers to handle stray animals, enforcing mandatory registration of all pets, requirements for breeder licensing, and establishing an islandwide trap-spay/neuter-return program. There has also been discussion of mass euthanasia of the island's strays.

### Looking Overseas

The bleak state of animal welfare in Puerto Rico—animal overpopulation coupled with inadequate resources—has prompted several organizations to transport rescued Puerto Rican animals to the mainland U.S., where they believe the animals have a better chance.

"Even though they are enforcing stricter laws, it is hard to get the police to do anything about severe cruelty cases; the safest thing is to ship off the island," says Donna Lenz, a volunteer and transport coordinator for Save A Sato, a nonprofit that has been sending rescued island dogs to partner organizations in the northeastern United States since 1996. ("Sato" is Spanish slang for "street dog.") The dogs can be mixed or purebreds, and they are highly sought-after by some families in the U.S.

Lenz, who works at two shelters in Connecticut, first became involved in Save a Sato when she adopted her Chihuahua in 2002. "Satos tend to be small, very happy-go-lucky, family dogs," she says. "Some of the dogs that come in from Save a Sato have been so badly abused, it's amazing how trusting and loving they are. We had one that was sent to our shelter in Connecticut—she's got three legs, burn scars all over her back, but she is the most incredible, outgoing dog. Many of our adopters, including myself, get a second Sato because they are so happy with the first."

Save a Sato covers the rehabilitation, medical, and travel expenses involved in the offshore adoptions. "There's some hesitation to adopt a dog from Puerto Rico because people think the animal might bring in



ELIZABETH K. KRACHT

**A group of male dogs gathers around a female dog in estrus on Puerto Rico's notorious "Dead Dog Beach" in the eastern municipality of Yabucoa.**

some strange disease," says Lenz. "But the same diseases on the island happen on the mainland, and we make sure the animal is totally healthy before travel. The dogs are given all required shots and must have a health certificate along with a physical prior to flying. Then they must comply with the additional guidelines of whatever state shelter they are brought to."

Explaining why the rescue organization chooses to adopt off the island, Lenz says her group rarely adopts to locals. "People in Puerto Rico can buy purebred dogs from backyard breeders or puppy mill pet stores. People hand out puppies on the streets for \$1. ... Why go to a shelter to adopt a dog when you can find the same dog on the street and not be forced to pay spay/neutering and vaccination fees? It is very common for a family to bring home a female Sato, let her have puppies, keep the male puppy, and dump the mother and the rest of her litter on the side of the road. Rescues like Save a Sato work very hard to save these [dogs]."

Like Ramirez, Lenz views culture as a huge factor delaying progress in animal welfare on the island. "People there are brought up to have no respect for animals," she says. "Fixing that is not something you can do overnight. Everybody is trying really hard to ... implement serious spay and neuter programs over there, to get the vets to give discounts on necessary treatments. There are a good amount of people that love animals, but it's hard because for every one dog you rescue, there are going to be a hundred more out there dumped on the side of the road."

"Being able to adopt off of the island of Vieques helps us ... we know that these animals are getting good homes," says Rumore. "Unfortunately, when giving an animal away, economics plays an important factor. We have specific guidelines that people must comply with in

order to adopt an animal, and unfortunately many local people don't meet the criteria for adoption."

**The Media Spotlight**

The tragedy in Barceloneta had one positive result: It galvanized animal lovers on and off the island to advocate for lasting improvements. "The government might not realize that when individuals and groups aren't getting their help, the media is their only resource," says Elizabeth Kracht, author of a rescue blog called *Class & Circumstance* and president of the nonprofit *Amigos de los Animales*. "And on such a small island, word travels fast."

Kracht has drawn attention for her pickups on "Dead Dog Beach"—the out-of-the-way beach populated by unsightly strays and often littered with dead animals. "At Dead Dog Beach, there is no municipality animal control program coming to pick up animals," she explains. "Instead, the hotel nearby poisons them, fishermen kill them; people walk down the stretch with canes ready to hit the dogs. I saw a lot of horrible things that I've never seen outside that area."

Others are seeing more of the problem. The outrage over the Barceloneta massacre has led to international disgrace for the island. News articles link Puerto Rico and its citizens to animal abuse, while online personal blogs condemn the state of animal welfare on the island and have even initiated campaigns urging potential tourists to boycott the island until drastic changes are made.

"The Puerto Rican Tourism Company estimates a loss of \$15 million in tourism revenue because of that one day," says Kracht, who hopes the economic impact will instigate change. "Everybody is working at different levels, and everyone has different strengths. We all play a part; none of us is the answer to the entire equation, but together as a group we are."

But many fear that if the government does not act to improve animal handling and care standards on the island, momentum will be lost. The stricter laws won't help much if the local citizens don't understand their purpose.

"We don't have the basic foundation for animal control even set here, so to teach humane animal handling is pretty tricky," says Kracht. "Because of the tragedy that happened last year, police are being trained, but they are not necessarily being trained by anyone with any knowledge on animal welfare."

HSI has significantly increased its involvement in Puerto Rico over the past two years. The organization directly supports spay/neuter efforts in several communities, and also focuses on education and enhancing the effectiveness of animal welfare programs. More than 70 animal advocates recently attended an HSI-sponsored

workshop in San Juan on adoptions and shelter animal care, featuring a presentation by Kim Intino, The HSUS's director of animal sheltering issues, and Mike Arms, president of the Helen Woodward Animal Center. Advocates learned proper protocols for housing, feeding, vaccination and disinfection, and how to increase adoption rates through innovative marketing.

"Change is always slower than we'd like, but I've seen positive changes since the tragedy in Barceloneta," says Jessica Higgins, HSI's program manager for Latin America and the Caribbean. "The shelters are riddled with problems, including an average euthanasia rate of more than 90 percent, but most are eager to explore ways to improve," she says, noting that the workshop likely wouldn't have drawn as large a turnout a year ago. "People are taking notice—not just the animal welfare groups, but the public at large. The problems are massive, and they won't go away overnight. But the energy is there, and now it's our job to harness it."

### Teaching the Children

Animal welfare advocates say Puerto Ricans and visitors who are aware of the problem must extend their knowledge to the rest of the population. Most animal welfare groups on the island agree that education is the best and most long-lasting approach for combating animal abuse in Puerto Rico.

"We organize pet fairs, where we educate the general public on sterilization, how to take care of the animals during a hurricane," says Davis. "Occasionally, we'll do a pet show where people will compete for prizes. That just helps give value to the animal. It shows that this is not just some animal ... that this is a loving family member."

Davis sees working with young people as the best route to changing a society: "Starting in 2009, we'll be doing monthly school visits and organizing little PAWS groups where the students become animal activists. They will try to teach others to vaccinate regularly, to not abandon your animals on the street, to take care of your animals, not just leave them tied up with chains."

Sally Tully-Figueroa, president of PARE ESTE, a volunteer organization teaming with the government to build a regional shelter on the eastern side of the island, is enthusiastic about education's potential to spur progress. "We were actually called upon by the department of education—after years of meeting with them and presenting them with materials—to institute humane education in the elementary school curriculum. They finally agreed [and] sent a humane education specialist to give forums to teachers instructing them on how to give humane education classes in our district," she says. The one-time pilot program was successful back

in 2006, and she hopes the department sees a need for a follow-up initiative.

Many of the groups hope that their educational efforts will have a trickle-up effect, going from kids to their adult relatives at home. "It's a bit subversive, but you educate the kids, and the kids educate the parents," says Rumore. "You get the kids excited about exercising their dog, keeping it contained so that it is safe, and then they bug the parents about it, and hopefully the parents will follow through."

The effectiveness of animal safety laws depends on legislative enforcement. But if the government doesn't deem the problem worthy of time and effort, citizens must make the government aware that they regard the issue as a priority.

"Hope springs eternal," says Rumore. "We don't live and work in a vacuum; advances in terms of animal welfare impact other aspects of our life. ... Education provides people options. If you've always grown up under the assumption that an animal is to be used and abused, then that's what you do. But if you are shown other ways, you've got the opportunity to make positive changes." AS

**Old San Juan is known for its historic forts, scenic beaches, and the feral cats who wander its rocks and walkways. Since 2004, an organization called Save a Gato has trapped, neutered, and returned 158 cats, significantly reducing the population.**



*Amanda Collazo grew up in Ponce, a small town on the southern coast of Puerto Rico. Since graduating from Princeton University with a degree in sociology and a certificate in Latin American studies, she has worked at Curtco Publishing in California. Her future plans involve returning to her home island and studying law at the University of Puerto Rico.*