

Field Trip

BY LESLIE WOLFSON

San Pedro, Ambergris Caye, Belize

The organization: Founded in 1999, the Saga Humane Society (sagahumanesociety.org) was named for the dog of a veterinarian who once worked there. But now many locals simply call it “Fort Dog.” The island itself was Madonna’s inspiration for her tropical love song, “La Isla Bonita” (“I fell in love with San Pedro/Warm wind carried on the sea, he called to me ...” Ah, the ‘80s.)

Impetus for creating the organization: Madonna’s ditty failed to capture a less romantic aspect of San Pedro: Before 1999, the homeless animal population was controlled by regular strychnine poisonings. A public outcry spurred locals to find a more humane method of solving the problem. But poisoning is still occasionally used in extreme cases, such as when packs of feral dogs become dangerous. Saga and its supporters continue to entreat government officials to find a better solution.

Vital stats: The Saga Humane Society team includes a veterinarian, two other staff members, and two volunteers. Saga serves a human population of 15,000, excluding tourists. An estimated 5,000 homeless dogs and cats live on the island.

Their digs and deeds: Because few pets receive preventive care or are spayed or neutered, Saga distributes pamphlets, publishes articles in the local newspapers, and speaks to locals about pet care. Saga offers low-cost or subsidized spay/neuter surgeries as well as other veterinary treatment. The organization’s clinic and cattery are housed in an apartment building, and an area for healthy adult dogs has been constructed nearby. The next project underway is the puppy area. Depending on funding, other plans in-



Stray dogs in Belize get help from the Saga Humane Society and its “barefoot vet,” Heather Stewart. LESLIE WOLFSON

clude a new facility that would contain an education center and a new cattery. Staff and volunteers would also like to institute a humane trap/neuter/release program for feral dogs and obligatory licensing for all pets.

Most shocking local “entertainment”: Residents (mostly teenage boys) “fish for crocs” using live chickens and puppies to attract crocodiles at the nearby lagoon. Because of complaints from Saga, police are cracking down on the activity, occasionally posting an officer at the lagoon at feeding time.

Most fascinating local term: Stray dogs on the island, most of whom are of mixed heritage, are called “potlickers,” a term used to describe dogs who lick the cooking pot clean after a family finishes eating. (For more on these pot-ty dogs, called “potcakes” in the Bahamas, see “Where In the World is *Animal Sheltering*?” in the May-June 2007 issue.)

Most pressing needs: Funds are always in demand and hard to come by in the developing country of Belize. The local population is poor, and most donations to the shelter come from tourists. High on the wish list are litter boxes, collars and leashes, cat toys, sterile surgical gloves, and straight razor blades, which veterinarian Heather Stewart—nick-

named “the barefoot vet” by a former Saga volunteer—uses to shave fur to prep animals for surgery or other treatments. “I joke that if this vet thing doesn’t work out, I have gotten skilled enough to be a pretty good barber,” Stewart says.

Most creative fundraising event: A local business, Tsunami Skydivers, donated a free tandem skydive. Saga raffled it off and raised \$1,200.

A dog who blogs: “Nurse Melly” is the group’s mascot. A formerly sick and homeless dog who showed up covered in mats and skin lesions, Melly is now healthy and lives at Fort Dog as the island’s only canine nurse. She assists Stewart at the shelter, and according to her site (which is “translated” for human readers by Stewart), she blogs about her life and thoughts when no one is looking. Her goal is to have a shelter to be proud of. Melly also “has a deep and abiding interest in ankles,” and considers *Bridget Jones’s Diary* a great movie because Bridget “has great ankles.” Read more of Nurse Melly’s thoughts at nursemelly.blogspot.com.

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