

The KAT Centre: Rescuing the Street Dogs of Kathmandu



■ Gregg Tully

When I first visited Kathmandu, Nepal in 2002, I was shocked by the thousands of dogs living in the streets, many of them diseased, limping, and hungry. Puppies especially suffer, struggling to find food. As an American who had never been to the developing world, I had only seen dogs who were cared for and fed by their owners. Although the main purpose of my trip was to trek in the Himalaya, the friendliness and warmth of the Nepali people brought me back to Nepal the next year.

As I finished my education in 2006, I decided that before I began a career, I would spend all of 2007 volunteering in Nepal. One of the organizations I helped during that year was the Kathmandu Animal Treatment Centre (better known in Nepal as simply KAT), which is dedicated to improving the lives of Kathmandu's street dogs. Rather than thinking of dogs in the streets as a problem to get rid of, KAT sees them as members of the community who live alongside people.

The Kathmandu Animal Treatment Centre was founded by

Jan Salter in 2004. Jan is a unique woman who has lived most of her life in Kathmandu and is a very well-known artist, having painted portraits of members of different ethnic groups throughout Nepal. Also a compassionate animal lover, she was horrified by the city government's method of trying to reduce the stray dog population. Every year, the government would put out poisoned pieces of meat which dogs would eat, causing violent seizures and painful, slow deaths. In addition to being cruel, this was ineffective – the remaining dogs would breed and the population would return to its original size within a year.

After Jan Salter learned about "Animal Birth Control" (ABC) at an animal welfare organization in India, she decided to start a similar program in Kathmandu. Animal Birth Control is a humane and sustainable way to create a healthy, manageable street dog community by treating the root of the problem – too many dogs have too many puppies. Almost every morning, KAT's staff goes out early in the morning in an "animal ambulance" to catch

street dogs in sacks. They bring the animals back to the Centre and feed them, sometimes the first good meal they have had in weeks. The next morning, the KAT Centre's vets sterilize (spay) the dogs so they will not have more puppies, vaccinate them for rabies, and put notches in their ears to show they have been through the ABC program. The vets also treat them for any health problems they have. After around three days, if the dogs are healthy and have recovered from the sterilization without any complications, they are returned to their own neighborhoods where they know how to find food and shelter. The government has agreed not to poison stray dogs in the areas where KAT works.

When I learned about the KAT Centre's work for street dogs, I was immediately inspired to get involved. I was especially excited about how effective the ABC program has been. In just seven years, KAT has treated dogs in the entire city of Kathmandu, although it has not yet raised enough money to work in the neighboring city of Patan or most





of the area outside the Kathmandu ring road. The organization has sterilized more than 11,000 dogs and vaccinated over 22,000 for rabies. In the last five years, the number of street dogs in Kathmandu has decreased from roughly 31,000 to around 22,500. More than 40% of the street dogs now have ear notches, showing they have been sterilized and vaccinated, and as a result, the population is expected to become much smaller in the future.

During my year in Kathmandu in 2007, I spent one day of every week at the Centre. I always looked forward to my days there, surrounded by the dedicated, hard-working staff and the playful dogs. Since KAT is a small organization, there were usually many ways I could help, including improving KAT's website, keeping in contact with supporters, and designing educational materials. And of course, the dogs at the Centre always enjoy people petting and brushing them!

Visitors to KAT enjoy seeing happy, healthy dogs playing on the Centre's grassy lawn and learning about how the programs improve the lives of street dogs. KAT also hosts many volunteers – Nepali and foreign, who come for just an afternoon, days, weeks, or even longer (like myself). Volunteers can play with the animals, help with office work, put up posters and talk to people about KAT throughout the city, and much more. Furthermore, veterinarians,

vet assistants, and vet students come to the Centre and share their knowledge while learning about ABC and common diseases that affect animals in Nepal.

In addition to the Animal Birth Control program, KAT runs a Rescue and Treatment program for street dogs who are sick and injured. The Centre receives phone calls every day about dogs who were hit by cars, have severe skin infections, or suffer from other health problems. KAT's staff rescues them in the animal ambulance and brings them back to the Centre, where KAT's vets treat the animals. One of the most rewarding parts of my experience at KAT is seeing a sick, hungry, unhappy dog come to the Centre, and seeing the same animal weeks later, happy, healthy, and playful. Many of these dogs can be returned to their own neighborhoods after they are restored to health. But some, because of their illnesses, are never able to defend themselves on the streets again, and become "in-house" dogs at the Centre. Some in-house dogs need so much medical treatment or special care that they spend their entire lives at KAT, but most live at KAT until a kindhearted person adopts them into their own home.

I am truly impressed by the way the Rescue and Treatment program, like the ABC program, is changing the dog population of Kathmandu. Only 19% of the street dogs have skin disease

where KAT is operating, compared to 82% where it does not work. Additionally, far more people call KAT to rescue animals in need than in the past, and far fewer call the government to complain about street dogs.

The Kathmandu Animal Treatment Centre's work does not only affect animals. The organization's Public Education program teaches children and adults about rabies awareness, avoiding dog bites, proper treatment for pet dogs, and compassion for all animals. KAT's staff hands out leaflets when they catch dogs and gives presentations in schools, and school groups visit the Centre and learn about its programs. Now, people are kinder to street dogs in the areas where KAT works than in the neighboring city of Patan, which its programs have not yet reached. When I walk from Patan to Kathmandu, I can easily see the change – there are far fewer dogs, they are healthier, and more people accept them as members of the community.

Now I am spending another year in Kathmandu, volunteering full time at the KAT Centre. I am very happy to be back in Nepal and excited to help KAT transform Kathmandu's dog community. My roles have expanded to include raising awareness about the organization, helping to plan for KAT's future growth, and encouraging people to visit the Centre, volunteer, and donate.

With enough support from donors and volunteers, the Kathmandu Animal Treatment Centre will be able to achieve its goal of creating a healthy, manageable dog population throughout the entire Kathmandu Valley. ♦♦

To learn more about the Kathmandu Animal Treatment Centre, including how you can help the street dogs of Nepal, please visit the organization's website at www.KATCentre.org.np, send an email to katcentre@wlink.com.np, or call +977-1-4373169.