

Camping out to boost canine welfare

GOING "camping" in Nepal can have two meanings. Most visitors to Nepal go to trek, walk and climb, involving nights spent under canvas.

For veterinary volunteers like me the term has a different meaning. During my month in Nepal we had two camps. One involved an all-day health camp organised by the Himalayan Animal Rescue Trust (HART) for ponies, with the Tongawalas in the Chitwan National Park and a tent was only used to store medication, equipment and for display purposes. The second camp was a catch, neuter, vaccinate, release and monitor (CNVR-M) camp in the Kathmandu valley to spay

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reports on the vital work being done by HART and Animal Nepal to tackle the problems caused by an ever increasing dog population

and castrate as many dogs as possible over five specified days. Tents were vital to the plan. Three operating theatres were to be located in three individual tents.

Before a camp is organised in a specific location, it must be approved by the local political party representatives, village leaders and social workers.

This particular camp was organised as a joint venture

by Animal Nepal and HART. Animal Nepal had been approached by Badikhel and Namuna Godawari village development committee, to assist with the increasing dog population problem that was a concern to the community, mostly because of the fear of a rabies outbreak. In Nepal, more than 200 people die from the disease every year. A high percentage of these are



Chandra and Bandu – vet technicians and tent erectors.

children. An average of 30,000 people receives rabies post-exposure treatment every year, usually after dog bites.

Local authorities in Nepal – faced with an increasing dog population and all its attendant problems around fighting, traffic accidents, livestock loss, aggression or a rabies outbreak – normally reach for the poison bottle. Staff have supplies of strychnine, hide it in chunks of meat and scatter it around the area.

Neutering and rabies vaccination is increasingly being requested by local people who are often distressed by the sight of their dogs dying a horrible death. A stable dog population is the best protection against disease.

In Nepal, especially in Kathmandu, many dogs are seen on the streets with extreme malnutrition and skin disease and appear to be treated very badly despite the Hindu belief that dogs have a major religious significance and are worshipped during the festival of Tihar. In Hinduism dogs are believed to guard the doors of heaven. On many occasions, community dogs are fed by the community and the dogs, in turn, protect Hindu homes and people from intruders.

Combined effort

Welfare groups Animal Nepal and HART in Godawari during my last week in Nepal combined for maximum effect, galvanised by a community request for action and to stop the local authorities poisoning the street dogs. It is generally accepted that at least 70 per cent of animals in a community need to be neutered and vaccinated to control a rabies outbreak, although no one is sure where this figure came from. To achieve a high percentage of neuters, a combined effort by Animal Nepal and HART was the best way to treat as many dogs as possible.

The first stage of the project was to survey the area and count the number of dogs in the district. Information about

Agonising death

The effects are usually devastating, with dead and dying animals all over the place. The poison affects the nervous system and the animals usually die very quickly with agonising seizures, but some can live hours to eventually die from anoxia and exhaustion. Most are community dogs and some strays, but pets can be killed as well. There is even a risk from street children picking up bait.

During the monsoon season strychnine is washed by rainwater into water resources leading to contamination of drinking water and vegetables. Usually, the dead dogs are not buried or cremated, which causes further contamination.

Better education has helped to slowly spread the knowledge that this behaviour is worse than useless as it has been proved that within a poisoned area the dog population will recover within half a year and the whole vicious cycle will start again. In addition, in the short-term, poisoning results in a redistribution of the surviving animals into new territories, thereby increasing the rabies risk through increased movement.

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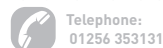


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An operating tent ready for action.

the proposed camp was given to the locals via leaflets and banners about where the camp was to be held and the date. Schools were visited to distribute programme details and promote volunteer support. The students were enthusiastic and many volunteers were signed up.

The venue for the camp was the compound of a donkey sanctuary. The ground was rough and required some levelling before the tents were erected. It was planned the dogs would be retained overnight after their operation in a building normally used by the donkeys to protect them from inclement weather and marauding leopards. This was cleaned as far as possible and plastic sheeting used to cover the earth floor. A caretaker already lived on site and would keep an eye on the recovering dogs overnight.

Catching teams

Three operating tables were set up in three tents with another tent for supplies, materials and drugs. The pre-op check area was a table protected by a canopy to give shade to man and animals against the glaring mid-day sun and temperatures more than 30°C.

The catching teams from both organisations went out at first light around 7am and were usually back at the camp by 9am. The public came with their own animals every morning as well and we tried wherever possible to neuter these animals first to allow the owners to collect them and take them home by the late afternoon.

Because the catching teams go out early with only a cup of tea to sustain them, nothing happened on their return to the camp until the traditional Nepali breakfast of dal bhat was consumed. This is a spicy lentil soup served with boiled rice and sometimes curried vegetables. It is eaten by mixing the dal and the rice together into a ball with the fingers and then popped straight into the mouth – or if you are a softy westerner like me you ask for a spoon. It is very tasty, but after a few days you wish for a bit of variety.

Breakfast over it was straight to work. Every patient was checked and given atropine as a premedication. About 10 minutes later, general anaesthesia was induced via a butterfly catheter with xylazine and ketamine. Each dog was kept on a saline drip throughout

the operation. This was mostly to ensure a patent vein as a top-up dose of anaesthetic was usually required at least once per operation.

An ovariohysterectomy was done through a right flank incision after the site was shaved and scrubbed. Catgut was used throughout the procedure to ligate and to suture the internal muscle layers. It was also used to close the skin by subcuticular sutures. Each animal received pain relief with meloxicam, long-acting penicillin and a rabies vaccination. The suture line was dressed with an antiseptic insect repellent ointment. The left ear was notched to ensure the animal was easily identified in the future. Most patients were awake within 30 minutes of the end of the operation.

In this way, 94 female dogs and 24 male dogs were neutered and vaccinated in four days. The fifth day was left free of procedures to allow the animals that had their operation and kept overnight on the fourth day to be released in the area where they were caught. It also enabled the teams to return to the catching areas to do postoperative checks where possible.

The benefits of the CNVR-M scheme working within a community from temporary field surgery units, include cost effectiveness, visibility (anyone could come and watch – and they did) and reduced stress to the dogs. It also allows close collaboration with many local people, who as a result become better educated and realise the benefits of a CNVR-M to animals and people.

Welfare groups starting from scratch do not need the initial capital to build shelters and hospitals. Available funds can be channelled into good quality equipment, materials and medicines. Local authorities will in many cases be willing to provide an old building or shelter with access to electricity and water. Where suitable buildings are not available then tents located next to a rudimentary shelter, which provided power and water as in this last camp, proved very effective.

The costs of neutering, taking into account all medications and food (breakfast, lunch and dinner) for the surgical and catching teams, was £4.26 per animal. There were 17 people in the two teams from Animal Nepal and HART who included vets, vet technicians, catchers, helpers and students.

Nepal, Afghanistan and Paki-

stan are the only south Asian countries to have national government programmes to manage dog populations and the problems they create, particularly rabies. Until more countries do the same the efforts of welfare groups such as HART and Animal Nepal with limited resources can demonstrate what can be done with neutering and vaccination, but cannot solve the countrywide problem of dog over-population and endemic rabies.

There are an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 dogs in Kathmandu alone. Even the most dedicated teams of vets and catchers working all year round cannot hope to reduce this total, let alone keep pace with the rising population.

The other hope on the horizon is the advent of new immunoconceptive vac-



cines. GonaCon is just beginning worldwide trials (including Nepal) and shows great promise to be able to control

the bitch oestrous cycle with one injection that may last two to three years. If this product fulfils hopes and could be made

available commercially it would make a huge difference in the fight against rabies in countries in Asia and Africa. ■

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