

ARE YOU HELPING OR HURTING?

HOW TO ESTABLISH YOUR CREDIBILITY AND WORK WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Establishing and operating an animal welfare organization in a small developing country can be a very sensitive and somewhat daunting task. Today, we hope that by sharing with you the pitfalls and problems we encountered here in Antigua and Barbuda and the success of our eventual policy decisions, we can assist you in making the most of your obvious concern for the welfare of animals.

Many, if not most, animal welfare organizations in the Caribbean region have been started by expatriates who are taken aback at the sight of stray and roaming dogs on the streets and beaches, horses tied out in the hot sun, livestock and donkeys roaming the roadways.

At first glance, this can appear to be a careless disregard for the care and safety of the animals, and we are eager to put it right.

We often think we have all the answers. After all, wherever we have come from, be it the United States, Canada, the UK, Holland, Italy, France, etc our animals are not usually seen roaming the streets and highways; dogs are not chained; horses and donkeys graze in fenced paddocks in the daytime and are stabled at night; livestock are safely secured on farms. In these communities, deviations from these norms are viewed as acts of cruelty or neglect and can be prosecuted.

But this is, or at least was, **our** reality. It is not necessarily the reality of the Caribbean region.

Cultural Perspective

Recognize that animal welfare is but part of a whole. To be successful you must adopt policies and propose solutions that take into account the peculiarities and needs of the rest of the community.

One of your first priorities must be to understand the culture of the community, the historical perspective and the socio-economic factors that impact on daily life.

You are then in a better position to establish realistic goals, taking what you have learned into consideration.

To gain credibility, you must always be mindful of local government policies and attitudes as well as the abilities and expectations of the people. You cannot simply import ideas and practices directly from more developed countries and expect them to work and be accepted. You must adapt them to meet the needs of the region.

Many Caribbean nations have struggled to become independent from the constraints of colonialism and may not respond well to your ideas if they are presented too dogmatically. It is important that you understand that the beliefs and practices that you think are absolutely correct may not be correct for this region. To effect change you must proceed with sensitivity and understanding of local concerns.

Whether you are taking on animal welfare as a newcomer or as a national, you will probably be introducing new concepts to the community, and you must do so in the manner most appropriate for your surroundings. Otherwise, your hard work may cause friction and resentment that will undermine any possible progress. You might also cause unnecessary suffering to the very animals you are seeking to help.

In circumstances where people are struggling to put food on the table and clothes on their children's backs, sharing table scraps with the animals in the yard may be all that the family can do. In this case, the dogs probably will be thin or even emaciated. If they have skin diseases, they will probably go untreated. Even common parasites may not be controlled. When money cannot be found to buy medicines or food for children, how will it be found for dogs?

In the Caribbean, the home yard is often unfenced. The dogs will either be tied or allowed to roam. When we see these dogs tied in their yards or wandering on the streets we may incorrectly perceive them as victims of abuse or cruelty or intentional neglect. But in reality, it may just be a matter of circumstance.

Building a Relationship with Government

Concentrate on establishing a strong working relationship with your government. You cannot meaningfully affect animal welfare in your country without their support.

Fifteen years ago, as our Humane Society was in the midst of forming itself, we received a very important "message" via the radio. That message was, for us, an amazingly well-timed wake-up call, and greatly influenced how we eventually went about our business. Parliament was in session and as usual the proceedings were being broadcast. For those of you not from this region, let me tell you that in many Caribbean countries sittings of Parliament and the Senate

are aired on radio and are listened to faithfully by the vast majority of citizens. Consequently, these proceedings have quite an impact on the country, and persons can be greatly influenced by what they hear their representatives say.

On this particular day, the issue of stray and roaming dogs was being discussed. Various members raised the all too familiar problems: soiling streets and beaches; killing livestock; attacking passersby. I don't think we were too surprised that no one raised concerns for the welfare of the dogs themselves, but imagine our dismay when the then-Minister of Agriculture rose to say: "The solution is simple. They should all be shot."

This one statement woke us up to the realization that it wasn't just the grass roots population we had to reach with our responsible animal welfare message. We had to sensitize the very people we were hoping would come to our assistance. We had expected that their experiences, which often included studying or even working overseas, would have made them natural allies, but with a few exceptions, that was not the case.

Armed with this knowledge, we began a relentless campaign of sensitizing members of government with respect to the need for responsible animal welfare in Antigua and Barbuda. We very quickly got over any thoughts of appealing to their concerns for the plight of the animals themselves. Instead we focused on the impact that these stray and roaming animals had on the nation's economy.

Our economy depends almost entirely on tourism, and we took great pains to point out to our government that the tourists were appalled at how we were treating our animals. We showed them countless letters from tourists complaining that they had loved the beaches, loved the people but had been so depressed by the sight of the animals, particularly the thin and hairless dogs that they did not want to come back. At that point in time, such dogs were seen everywhere in Antigua, so much so that residents seemed to have become immune to them and it came as somewhat of a shock to the politicians that they were visible to our visitors.

We were able to show our government that the welfare of animals is an important part of the social development of a country. We were also able to show them that we would be taking on a lot of problems that were really their responsibility. However, we were totally non-judgmental in our approach. We saw no merit in berating them or pointing out their past failures. We were perfectly willing for them to take the credit for our progress; we were happy to work behind the scenes. This informal partnership continues to this day and has been largely responsible for our growth and success.

Establish Realistic Goals

Be focused. Formulate clear policies and review them from time to time. Keep your eye on your goals. Recognize that you and your organization are responsible for the consequences of your policies and your decisions. Do not be dissuaded from your goals by well-meaning persons who do not bear the burden of this responsibility.

It is critical for you to decide at the outset if your goal is to establish or improve animal welfare in the country or is it to assist individual animals you encounter. To some extent it can, of course, be both but it is important to utilize your usually very limited resources in the best way possible.

This may prove to be more difficult than you at first realize. All the animal welfare problems that have existed for so long will come at you all at once. And you may be expected to deal with all of them! You may even be accused of not doing anything about blatantly chronic situations. But you must decide: do you have the resources to effect change in all of these areas? Not very likely. Prioritize. Choose the areas in which you can bring about positive change. Select a strategy to deal with your critics and move on.

Be careful, at least initially, to steer clear of areas that are actually matters of criminal activity. For example, dog fighting is a horrendous activity that takes place all over the world. Much as you will abhor it, it is most decidedly not an area into which you should tread, especially if you are an expatriate. There is big money and bad people involved in dog fighting. By all means assist the police by passing on any information you receive but do not take it on as a project. In such small communities where everyone is very high profile, it is far too dangerous.

In the Caribbean region it seems there will always be kind and caring folks, often temporary residents, who want to help the animals but not all of them want to be involved in the much larger task of bringing about permanent changes in animal welfare. Many are concerned about the mangy dog at the side of the road and will rescue him, have his mange treated, fatten him up and either keep him, or try to find him a new home. This certainly can improve the lot of that particular dog but it has a very minimal impact on the overall welfare of animals in the community. It is a hard, and for some, unpalatable fact that the money spent on the one mangy dog might have been able to save a number of animals had it been spent more thoughtfully.

Some organizations seem to almost specialize in before and after photos. While undoubtedly these pictures of rescued animals can be very helpful in raising funds for an organization, tugging as they do at the heartstrings, surely that cannot be all there is. Surely, an animal welfare organization must be willing to look beyond the individual animal and strive to utilize its resources in such a way as to bring about long-lasting meaningful change in animal welfare.

It is also difficult for some people to understand that feeding strays on the streets or beaches is not consistent with responsible animal welfare. It creates too many problems for the strays themselves and for their surroundings. It encourages pack behaviour and can lead to serious dog fights. The dogs continue to spread disease, strew garbage, kill livestock and worry passersby. Feeding them in public places attracts rodents – already a huge problem on most of the islands. Unless everyone in the community is in favour of the dogs roaming in the community, it can also lead to inhumane methods of removal.

In St. John's, around the cruise ship docking area, dogs are often seen begging treats from tourists. They actually work the area. You see them arrive at the docks shortly after the first cruise ship blows its horn; most of them leave again as the passengers line up to go back on board at the end of the day. However, some of the dogs stay in the area and become a major nuisance. They soil the area, and sometimes attack passersby. Their very presence acts as an attractant to other dogs and what might start out as one or two can quickly turn into a pack of five or six or more.

From time to time the management of the dock area requests our help in removing the dogs. We have taught their maintenance and security personnel how to set our traps and they bring the captured dogs to our shelter for rehoming. On rare occasions, a dog has been in such a bad state that it has had to be euthanized but this is the exception, not the rule.

Some time ago, during one of our trapping sessions, some well-intentioned but very misguided individuals began an assault on our traps. They let the dogs out and started placing food outside of the traps to discourage the dogs from going in. Management became very annoyed at the waste of their time and called us to pick up the dog traps. They said they would pursue another course. And it would seem that they did. Later that week there was not a dog to be seen in the area. They had all been poisoned.

Create a Strong Foundation – Narrow Your Focus

Slow down and get it right. The problems were there before you got involved. By taking your time and getting your support structures in place first, you will have a much better chance of long term success. The animals will benefit in the long run.

In 1991, as the Humane Society assessed its situation, we came to the realization that we could not save all the animals, even if we concentrated solely on dogs, nor could we effect long term positive changes by concentrating on the plight of individual animals. We realized that we had to create an organization with a solid base, a foundation that would enable the organization to continue *ad infinitum*. We knew we had to create an organization that would work toward changing attitudes and perceptions. An organization that could remain focused.

We also recognized that at that time many people took dogs for granted; they were just there. They sounded an alarm if strangers came to the gate, they didn't require much upkeep, just a few table scraps or perhaps some cooked chicken back & neck and rice, and if they got sick and died, they were replaced. In fact, they bred so frequently, they replaced themselves. Dogs often were perceived as dirty, and not to be touched. If the dogs caused trouble, they were "not my dogs". There was seldom any sense of bonding or responsibility for the animal's welfare, let alone his misdeeds.

It is clear that everyone in this room understands and has experienced the joy of having companion animals in their lives, the intense pleasure of the unconditional love offered to us by these wonderful creatures. But in Antigua in 1991, far too few people understood that bond. It simply wasn't part of their life experience.

The Humane Society decided to set about teaching the joys of companion animals. We could see that the compassion was there; it just had to be tapped.

We began by going on talk radio shows, and producing radio messages and newspaper articles on every aspect of animal welfare. We were laughed at by many, scorned by some - what were we doing worrying about animals when so many segments of the human population needed assistance? But we also received a lot of calls from kind and caring persons who couldn't look after their unwanted litters of pups and kittens but didn't know what to do about it. Our very first call was from an elderly woman with three unwanted kittens. She said she couldn't keep them and was going to throw them out as she usually did but her neighbour told her she couldn't do that anymore, there was now a Humane Society and she had to call us.

At the same time that we were spreading our humane education message, we were also removing from the streets and beaches the most severe cases, the dogs whose suffering cried out to be ended.

Acknowledge that what is best for the animals will not always be in harmony with your own emotional comfort level. Strive to make decisions that truly are in their best interests.

Initially, we made some big mistakes that almost were our downfall. We got involved too soon in trying to rescue animals and find them new homes. We weren't prepared, we hadn't thought it through. We didn't have a shelter at that time so we gave the animals, mainly bitches and their puppies, to willing volunteers to look after for us. We quickly burned out our volunteers. We also found that some of them were so overwhelmed that they weren't paying enough attention to cleanliness and parasite control, and we sometimes had problems with the health of the animals. The pups didn't always get the proper socialization and ended up with strong dog-dog bonding but little interest in humans. These dogs were eventually rejected by their new families.

We set up a table outside a busy supermarket and gave away the now fat and healthy pups for free. What a dumb thing for an animal welfare organization to do! There we were giving away pets to people who hadn't given it any thought in advance. They were there to do their grocery shopping, and we were encouraging them to make an impulsive, on-the-spot decision. There was no arrangement for spay/neuter so the pups would be able to go on and reproduce a zillion more pups, and being free implied they were of little value. What a recipe for disaster. But you see, we had bowed to the pressure to get the little critters new homes and had not stopped to consider the consequences of our actions beyond that short-sighted goal.

They went like hotcakes. Every child passing the table on his way into the store with mom wanted one. We were making it so easy, and they looked cute, why not? In fact, they looked so good that they probably replaced the thinner, parasite-ridden pups already in the adopter's home yard. I shudder to think what they did with those poor little rejects.

It was all becoming counterproductive. We were falling into the same trap as those who had come before. We were trying to save too many and had lost our focus. What we were doing was never going to change the face of animal welfare in this country and we finally woke up and realized it.

Don't Let Your Critics Derail You - They don't bear the ultimate responsibility, you do!

We then regrouped, refocused and began making some very tough policy decisions that initially made us unpopular with some folks. However, these same decisions have also made us a strong, active, successful animal welfare organization that is solidly in place in this country.

One of our decisions was that we would not pick up re-homeable animals until we had a shelter in which to house them, and we would not even try to build a shelter until we knew we could continue to staff it, feed the animals, spay/neuter them, vaccinate etc. This decision was not popular with many of our volunteers who were anxious to see a shelter in place but who ultimately would not have been responsible had it failed.

In fact, this decision, not to pick up re-homeable animals, was not as difficult or as unreasonable as it might seem. There was no law in Antigua requiring that dogs be kept at home and many, if not most, of the dogs seen roaming the streets actually had homes to go to. We really would have had no legal authority to remove the dogs and would have been in danger of taking someone's pet. It was a different matter with animals that were causing problems or were clearly in severe distress be it from neglect, abandonment or abuse. Those dogs could be legally removed and those are the dogs on which we initially concentrated. We deliberately turned a blind eye to those who might have been in less than optimum shape but were obviously fending for themselves. We knew that to pick

them up and treat them would be putting a band-aid on a huge, gaping wound. And we would quickly run out of band-aids.

Dogs on the beach were a tremendous problem at that time. As you probably have experienced, some tourists love to interact with the dogs, others most decidedly do not. Hotels are always unhappy to see the dogs and hotel security chases them away when guests aren't looking.

Life on the beach is no life for a dog. They eat sporadically. They have trouble finding somewhere to sleep where beach security won't find them. They usually do not receive vaccinations, worming or veterinary attention. They are constantly at risk. Beach dogs deserve their own yards, their own families. They are not tourist attractions. Every time I hear a returning tourist say that they so love to come back to Antigua and find the dogs still on the beach I wonder how they can be so heartlessly selfish.

In the early '90s in Antigua, hotels would routinely poison beach dogs once the count became too high or the nuisance factor too annoying. They set out the poisoned meat after dark when tourists were off the beach and picked up the carcasses before daybreak.

We approached the hotels, one by one, and asked them to stop the poisoning. We told them that we would undertake to remove all the dogs from the beaches, over time, starting with those that were bothering the guests when they refused them food. We obviously couldn't clear the beaches overnight but we would begin immediately. The hotel managers were not heartless individuals. They simply had seen no solution other than the poisoning. Even though they recognized that under our plan the dogs would not disappear immediately, they were glad to now have an alternative and agreed to our request.

We asked the hoteliers to advise their guests about our project and to ask them to stop feeding the dogs but we were pretty sure most of the guests would still continue. Another of our conditions was that the hotels at least prohibit staff from feeding the dogs – many would throw them their leftovers. We knew that some of the dogs actually had homes in the area but came to the beach for the day for the yummiest food and we wanted to discourage them from lingering.

This worked very well for quite some time. Even without a shelter, we found homes for a great many beach dogs. We trapped and euthanized those that were overtly aggressive or feral and would have posed a danger but they were few and far between. Then disaster struck. A woman who was actually a member of the Humane Society at the time, though not on our board, worked at a resort on one of the busier beaches and unknown to us, not only fed the dogs on the beach but had some of them spayed or neutered and returned to the beach. Believing that we had reneged on our part of the arrangement, the hoteliers once again set out poison. I can still vividly remember going to the beach early one morning to find six dead dogs along the water's edge.

It took a lot to convince the hoteliers to return to our arrangement and stop the poisonings but thankfully they did.

Incredibly, the same inappropriate situation has recurred within the past few months - the same beach but a different individual feeding and spaying the dogs. We are again working with the hotels to remove the dogs, particularly in light of some very serious complaints from returning visitors which if not addressed will result in more drastic solutions.

Keep Your Shelter Practices Realistic

Ensure that you do not become part of the problem. Don't let your shelter practices or your need to find the perfect home turn out unsocialised dogs or dogs that are so dog bonded, they have no interest in their human families. These animals will be rejected eventually.

We now have an animal shelter; it opened in the spring of 1999. It has been both a blessing and a burden.

We continue to follow our goal of helping the people of this country to experience and enjoy having companion animals in their lives, not just in their yards. With this in mind, we try to carefully select the animals that we make available for adoption to ensure that they are healthy and of sound temperament. We know that if we adopt out animals with chronic diseases and their new families have to spend all their time and resources at the veterinary clinic, or if the animals are unmanageable, we will not get our message across. We get it wrong sometimes but when the match isn't right, we encourage adopters to return the animal and try again. We also try to learn from our mistakes.

We do our best to ensure that every animal will go to a kind and caring home but we do not place unrealistic restrictions on these homes, or expect them to achieve unattainable standards. If we were to insist that the only right way is our way as we knew it back home, we would end up with an overwhelming number of dogs at the shelter with no place to go. They might then be physically safe but they would suffer from the effects of the long term kenneling and would not have a sufficient quality of life.

While we would like to see every dog with its own fenced yard, it is not a realistic expectation in this region. Every child doesn't have a fenced yard to play in; how can we expect every dog to have one.

For their own safety, it is sometimes necessary to tether dogs when their families are not at home to supervise them. Therefore, we teach humane tethering – for example, type of collar; length and weight of chain; duration of tethering; access to shade and water; the importance of spending time and interacting with the dog – as well as advising on other methods of security such as pens and running

cables. We feel strongly that it is better for the dog to be properly tethered in his family yard where he is safe and will receive love and attention than to be allowed to roam on the roadways and beaches. It is also better than being kenneled too long at an animal shelter.

At the shelter itself we are very sensitive to the problems caused by multiple dogs living in the same kennel and we do not let it get overcrowded. Each dog has its own kennel. We double up only in emergency situations and never for very long. We understand the problems of dog-dog bonding and pack behaviour. We do not euthanize healthy animals to make room for others. We keep the numbers manageable by maintaining an active waiting list of persons who want to give up their animals.

We also insist on spaying or neutering any pets the family intends to keep. We never take in puppies or kittens without making arrangements to spay the mother thereby ensuring that we are offering more than a temporary solution to the problem of too many animals. We have a very active spay/neuter programme and have altered thousands over the years.

We follow a humane euthanasia programme that takes into account the health and safety of shelter staff, shelter animals and the new homes that we hope our shelter animals will eventually go to.

In addition to the small-animal shelter we have an animal sanctuary that is home to fifty donkeys, two horses, numerous ruminants and rabbits. We have plans to increase the donkey section and in cooperation with government eventually will bring in all the donkeys that are now seen roaming our roads.

We receive frequent visits from schools, camps and church groups and utilize these visits to teach the children how to be responsible and caring. You already know of the success of our children's television show, *Pet Playhouse*, which by the way is watched by the parents as well as the children. We know this because when people come to our shelter, adults often greet our shelter cat, Wispa, by name and tell him they saw him on *Pet Playhouse*.

Remember, the Goal is Responsible Animal Welfare

There will always be detractors but over the years we have gained the appreciation and support of most of the people of this country and have a strong working relationship with government. Our organization has been lauded by most of the veterinarians in the country as being responsible for a tremendous improvement in the welfare of animals. Apparently the animals they see are now in much better condition, cats and dogs are being spayed or neutered, the dogs are wearing collars and more and more of them are coming for their shots. Our programmes are working. We have gone from strength to strength.

It has not always been easy to stick to our policy decisions but we know that it is important that we act responsibly and try to keep in mind the long term best interests of the animals, not just our own emotional comfort level. We continue to follow our goal of responsible animal welfare.

I recognize that some of what I have said here today will be controversial and will fly in the face of what you have been doing or think you want to do. I only hope that when you have had time to mull it over and compare your own expectations with your actual experiences in the field and the realities of your community that you will consider rethinking some of your policy decisions, not in the interests of your own “feel good” needs but in the best interests of the animals you so clearly want to help.