



Saving dogs in Jodhpur

India

Rabies is estimated to kill 50,000 people worldwide every year and the majority of these deaths (estimated at 30,000) occur in India. The main source of infection in people is a bite from a stray dog. The death toll due to rabies in animals is likely to be much higher than it is in people, but no one knows by how much. Because rabies is not a federally reportable disease in India, reported figures are likely to be underestimates of the actual number of cases.

Because of cultural attitudes in India, stray dogs are tolerated and often encouraged in the community. While some community members may offer food or shelter to these animals, they are effectively homeless animals, and for economic reasons the community cannot afford to neuter or vaccinate them, nor provide them with adequate veterinary care. The result is an overpopulation of diseased or otherwise unhealthy dogs. Historically, municipal authorities have tried to cope with this problem by killing stray dogs using often inhumane methods, including poison and gas. Not only did this cause the dogs to suffer unnecessarily, it was also unpopular with the community members who cared for the stray dogs, and it was an ineffective strategy for the long-term control of rabies; stray dogs from surrounding areas

would simply move into the areas where dogs had been killed and the problem re-emerged.

Since rabies is an incurable, almost invariably fatal disease, the best means of controlling it lies in prevention. Recently, programmes have been started in India whereby stray dogs are captured, vaccinated for rabies, neutered or spayed, and released at their point of capture. This minimises disruption of the existing stray dog social network by keeping dogs in the neighbourhoods they know. The aim of the neutering/vaccination programmes is to improve the welfare of stray dogs by producing a stable, healthier, rabies-free population. Although the results of these programmes seem to show promise for reducing rabies, no one has yet demonstrated this through laboratory confirmation of suspected rabies cases, nor has there been a concerted attempt to quantifiably assess the healthy stray dog populations both before and after implementation of the animal birth control (ABC) programme. These are two of the goals of the Marwar Animal Protection Trust.

The Marwar Trust, a registered public charity, was founded by Federico Spinola in 2003 as a natural development of his involvement as a trustee of Help In Suffering, Jaipur (HIS). Its aim is to ultimately eliminate dog





Above: The Marwar team with Dr Ray Butcher
Below: Dr Wandeler, Dr Mahesh & Dr Subhash



rabies from India. The Marwar Trust's 'Jodhpur Project' was launched in 2004. This five-year project is a collaborative effort between World Health Organization experts, local people, veterinarians and scientists, and it is specifically aimed at eliminating rabies from the city of Jodhpur in northwest India.

One of the goals of the Jodhpur Project is to evaluate the current health status of the stray dogs in the city prior to, during and after implementation of an ABC/rabies vaccination programme. Kennel and surgical facilities at the Marwar Shelter have already been constructed and the ABC programme currently processes about 35 to 40 dogs every day, six days a week, under the guidance of Wing Commander Rajan Jaisinghani (Retd.), the Marwar Trust's Chairman.

Jodhpur is home to an estimated 800,000 people. Because most dogs are not owned, there were, prior to the implementation of the Jodhpur Project, no reliable statistics on how many dogs were living in the city. One of the first

studies undertaken for the Jodhpur Project was a series of 'street dog counting' surveys. A team of 'markers' went out into the streets over four days and sprayed a temporary, non-toxic vegetable-based dye (beetroot juice) on all the dogs which they encountered. A second team of observers went out into the streets after the marking team had done their work for the day, and counted the number of marked and unmarked dogs which they saw. Using the ratio of marked-to-unmarked dogs over the study period, the investigators were able to calculate the total number of dogs in the study area. Similar studies were conducted in different types of habitat in the city (residential versus commercial versus tourist, etc.) and an overall stray dog population estimate for the city was calculated. The surveys indicate that there are over 45,000 stray dogs in Jodhpur. This figure does not include privately owned (pet) dogs, and puppies under three months old (which were not marked by the marking team).

One of the other goals of the Jodhpur project is to determine the number of rabies cases occurring in Jodhpur. In order to demonstrate that the ABC/rabies vaccination campaign is successful in decreasing the cases of rabies in Jodhpur, a rabies diagnostics laboratory will also be established at the Marwar shelter in 2006. This laboratory will be the first of its kind in Rajasthan and will allow the Trust to document and definitively diagnose rabies cases (in dogs and other species) occurring in Jodhpur and surrounding areas. The lab will be set up under the supervision of Dr. Alex Wandeler, an advisor to the World Health Organisation and Leader of the Centre of Expertise for Rabies for the Canadian government. In addition Dr. Sarah Totton, a veterinarian from the Ontario Veterinary College in Canada, will be conducting health assessments of the dog population in Jodhpur before and after implementation of the ABC programme in order to assess the success of this programme with respect to improving the welfare and overall health of the stray dog population.

In addition, because children aged five to 15 are most at risk of contracting rabies in India (since they have the most contact with stray dogs), a rabies education programme targeted at the local private and public schools in Jodhpur will be launched this April. It is hoped that the Jodhpur Project will serve as a model for future ABC/vaccination campaigns throughout India with the overall aim of eliminating rabies and improving the welfare of stray dogs.

The Marwar Animal Protection Trust

Web: www.marwartrust.org

Email: info@marwartrust.org