

Soi Dog Rescue: How You Can Help Man's Best Friends

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It is for many people the most shocking aspect of life in Bangkok – the sheer number of stray dogs and cats that populate the busy city streets.

That number has been estimated at 300,000. If you consider that one female dog can set into motion a reproduc-

tive whirlwind that can produce 67,000 stray dogs over the course of seven years, it's not surprising that the problem has reached epidemic proportions. But thanks to a small group of dedicated volunteers, steps are being taken to not only help these animals, but the communities they live in and the environment as a whole.

The volunteers call themselves Soi Dog Rescue (SDR) and their organization was founded in 2002 with the simple aim



of improving the lives of Thailand's stray animals and creating a happier, healthier society for everyone. Their philosophy is "every little bit helps," but when you consider how much they do, it's actually quite a lot. SDR's goals include sterilization, education and adoption and through these efforts they are making a real difference in the neighborhoods around town.

The main focus of SDR is to control the animal population and they hope to achieve this by sponsoring local spay and neuter campaigns. Their first one was held in a residential area near Bang Phli in 2003 and today, SDR continues to encourage and support community-based sterilization projects in which whole neighborhoods participate in the capture, transport, funding and care of street animals. The veterinarians that perform these procedures do so by volunteering their time and talents, coming from countries like the United States, England, Canada, Australia and Hong Kong, but there is far more that needs to be done.

SDR President and Co-Founder Sherry Conisbee understands that local vets can't afford to just give their services away, but feels that they can actually profit by lowering their sterilization costs and treating more animals. "Mass low-cost sterilization will make them loads of money," she remarks.

Looking to the future, SDR realizes that the best way to address the animal population "problem" in Thailand is through education. By informing children of the importance of population control and offering them appropriate information through a variety of school programs, they can help reduce the numbers and improve the lives of Thailand's street dogs and cats. SDR's hope is that the children they reach will grow up to be sensible adults equipped with the knowledge required to be responsible pet owners.

SDR offers a unique approach to finding homes for dogs and cats born on the streets. A lucky few are nursed back to health, fostered in loving homes, trained in basic obedience and then offered through the website for adoption in Thailand and North America. SDR hopes to expand this program in the years to come with the aim of providing loving homes for deserving street animals. "In our work, the icing on the cake is when the animals go to a new home," remarked Angela Boner, the organization's VP of community outreach. "Many of the people who adopt animals from us keep in touch via email and it's heart-warming to see happy dogs and cats with their new families."

SDR's latest fund-raising venture is the store ReTails, a place where one can go to browse for high-quality household, clothing, jewelry and other items at bargain prices. All items for sale at ReTails are donated and slightly used (or as Sherry puts it "pretty new") and the profits from their sale go to support SDR's regular activities, which include spay and neuter projects, vaccinations, medical care and community education. Higher-value items and large goods like furniture can be taken on commission and delivered by ReTails transport provider, Crown Relocations.

ReTails (located in the Lake Rajada Complex, 195/1 Rachadapisek Road across from the Queen Sirikit Convention Center) officially opened in September 2006, but they held their formal ribbon-cutting ceremony on March 29th 2007. The event included a live auction that raised over 150,000 Baht for SDR's activities. In attendance was Miss Universe 2005 Natalie Glebova who recently adopted an orphan kitten called Tammy from SDR. She has been so impressed with the organization's efforts that she has since become their official ambassador, using her celebrity status to help raise awareness for SDR's efforts.

"There is much we can do in our lives to help make the world a better place," Natalie says. "As an animal lover I have been alarmed at the conditions that street animals in Thailand are living under. Much of this can be alleviated through a co-coordinated spay and neuter program such as that being undertaken by Soi Dog Rescue."

For the auction Natalie donated a crown necklace from her own collection. Other



items auctioned that evening included works from renowned artists Louise Truslow and Ralph Kiggel.

It is important to note that SDR is not a shelter. Their main spay center is nothing more than a small-capacity field clinic located in the rural outskirts of Bangkok. SDR simply does not have the space to provide permanent homes for the animals that pass through their facility. Their main goal is to treat them and release them back into the communities.

"There is a misconception that Thais are oblivious to dogs and cats, but this couldn't be further from the truth," explained Wendy Edney, the General Manager of SDR's spay center. "The animals are a big part of life in the communities, and they belong there provided that they are healthy."

SDR's efforts have made a difference. To this date, over 2,700 animals have been sterilized, 2,500 rabies vaccinations administered, and 280 stray dogs and cats have found new homes. There are currently 18 international schools participating in their educational programs and the spay center will be hiring a full-time veterinarian in May.

Despite all this, there is still much more to be done and anyone reading this ar-

ticle can participate and make difference. SDR not only needs money to continue treating stray animals, but their spay center also needs a new fence, an autoclave (a device that sterilizes medical equipment), a microscope and a new truck (not to mention funds to extend the lease on the land where they are located). The most obvious action comes in the form of donations, be it cash-saleable merchandise for the ReTails store or dog equipment like leads, bowls, food and pet toys. Shopping at ReTails is perhaps the easiest way to help – just stop by the store and if you see something you like, take pride in knowing that your purchase is going towards the efforts of a worthy organization.

Perhaps the most important thing one can do is to sponsor an animal. If there is a stray dog or cat living in your neighborhood, take it to a vet and have it spayed and neutered. Of course, this requires a significant out-of-pocket cost for any individual, but the benefits to society are too great to ignore. If one can keep in mind that "every little bit helps" then their actions can improve many lives – human, canine, and feline.

For more information about Soi Dog Rescue, please visit www.soidogrescue.org or call Wendy Edney at 08 1850 9065.