

## LESSONS FROM THE TEMPLE DOGS

By Nicolas Simon

What began as a family vacation in 2008 evolved into an eye-opening voyage of self-discovery and motivation. Before traveling to Thailand in the summer of 2008, I envisioned tropics and temples. I planned to visit my aunt and uncle, see the sights, witness a colorful culture, and taste the curry. By the trip's end, hundreds of vignettes floated in my head. Prominent among these were reflections on cultural disparities and the memory of the countless street dogs and cats lining Bangkok's streets and patrolling its Buddhist temples. My lens on Thailand focused on wonder and excitement, yet I was confounded by contradictions between the Thai view of the sacredness of life and the brutal conditions endured by its hoards of unwanted animals.

I come from a family of animal lovers. When my aunt and uncle moved to Asia many years ago, they were shocked by the sheer numbers and the desperate conditions of the street animals in virtually every city. Over the past decade they have devoted endless hours and significant resources to working toward solutions. I had an introduction to their work on our 2008 vacation, and was honored to assist my aunt in her daily outings to care for and feed injured and sick dogs and cats. We transported dozens of animals for neutering, cared for them postoperatively and then worked to place puppies, kittens and grown animals in adoptive homes. We fed animals and interacted with monks at the local temples where the animals congregate. It was at once heartbreaking and heartwarming to witness the wretchedness on one hand and the humility and grace of these animals on the other. I was overwhelmed, but encouraged by the obvious improvement in the health of the animals in the areas where relief efforts had been initiated.

The plight of Thailand's stray animals stayed in my thoughts for two years until I returned to Thailand in the summer of 2010. This time I journeyed not as a tourist, but as a volunteer determined to change the status quo. Within just a few days into my service with an animal rescue agency<sup>i</sup> working with Thai street animals, I discovered some of the realities of street life for these soi (Thai word for "street") cats and dogs. Realization also began to dawn as to the paradoxical underpinnings of this tragic situation.

Westerners view pets as an extension of family, and as such, we heap attention and care on our animals. The peaceful Thai people revere life, but many elect to drop off their excess or unwanted and unneutered animals at temples or rescue shelters rather than attempt to take care of them with the scant resources available to them. This approach has resulted in an unchecked proliferation of homeless, sickly, and unwanted animals. Recent efforts and interest from the Thai Royal Family<sup>ii</sup> have moved to more humane solutions than the mass military slaughters and relocations of years past, but cultural, social and economic habits continue to pose barriers to significant change. Much remains to be accomplished to provide resources and services to those who advocate responsible pet ownership, and volunteer efforts in Bangkok and other Thai cities are in their infancy.

On my first trip to Thailand, I wondered how people could tolerate the obvious suffering of entire packs of soi dogs and feral cats. However, as I worked with Thai people, I learned far more about their cultural outlook and I switched my perspective and started to view both the problem and potential solutions through a different lens. I adjusted my aperture to a new, inclusive vision of animal life and its interaction with human life. It came to me that it would be pointless to impose an outsider's judgment; a far more effective method of helping is to listen and learn from the people who live with

the situation. I quickly became attached to the sweet, smart and resilient Thai dogs and cats, and noticed small acts of kindness towards these creatures from street food vendors, monks, children and even businesspeople offering a bit of rice or satay or a pat on the head. The Thai people I saw and met were no more satisfied than I with the animal misery they confronted on a daily basis, but many of them had their own struggles. Living in the shadow of elegant buildings and modern business are people for whom every mouthful counts. A bit of rice to a dog was a bit of rice that could not be sold or eaten. For them, often there are no scraps to spare for hungry animals.

Spending weeks in the hot and humid equatorial conditions, I honestly felt that I made a small difference in the Thai community. The long hours of administering vaccinations, treating horrific infections such as mange and blood parasites, assisting with pet adoptions, socializing litters of kittens, providing information about spay/neuter programs and interacting with the neglected but lovable dogs and cats allowed me to improve the lives of animals and Thai families willing to accept a healthy, neutered, and loving creature into their lives. Each tiny victory and each animal rescued helped me come to an understanding of the value of incremental steps, and as I stood back to look at the overall picture, I could see the impact of our humble efforts. I cannot say that my work solved any major problems or resulted in a “sea change” in Thailand’s overwhelming animal overpopulation. I did, however, learn a very important lesson: my small contribution made a very big difference to specific animals and specific people. The dozens of dogs and cats that I helped have a chance at a happy and healthy life, and their adoptive families have the opportunity for the unconditional love a pet can provide.

What I accomplished was modest, but it was something. As Mother Theresa observed, “If you can’t feed a hundred people, then feed just one.”

Beyond the immediate relief and gratification of facilitating a happy ending for some animals, my time in Thailand expanded my outlook on social issues, cultural differences, and the problems of poverty. I had a first-hand view of the effectiveness of one-on-one encounters between people of different cultures and perspectives. In particular, the power of education was dramatically demonstrated in the way that Thai people opened their hearts and homes to pets once they realized not only the importance of animal population control and preventative medical care, but that these services were increasingly available to them.

On the flight to Thailand my goal was to work with needy animals; on the way home, my focus had shifted. I felt an invigoration and awareness that on the surface, nothing appeared to change and Bangkok was still overrun with thousands and thousands of vagabond dogs and furtive cats. But I knew that underneath, the seeds of change were planted in a small corner of a big problem. The kernel that had been growing inside of me for several years enlarged and my commitment to finding a way to make a difference in the world deepened. My immersion into Thai culture also challenged me to take a closer look at my curriculum for senior year. I returned from Thailand more dedicated to my goal to be of service to others and a career in furtherance of social justice, including animal welfare. I feel keenly focused on the reason I am taking AP Chemistry and other demanding courses my senior year, knowing that what I learn in these classes will be important to me and those I encounter in my future. Above all, I know that our world has too many abandoned “creatures” and they cannot just live off of scraps.

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<sup>i</sup> SCAD is Soi Cats and Dogs. It is an animal welfare group based in Bangkok and focuses on efforts to improve the lives of street animals, promote spaying and neutering, and promote adoption and responsible pet ownership. [www.scadbangkok.org](http://www.scadbangkok.org).

<sup>ii</sup> Thailand's beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej has adopted many handicapped, stray animals. His book "*The Story of Thong Daeng*" is a tribute to the loyalty, devotion and outstanding characteristics of Thai dogs, and in particular, his own Thong Daeng, whom he describes as "a common dog who is uncommon."