

Helping the Homeless in Chile.

Homeless Dogs, That Is!

> By Ada Letelier. Published On: Mon, Jun 29th, 2009.

It doesn't matter to me, dogs or cats, I love them both. I have had several dogs and cats in my lifetime and can't say whether I prefer one over the other. I also seem to be surrounded by people who feel the same way. My best friend Laura is always picking up stray animals. The last time we spoke, she had rescued nine cats and five dogs. She has a lovely ranch in California so she can provide food, shelter and a loving home for all of them.

A Chilean friend who lives in Colchagua has, at last count, 57 animals on his property – most of them rescued dogs. He just can't seem to stop finding and rescuing them. And we never, never know what Steve, the Santiago Times Publisher, will bring into the office on any given day – stray dogs, cats or even a ground hog. Anyone interested in tropical fish?

My daughter, who has had a host of unusual pets from the time she was a little girl – guinea pigs, frogs, rabbits – recently got a dog. She accuses her dad and me of abandoning her when we retired and moved to Chile four years ago; ergo the dog. And let's not forget the Obamas. They also made finding a dog for their daughter one of their top priorities after moving into the White House.

Cecilia, a Chilean friend of mine who now lives full-time in Miami, Florida with her husband, son, three dogs and two cats, came to Chile to visit her family. We met for lunch and started gabbing about all sorts of things. Eventually, the conversation led to a discussion about the high number of stray dogs that roam the streets in Chile on any given day or night.

"So many stray dogs," I said, "and no one seems to be doing anything about it."

"Well, that's not exactly true," she said. "I just got back from Valparaiso where I have given a local animal shelter a check, along with some other goodies (collars, leashes) that I brought with me from the states. This is a gift from the MDRR (Miami Dade Rescue Rail road)."

The MDRR, whose motto is "Compassion In Action – Helping Homeless Animals Ride the Rails to Freedom" felt compelled to act after viewing the video "558 Dogs and 106 Cats in One Home in Chile" (CNN iReport, Nov. 25, 2008) and reading a news report by our very own former Valparaiso Times reporter, Wes Kimbell. This moving video and Wes' article on the conditions he found at this home (VP Times, Nov. 26, 2008) led the members of MDRR to begin a fund raising campaign on behalf of "La Sociedad Protectora de Animales," the name given to the new location where two sisters, Marina and Estratia Gonzalez, bought a track of land and moved themselves and their 558 dogs and 106 cats.

The new shelter is located about half an hour's drive outside the city in a place called Laguna Verde. There the sisters struck a deal with the local municipality. The sisters would donate the land and the municipality would construct a new animal shelter on their property. Upon hearing that my friend was about to make a trip to Chile, they asked her if she would personally deliver the monies raised by the MDRR. Cecilia was more than happy to be able to help.

The rest of our conversation focused on what is and is not being done by local and national authorities concerning this growing problem. According to a study conducted by the University of Chile (2002) there is one dog for every six people in Chile.

Twenty-five percent are strays – approximately 250,000 stray dogs in total in Santiago. What to do? Aligned on one side are those who say that we cannot rule out animal euthanasia in combination with a good sterilization program as an effective means of getting this problem under control. Of course, we are only talking about very sick, rabid, and/or maimed animals, they are quick to point out. Opponents, such as Marina (a retired university level English Teacher) and her sister Estratia (a retired lawyer), along with my friends Laura, Luis, Cecilia are vehement in their arguments that animal euthanasia is not the correct or humane answer to this very serious problem.

According to Marina, "We are not in the business of rounding up strays and killing them. We believe that a sound sterilization program coupled with a good education program aimed at the general public is the best way to tackle this problem." The sisters also believe that adoption of animals from shelters is also something that needs to be encouraged. To this end, along with providing a home, food, and medical care for strays, La Sociedad Protectora de Animales, hopes to be able to find good homes for all of their "adoptable animals." By the way, the MDRR is also a no kill facility.

I concur with Marina's sentiments. I also do not believe that animal euthanasia should be used as a means of eliminating this problem. I do believe that government has to play a far greater role and pass legislation that will provide the resources needed to enable localities to deal with this problem more effectively and also to enable organizations like the Protectora de Animales to stay in business. It is also up to all citizens who can and are willing to help to do so.

I am not suggesting that we should all open up our homes to the strays of the world, but there is one immediate thing that we can do to help. If contemplating getting a dog and/or cat consider adopting from an animal shelter. This will help alleviate the severe over-crowding at some of these shelters and allow them to take in more animals. And, most of these animals (dogs and cats) – those deemed adoptable – are every bit as fit and healthy as any purchased from a local pet shop.

Too bad the Obamas did not follow through on their desire to adopt a "shelter animal" for their daughter. What an impact this would have made on people's attitudes towards the shelter animals of the world.

Finally, we can write letters to elected officials and let them know where we stand on this issue, while reminding them that our votes do count. We can also volunteer our time at local animal shelters, if so inclined. They can certainly use our help! And to people like Laura, Luis, Cecilia, Steve and countless others who have become fearless in their fight to protect the animals of the world, thank you for all you do on their behalf.

I leave you with this quote from someone who is considered to be one of the greatest humanitarians of the 20th century.

“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” — Mahatma Gandhi.