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The truth about stray cats and dogs

By Jeanine Toussaint

Stray animals have long been a cause for concern on the island, but the St Lucia Animal Protection Society (SLAPS), along with a team from International Veterinary Assistance (IVA), is doing something about the growing problem.

A five-member team of veterinarians and veterinary assistants has this week conducted a second spay and neutering clinic for stray dogs and cats. The clinic, the brain-child of husband and wife team Angela Witt and Mehrdad Nezari, started May 20 and will finish on Tuesday.

The couple was on their honeymoon at the Royal St Lucian Hotel when they became aware of a proliferation of stray animals on the beach. Feeling that something had to be done, the couple, who also happen to be vets, contacted SLAPS president, Jane Tipson and Dr Jennifer Cenac of the Animal Care Centre.

"That's how the pilot project got started last November," said Dr Cenac at a special dinner at Tropicana on Wednesday. "With help from their team of three vets and two vet nurses, we were able to spay and neuter around 38 strays. We targeted the stray cats at the Pigeon Island National Landmark, specifically."

Outlining their systematic approach, Dr Cenac explained that preliminary surveys had already been conducted at the Rodney Bay Marina boatyard, the beach near the Wyndham Morgan Bay Hotel and Vide Boutielle, among others. "So far we've been getting a pretty reasonable response from the public," Cenac said. "I suppose with the mentality that has been developed over the years, it's a bit difficult to explain to people who often think we should have something better to do with our time and money, why we're going about spaying animals." The point, she said, is that the problem needs to be addressed, as disease-carrying animals can pose serious health risks if left unchecked.

That concern was also expressed by Anne Otsberg, communications director with the Pegasus Foundation whose mission statement includes the protection of the Earth and all living creatures. The foundation, believing "all forms of life warrant compassion and respect", was one of the early supporters of the clinic, providing funds for the inaugural project. "We were interested in seeing how the project has been working here and from what we've seen so far, it has been wonderful," Otsberg said. "The cooperation between the local group and the IVA has been incredible. Funding is definitely crucial, so we're here to see how the project has been going."

Besides pointing to potential health hazards, noise pollution, and threats to road safety, she also said stray cats played a positive role in keeping the number of rodents in check.

Andria Cauvin, an IVA volunteer, said it was important to note that the animals who had undergone surgery were not subject to any cruelty. "We treat them as we'd treat our own

pets. They're properly anaesthetised to ensure pain relief and quick recovery," Cauvin explained. "Some of the animals are quite wild and don't enjoy being caged. We try to keep their cage time as short as possible and those who have offspring are released within 24 hours."

As for the "live and let live" theory and the belief that the animals have been emasculated by the experience, Cauvin said: "The population has to be managed, and the idea is not to go about neutering every single cat and dog. We're not just spaying the animals, we're also treating them for mange and parasites that they carry which may be spread to humans."

Up to Wednesday, some 25 animals had already been sterilised as part of the project. It is hoped by the close of the clinic, 100 strays would have been spayed or neutered. Mr Nezari told the STAR that within the three year span of the project, it was hoped a target of 1,500 cats and dogs will have been treated.

Ms Tipson summed up: "Our mission statement is working in the interest of animal welfare. And that means animals in general, not just the pedigree variety."