

# The Color of Compassion

— by Betsy Miskimins —

The island of Rarotonga in the southern group of the Cook Islands is said to be one of the “original treasure islands.” With the scent of frangipani lingering in the air and clear turquoise waters stroking the startlingly white sandy shores, this is one island sure to paint a picture of paradise for tourists seeking beauty and relaxation. Yet, if one were to stroll around the island paying particular attention to the state of the animals here, there would be a drastically different view. A picture with a background of malnourishment, disease and cruelty.

Thankfully, for the thousands of cats and dogs that populate the island, one resourceful tourist sketched a new



Photo credit: Courtesy Esther Honey Foundation

bright perspective for the future of animal care by founding the Esther Honey Animal Clinic, the only organization to provide veterinary services to the numerous companion animals of the Cook Islands.

## History

In 1993, while vacationing in the Cook Islands with her family, Cathy Sue Anunsen learned that the country had no veterinarian for its thousands of companion animals. She also learned that police, in an effort to control the dog population, routinely shot and bludgeoned to death unwanted canines.

Anunsen returned to the States and founded the non-profit Esther Honey Foundation, Inc. named in honor of her grandmother, Esther and Honey, a golden Rarotongan, or “Raro” dog native to the islands.

In 1995, after two years of preparation and the assistance of animal advocates, veterinarians, pharmaceutical companies and Air New Zealand, the Foundation established the only animal hospital in the Cook Islands.

Each year over 1,000 animals are treated by EHF’s all volunteer staff at no charge. The Foundation’s treatment and Spay and Neuter pro-

grams extend beyond the clinic doors to the far corners of Rarotonga and to the remote outer islands.

Traveling by freighter or plane, EHF volunteers reach animals who have never seen a veterinarian and those whose guardians are unable or unwilling to come to the clinic.

## EHF Volunteers — Brushstrokes in the Masterpiece

The Esther Honey Foundation’s most valuable resource is its colorful palette of volunteers. Over the last five years, 35 dedicated veterinarians, many technicians and students have given their time, faced many challenges and sacrificed a great deal to insure that the tranquil South Pacific is an animal’s picture of paradise too.

All EHF volunteers perform heroic feats by enduring the demands of living and working at the clinic. The 24-hour on-call position is especially demanding in the amount of time EHF volunteers spend working with victims of fish poisoning. Despite EHF public service announcements and one-on-one

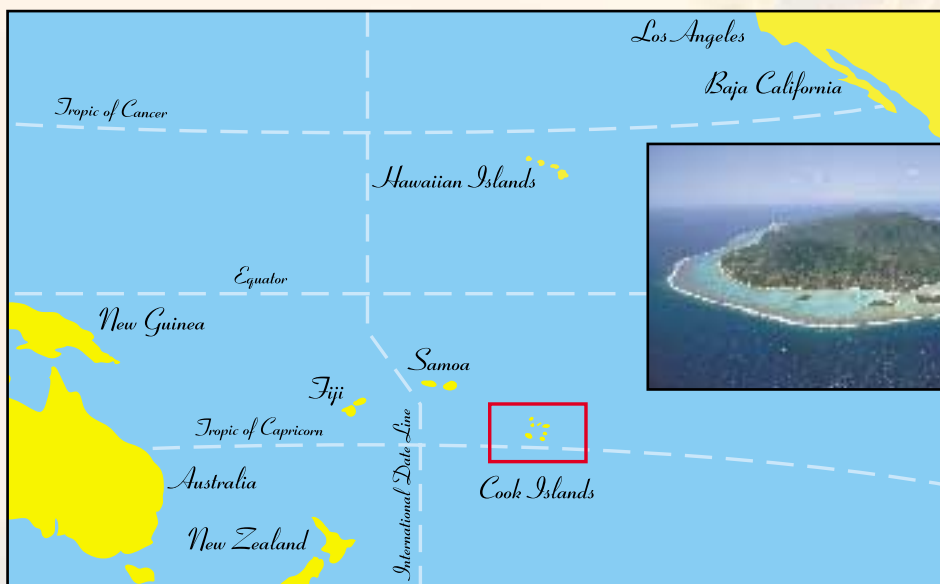
warnings, the locals frequently feed their pets reef fish.

Reef fish feed off of algae that contain ciguatera toxins that, once ingested by a dog or cat, gravely affect the animal’s nervous system disabling their regular body functions, their ability to walk, eat, etc. Within the bloodstream, the toxins often reverse an animal’s ability to feel hot and cold. They will feel immense heat when they are cold and vice versa. Volunteers lose nights of sleep as they stay up to syringe feed the animals or keep them company as they vocalize endlessly. Dr. Karin Johanson, a new veterinarian, was met with 15 new fish poisoning cases in her first week. Intern Tricia Schilling, a college junior at the time, assisted Dr. Johanson during that sleepless week and is now in her second year of veterinarian school.

The hardest thing to witness is the frustration the animals endure as they try to control their bodies, but simply can’t. They “inch worm” along on the lawn flopping and flailing. The only remedy for this all too common illness in the Cook Islands is time and supportive care. This requires both a great deal of patience and discipline that few can give.

Ryan Brown, the present clinic manager, recalls one of her first cases of fish poisoning and the realization of why she is here. “I was in the kennel syringe feeding Rusty. I was hot and sweating, but sitting there in that instant, I just realized that here’s this little soul, that’s totally dependent on me and if I weren’t here, how would he survive?”

Brown continues, “When an animal’s here, vulnerable and dependent on you, you just feel a con-



**A view of Rarotonga. Beautiful, remote and now, thanks to EHF, much healthier for companion animals.**

**Previous page, inset: The EHF clinic on Rarotonga is decidedly not state-of-the-art, but effective. Each year, EHF’s all volunteer staff treats over 1,000 animals.**



**The all-volunteer EHF staff, November, 2000.**

nection. You know that in your arms they feel safe and loved and taken care of. They are grateful for the attention that they haven't received all of their lives."

Brown can attest to the fact that this job is tough. It takes guts and grit; time and patience and the results aren't immediate. "It is extremely frustrating that some of the same animals are seen repeatedly for fish poisoning because the locals aren't getting the message due to lack of

sides. Their quick thinking successfully brought Boscoe's temperature down. They were then able to treat him for shock, give him fluids and tend to his fractures. "We don't have a lot to work with, we make do, we get results," Schaad states. "What we do here is necessary and mandatory. I'm glad to be here because the companion animals' survival depends solely on our efforts."

"It's an all around good feeling when you're able to help an animal

*"When an animal's here, vulnerable and dependent on you, you just feel a connection. You know that in your arms they feel safe and loved and taken care of. They are grateful for the attention that they haven't received all of their lives."*

care or interest" adds Brown. At least the animals have EHF as their allies though, working every day to raise awareness.

Although the clinic is adequately supplied for the demands of surgery and medical treatments, donations are always needed. Foundations are often not willing to fund projects outside the U.S.; therefore, EHF relies primarily on individual donations rather than grants.

EHF volunteers have a long and ingenious history of improvising with medical supplies to aid an animal in need. Dr. Duane Schaad, volunteer veterinarian for March and November 2000, recalls the story of

like Boscoe," says Lauralee Leone, veterinary technician for the clinic. "The ones that you do help produce an amazing emotion within you."

## *Painting the Future*

**S**tories like those of Rusty and Boscoe demonstrate the colorful mural EHF volunteers paint backed by the mission of Cathy Sue Anunsen to provide veterinary services to the needy animals of the Cook Islands. There are bright colors of love present in the joy and admiration of seeing an animal walk and play again. There are colors of frustration

that volunteers witness in an animal's daily struggles with pain and confusion. But there are also colors of hope present in the generosity of those concerned with compassion for all living things. These colors of hope are the future contributors of time, money, equipment and supplies for the clinic. The Esther Honey Foundation is a painting that grows bigger and better with each stroke. And EHF is always looking for new artists.

## *How can I help?*

**T**here are many avenues for assisting EHF. Those with backgrounds in veterinary medicine can volunteer their time and service to the clinic. Others can help get the word out about EHF by informing friends and family. Donate medical equipment, supplies, appliances and money. Please contact Betsy Miskimins via email at [frogfarm@aol.com](mailto:frogfarm@aol.com). Contributions to EHF are tax deductible and can be sent to:

The Esther Honey Foundation  
P.O. Box 3969  
Salem, OR 97302

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*About the Author: Betsy Miskimins, a recent graduate of the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication, is performing a six-month volunteer position for the Esther Honey Clinic as Community Outreach Coordinator. She is originally from Portland, Oregon and plans to return there in April. Betsy has picked up a few hobbies in Rarotonga, as she enjoys participating in outrigger canoe paddling and traditional island dancing.*