



Animal Balance: Spay Neuter in the Galapagos Islands



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Animal Balance

Spay/Neuter in the Galapagos Islands



Animal Balance works with local authorities in the environmentally sensitive Galapagos Islands to develop and implement 100% humane programs for the control and management of cat and dog populations that threaten native species. High volume spay/neuter clinics are coupled with energetic humane education and veterinary training initiatives.

Stats

- Since the project began in May 2004, 2,600 cats and dogs have been sterilized on the three effected islands, Isabela, San Cristobal and Santa Cruz Islands.
- Animals Sterilized: Isabela 558, San Cristobal 933, Santa Cruz 1073
- Population Count for cats and dogs:
 - Isabela Island May 2004: 470;
May 2005: 408
 - San Cristobal Island May 2004: 722;
May 2005: 803
 - Santa Cruz Island May 2004: 2,000;
May 2005: 1954

How Cool is That?

We're impressed with the ability of one person to assemble the resources and talent and create a paradigm shift in the treatment of dogs and cats within a different cultural and physical environment.

Adopt or Adapt

Travelers concerned about the treatment of cats and dogs in countries they visit could start a similar program. Understanding the political and cultural issues driving the treatment of the animals is essential, however, as is a willingness to spend a great deal of time gaining the trust of local residents and officials.

Animal Balance: The Whole Story

Animal Balance works collaboratively with local authorities, organizations and communities to organize 100% humane animal management programs in areas where ecosystems are most fragile. Through their unique community-based sterilization model, Animal Balance can reduce and manage cat and dog populations effectively. Animal Balance provides guidance and support to similar organizations throughout the world.

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Who They Are and What They Do

Animal Balance was founded in 2002 to develop a humane approach to control and management of cats and dogs on the environmentally sensitive Galapagos Islands.

The Galapagos Islands are located 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador. Cats and dogs arrived on the islands with the early whaling ships. In the last 60 years, Ecuadorians have moved to Galapagos from the mainland bringing dogs and cats with them. The animals have been allowed to breed to capacity and populations have escalated out of control.

The Galapagos National Park Service (GNPS) is mandated to protect native species, many of which exist nowhere else on earth. The Municipality (CIMEI) wants to encourage tourism. Both authorities consider large numbers of free-roaming cats and dogs a threat to their missions and have advocated eradication programs. Local residents do not want to see the animals killed but have traditionally allowed their pets to roam and breed freely and defecate in the streets.

Animal Balance was formed to bring these interests together and develop a humane solution that would enable companion animals and protected wildlife to live on the islands in harmony.

In May of 2004, Animal Balance held its first high volume sterilization clinic on Isabela Island. The following December, a smaller “wrap-up” clinic was held. Six months later, in May 2005 Animal Balance held a 4 week long clinic on San Cristobal Island and sent a satellite team to Santa Cruz to start tackling the large population there. In February 2006, a 2 week long clinic was held on Santa Cruz and San Cristobal simultaneously. A small satellite team was sent to Isabela for a ‘top up’ campaign. Clinics are planned for July and November of 2006 and a final set of clinics are being scheduled for 2007.

To support the campaigns and encourage humane care and control of companion animals, Animal Balance mounts energetic campaigns of community outreach that include such elements as a community dog show, a mural competition for island children, an open house celebrating conservation in the islands, and daily dog obedience classes for the general public. Animal Balance donates supplies and trains local residents so the programs can continue under local management.

Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

- An understanding of the problem and recommended solutions.

Animal Balance Founding Director Emma Clifford had been working with WildAid (an organization dedicated to ending illegal wildlife trade) on a project to protect the marine habitat surrounding the Galapagos. She was therefore familiar with local environmental concerns, local government structure, and the role and structure of the Galapagos National Park Service.

As former Manager of the San Francisco SPCA's Feral Cat Program, Clifford also had a working knowledge of sterilization as a humane means of population control.

To augment her own knowledge and experience, Clifford assembled an international advisory board of recognized experts on all aspects of the problem.

People

Animal Balance is a volunteer organization consisting of:

- Founding Director
- Associate Director

Their work is augmented by four volunteer staff members:

- 1 Website Manager
- 1 Photographer
- 2 Editors/Proofreaders

To mount the first campaign on Isabela Island, Animal Balance brought in a team of 48 volunteers including veterinarians, veterinary technicians, trappers, dog trainers, humane educators and support staff who worked in two, two week shifts. They were aided by a small corps of local volunteers.

It was found that four week campaigns were too long; local interest declined by week three so the campaigns were shortened to 2 weeks to be more efficient. Animal Balance also began to include more than one island on each campaign which made better use of all the resources.

Up-front Costs and Startup Funding

A private donation of \$10,000 funded a feasibility trip to the Galapagos in 2003. The Animal Balance staff then returned to the states to raise funds. Their target was \$55,000. They actually raised \$109,000.

They used The Foundation Center to research funders interested in everything from feral cats to public health and environmental issues. Letters of inquiry brought many negative responses, but also some positives. The breakthrough came when the ASPCA pledged \$15,000 if Animal Balance could raise \$30,000 from two foundations that had expressed interest. That was successful.

In-kind contributions were equally important. The staff spent the entire fall and winter of 2004 gathering supplies. Animal Balance was asked to appear at the 2003 CHAMP conference and had the opportunity to meet face-to-face with all of the vendors. They asked for and got donations of everything from Kong Toys to leashes and collars.

Advisory Board member Julie Levy, DVM put a request for veterinary supplies out on the Shelter Vet List Serve. The staff posted requests on other list serves such as Craig's List. Materials poured in from across the country. The Humane Society of the United States Rural Area Veterinary Services (RAVS) program donated an anesthesia machine and an autoclave.

The annual operating budget for Animal Balance is \$80,000.

Time Line

Animal Balance was founded in 2002 as a project of The Animal Fund. The Galapagos project was launched at the 2003 CHAMP Conference. After a year of planning, the first campaign took place on Isabela Island in May of 2004. The organization is applying for independent status as a non-profit entity in 2006.

Step by Step

1. Have clear goals.

Animal Balance goals for the Galapagos project were:

- Sterilize the maximum number of cats and dogs establishing zero population growth
- Attain accurate statistical data on cat and dog populations
- Permanently identify all cats and dogs as sterilized
- Stop the migration of cats from the town to the park
- Physically and emotionally involve the community, thereby establishing a connection between humans and animals and fostering an interest in the local ecology
- Alleviate fears concerning perceived health issues associated with dogs and cats
- Inform the local community regarding humane pet care
- Teach the local veterinarian surgical skills

2. Take your story to the people who can make a difference.

Clifford's first step was to establish relationships with local authorities whose support would be essential for success. In 2002, she began what would become a year-long dialogue with Victor Carrion, the director of eradication and control of invasive species for the Galapagos National Park Service. She told him about the San Francisco SPCA's successful feral cat programs and explained that lethal methods, such as hunting or poisoning, might temporarily eradicate local populations but that surrounding cats and dogs would quickly fill that void and begin reproducing again, creating a never-ending cycle. She slowly convinced him that sterilization would be the only long-term solution to reduce and control cats and dogs. Once convinced, Carrion became a valuable ally.

3. Bring the best knowledge and experience to the table.

In 2003, Clifford established an international Advisory Board consisting of recognized experts in every aspect of the proposed project. (www.animalbalance.org/advisory.shtml). The Advisory Board not only served as a vital source of experience and knowledge, it dramatically increased the credibility of the organization with government and park service authorities in the Galapagos.

4. Step up to the plate.

At first, according to Clifford, her proposal fell on deaf ears. Eventually, however, Carrion started to listen. When he acknowledged that the main obstacle to implementing sterilization programs in the Galapagos was lack of resources, including trained veterinarians, Clifford immediately offered to bring in everything needed, hold some clinics, and train local veterinarians.

5. Get to know the territory.

Carrion remained concerned that what had worked in San Francisco might not work in the Galapagos, so he invited the Animal Balance staff to visit. In May of 2003, Clifford and Associate Director Alice Ng spent two weeks meeting with Carrion, spending time in the communities, and evaluating the feasibility of a large scale sterilization program.

6. Arrange collaborations with the local authorities.

The GNPS agreed to provide temporary clinic space at the Darwin Research Laboratory's Giant Tortoise Breeding Center, as well as transport and logistical advice. In addition, it was the GNPS that handled all of the necessary paperwork with the Ecuadorian government. The municipality agreed to provide three people to assist the Animal Balance team.

7. Figure out the logistics. Get necessary permissions.

Getting all of the supplies to the remote Galapagos Islands was a challenge. Clifford learned that the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society ship Farley Mowat was going to the Galapagos in the spring of 2004. She approached Sea Shepherd, and they agreed to carry all of the materials.

Animal Balance had to get special permission from the United States Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to carry controlled substances. They also had to get permissions from the Ecuadorian government to import the supplies.

8. Adapt the program to local conditions.

During the feasibility visit, it appeared that the cats and dogs on Isabela were strays so a TNR program was envisioned. When Animal Balance arrived a year later to launch the first clinics, they discovered that, although the animals roamed at will, they had companions who fed them. As a result, TNR was just used at the edge of the villages and instead Animal Balance worked with the residents to convince them to have their animals altered. Because making and keeping appointments is not part of the local culture, the Animal Balance team found it best to hire taxis and go to the homes to pick up the animals.

9. Gain the trust of the local residents.

When the team arrived in May 2004, all the animals they had observed a year earlier had vanished from the streets. A rumor had circulated that Animal Balance was actually coming to kill the cats and dogs. The team immediately held a Doggie Bathe-In in front of the municipal building to bring people out and demonstrate that the animals would be treated with kindness. They went door-to-door, engaging residents in conversation about their animals and offering free collars, leashes, food, bowls and mange treatment to those who would agree to have their animals altered. The mange treatment was often the incentive to have the surgeries done. On the first surgery day, a well respected local leader taped the activity and showed the video at a meeting he hosted in a popular local gathering place.

The Animal Balance team stayed in local hostels and ate in local cafes. While only a few team members were fluent in Spanish, they all took a crash course and made every effort to communicate in the native language. Even when they weren't successful, their earnest efforts helped create a bond. In time, they became so popular that a local band wrote a song about them.

10. Establish a plan for evaluation.

The GNPS did a census before the Animal Balance team arrived. Animal Balance created a data base to enable the local authorities to keep track of companion animals. The base includes a photo, microchip number and medical history. The local authorities have now instituted a system for registering all cats and dogs. This process is currently taking place and will provide a post-campaign census.

11. Make the program sustainable.

Animal Balance donated all the equipment and supplies to the local authorities. Animal Balance hired the local veterinarian, whom they trained during the campaign, to continue the work on Isabela and reach out to other islands.

An internship has been established to enable veterinarians training in Ecuador to work with the local veterinarian as part of the Galapagos campaign. The goal is to provide a rotating pool of veterinarians who know spay/neuter and can run these programs. This is important because strict immigration policies in Galapagos make it difficult for veterinarians to settle permanently in the islands.

Local residents have also been certified as dog trainers.

Results

The Numbers

You can read the annual project reports here <http://www.animalbalance.net/DatePage.html> for Animal Balance's Galapagos Islands and Dominican Republic programs.

Critical Factors

- Backing of a respected and knowledgeable Advisory Board.
- Relationships with local decision-makers built through extensive preliminary conversations and feasibility trip in 2003.
- Gaining the trust of the local people by living among them, speaking their language, adopting their pace of living, and showing a genuine concern for their animals.
- Bringing the Park Service, the CIMEI, and the residents together for a common purpose.
- Knowing how to communicate. Many residents didn't read so Animal Balance had to use TV and radio as well as door to door visits.
- Changing the program in response to increased understanding of local conditions.
- Knowing how to appeal to a wide audience of funders and supporters. i.e. one funder might be very concerned about the killing of dogs and cats while others might be more concerned with public health issues or the protection of the native species. All arguments are equally valid but different ones appeal to different people. It's important to use them all.

Thinking Outside the Box

- Before Clifford and Ng went to the Galapagos for the first time, they made up some very inexpensive Animal Balance T-shirts. They gave one to Carrion, and he wore it to a crucial meeting with the authorities on Isabela Island. That visual statement of support on the part of a respected GNPS official helped bring other essential authorities to the table.
- A mural competition with the theme "all animals can live in harmony if we take responsibility for our pets" involved school children and their parents and resulted in a beautiful and permanent artistic expression of the campaign.
- Daily dog training classes were held to teach residents how to control their animals. At the end of the campaign, a Best Guardian competition rewarded six residents who had taken dog training classes and were providing excellent care for their pets.
- A Best Pet competition was held during which local residents walked their dogs on leash, dressed them up in costumes, and just had fun interacting with them. Nearly the whole village turned participated. Animal Balance gave prizes such as dog crates, bowls, and candy for the children.
- The Animal Balance team was happy to be able to donate supplies to the GNPS Giant Tortoise Breeding Program. Kitten carriers will be used to transport the young tortoises to their island habitats. The tortoises are being implanted with the same microchips used for the cats and dogs and tracked with donated scanners.

How They Feel About What They Did

- Clifford said Animal Balance proved, with the Isabela campaign, that a community based sterilization program can be run successfully in a sensitive habitat area.
- The collaboration was a success. Animal Balance provided parts of the project that were unattainable locally, such as creating the model, and importing the skills, supplies, and equipment to make it happen. The local organizations provided help with logistics, personnel and vast amounts of advice, information and support.

- While the focus of the campaign was sterilization, Animal Balance is particularly pleased with the improved level of control and care they were able to encourage through their humane education programs. At the beginning of the project, few people took an interest in their pets. Children socialized the puppies and kittens, but adult dogs were rarely handled. The residents tended to see them as useful items - cats to catch rats and dogs to guard or hunt. By the end of the first four week campaign, local people were attending dog training classes; walking their dogs on leashes; providing food, water, and shelter and enjoying positive interactions with and pride in their pets.
- Attitudes have been changed. The GNPS director on Isabela adopted a puppy during the campaign. Since he is mandated to protect the native species, it makes a real statement when he walks his dog through the village on an Animal Balance leash.

Their Next Steps

In July 2006, a week long clinic will be held on Santa Cruz Island. It will be led by local partners at the CIMEI. This will be the first time they have organized a clinic themselves. It is now time for Animal Balance to take a step back and allow the campaigns to be locally run. Another campaign will be led by partners in November of 2006. Together all parties hope to stop population growth on all 3 islands by the end of 2007. The goal is for the project to be sustainable.

The Ecuadorian vets that Animal Balance trained over the past 2 years have invited other vets to the islands for training. CIMEI will now bring a new Ecuadorian vet to the Galapagos every 6 months to treat and monitor the cat and dog populations on all 3 islands. Animal Balance will give support where necessary.

The Galapagos vets have been invited to attend conferences in other South American countries and explain how the campaigns work and to let them know that killing is not the answer.

The Galapagos Television station continues to show a short video of the sterilization campaigns. As a result, requests are coming in from other communities to do similar programs. Animal Balance will not do campaigns if killing is still going on, and it is in some places. The success of their program is now proving to be a strong incentive for other communities to stop the killing and try humane approach to controlling the cat and dog populations.

Animal Balance is looking forward to taking the model and applying it to other islands around the world with similar problems.

Some Words of Wisdom

What Worked

Neutersol proved very useful in this environment. Men liked the fact that dogs could keep their testicles and still have enough testosterone to guard or hunt.

Be Prepared For

- Everyone will tell you it can't be done.
- Things may not happen on your schedule. The Sea Shepherd ship Farley Mowat was delayed and didn't actually arrive until the second week of the Isabela campaign. The Animal Balance team had to carry huge amounts of materials with them and delay some surgeries until supplies arrived.
- You'll have to prove a million times over that you're there for the right reason.
- Aftercare may be minimal. Animal Balance found that they had to change some of their protocols (i.e. leaving glue on the spay site or changing the stitch pattern) because dogs would run back to the beach and burrow in the sand or climb hot black lava rocks and lie down. They now recommend 24 hours of aftercare.

- Things may move at a slower pace than you're used to and it may take time for people to accept and trust you.

Your Next Steps

With the information we've provided, can you start a program like this one in your organization? [Click here](#) to send an email to ASPCA® National Outreach with your feedback and questions.

Animal Balance: Thumbnail Sketch

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Animal Balance was founded in 2002 to end the eradication of cats and dogs in the Galapagos Islands, where they had become a threat to protected native wildlife. The organization works collaboratively with the local authorities and residents to organize intensive sterilization programs for cats and dogs and teach humane pet care and control.

Staff

- Paid administrative staff
- 4 volunteer staff
- Extensive network of field volunteers (veterinarians, techs, humane educators)

Operating Budget

\$80,000.

Business Type

Project of the Animal Fund, 501(c) (3) nonprofit
Applying for independent status as a 501(c) (3) nonprofit