

Helping street cats in Morocco

Emily Fowler discovers a UK charity that gives cats and other street animals in a Moroccan city a better quality of life and chance of a future

PHOTOS OF ESSAOUIRA STREET CATS BY STUART-LEE TOVEY

Essaouira is a vibrant city on Morocco's Atlantic coast, popular with water sports fanatics and culture seekers alike. As one of Morocco's fishing ports, it's hardly any wonder that huge numbers of cats congregate here but visitors to the city all notice one striking thing about the stray animals – they all seem healthy and cared for, not how you'd expect typical 'street cats' to be. The main reason for this is a UK based charity, Help the Street Animals of Morocco (www.hsam.org.uk) that helps both cats and dogs that might otherwise suffer on the streets.

How it all started

Veterinary nurse Claire Sedgwick and her partner Rob first visited Essaouira in 2006 and immediately noticed the high

volume of stray cats and kittens in the area. As a vet professional and animal lover, Claire was concerned about the sheer number of street cats they encountered and the terrible state of health the majority were in. When the pair came across a group of poorly kittens that were obviously suffering, they knew they had to do something to find veterinary help and eventually they found that help in the form of local vet Dr Adnan El Aji.

Helping that one litter of kittens wasn't enough for Claire and Rob and they started making plans to help the street cats of Essaouira as soon as they returned from their holiday. The following year brought the first of HSAM's trips to the city to care for the cats and during that trip they neutered 107 cats and gave 200 kittens vital veterinary treatment, all with the help of Adnan.

Not only does Adnan continue to give HSAM the use of his surgery for free but a local animal rescue (Refuge GCO) care for the animals during their recovery from any treatments or surgery.

In October 2013 HSAM expanded



its programme to help street dogs in Essaouira as well and their vision is a deserving one. "HSAM's mission is to create a sustainable and healthy street cat and dog population in and around Essaouira, Morocco."

HSAM's Work

Twice a year, teams of HSAM volunteers made up of veterinary professionals and trained animal handlers visit Essaouira to provide essential care and veterinary treatment to the cats and dogs in the area. Probably the most important part of their work is the neutering programme. Not only does it control the street cat population, it lessens the chance of diseases and stops mating behaviours like fighting, spraying and roaming – meaning a much better quality of life for the cats. HSAM follows the internationally recognised procedure of 'tipping' the cats' ears once they're neutered so everyone knows they've been done. They also perform routine health checks and flea, worm and tick treatments. To avoid stressing the cats and cross contamination, they're treated on the street wherever possible, only being taken in for surgery and intensive care needs.

In 2013, Essaouira's 'Veterinary



Department' officially approved HSAMS's 'Dog Population Management Programme', and since then the stray dogs in the area have also been cared for during the bi-annual visits – including getting neutered, vaccinated against rabies and treated for parasites. Once the dogs have been vaccinated against rabies they get blue tags in their ears with ID numbers, so everyone can see they're part of the dog sterilisation and rabies vaccination programme; the first of its kind in Morocco!

Local residents and street animals

Part of HSAM's aim is to educate the people of Essaouira in animal care and welfare, so as to create a mutually beneficial environment for humans and animals. The teams of volunteers always

speak to locals when they're out and about checking on and treating the animals, and it's now commonplace for the locals to approach the teams to let them know if they're concerned about a specific animal and to ask any questions they might have about animal care. HSAM also put on awareness events locally and produce information leaflets in Arabic and French.

HSAM's work and influence has created a much more positive coexistence between the local people and the local animals. You'll often spot water bowls dotted around the city and people playing with the cats and dogs in and around the area. With an amazing total of over 3000 animals helped to date, the street animals of Essaouira have a lot to thank Claire for! 🐾



Special Care Unit for cats

In their 75th year of helping animals, much loved charity Ferne Animal Sanctuary in Wambrook, near Chard, Somerset are looking to improve and expand their current facilities.

Plans to build four new buildings on their current site are shortly to be submitted for approval. These will include a new agricultural building and storage shed. Both are urgently needed to house all the wonderful donations the Sanctuary receives from the general public.

In addition, the application will include plans for a new Visitor Centre, which will provide a much needed meeting room and exhibition space. The fourth building will be for a new cat Special Care Unit for strays and nursing queens.

Founded in 1939 by the late Nina, Duchess of Hamilton and Brandon and set in 51 acres of glorious Somerset countryside, Ferne Animal Sanctuary originally looked after the pets of servicemen and women who were going away to fight for their country.

Elaine Hayes, CEO at Ferne Animal Sanctuary said: "It's hard to believe that the doors of the Sanctuary were opened 75 years ago; everyone here is very proud that we still continue to make a difference by helping animals and communities.

"Our plans for expansion are yet another very exciting time for all the staff, volunteers and supporters of Ferne.

"We will shortly be launching an appeal for the cat Special Care Unit as this will be a very expensive building, full of the latest technology. This new facility will enable us to look after the cats to the highest possible standards."

To find out more about Ferne Animal Sanctuary, their upcoming events and how to become a valued volunteer, visit www.ferneanimalsanctuary.org or call 01460 65214. 🐾