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Celebrating Cultural Differences in World Veterinary Year

By Jen Reeder

A few years ago, there was a serious dog problem in Todos Santos, Guatemala. Large numbers of dogs were roaming the streets and sometimes biting passersby, making locals feel unsafe and causing a decrease in tourism in the rural Mayan town.

Members of the community contacted Veterinarians Without Borders – Canada for help. The organization sent volunteers to Todos Santos who were surprised to learn that most of the dogs were not strays, but owned. The group established several health and sterilization clinics and learned about the human-animal bond in the town in the process.



"In this particular Mayan culture, it's actually a very close relationship," says Dr. Enid Stiles, DVM, vice president of Veterinarians Without Borders – Canada and coordinator of the Canine and Feline Programs. "The dogs are very important to them. They represent protection mostly for their homes, for their families."

It has been 250 years since the world's first veterinary school was founded in 1761 in Lyon, France, and 2011 is being hailed as World Veterinary Year. As we celebrate 250 years of veterinarians serving humankind in caring for our pets, it is important to

recognize and celebrate our differences so that people in countries around the world, particularly our neighbors in Latin America, can share knowledge to continue this tradition of contributing to the health of pets globally.

For example, in Todos Santos, Stiles says dogs tend to live outside and generally aren't restrained because leashes aren't accepted by the culture. Spaying and particularly neutering are not widely accepted either because of concerns for the dogs' well-being, although the procedures gained wider acceptance when the Canadian Veterinarians Without Borders group began offering chemical sterilization as an alternative to surgery. In fact, Stiles said 60% of male dogs were brought in for chemical sterilization in Todos Santos.

Dr. Susan Monger, DVM, and international director of the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association Field Services (based in Austin, Texas), has traveled with staff and volunteers to Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, Guatemala and Mexico (the organization also works in Peru and Ethiopia). The Field Services Program focuses on education of local veterinarians, students and "técnicos" (similar to veterinary technicians in North America) in impoverished areas — in some instances, the veterinary schools don't even have textbooks.

"Everyone we have worked with has been very, very eager to learn," Monger says.

Some of the cultural differences Monger has noted include the wariness of spaying and neutering (as in Todos Santos), fewer pure breeds, lack of leashes, dogs living outside, and never sharing a human's bed and diets. Because owners often cannot afford food for themselves, their dogs and cats live on scraps like tortillas and chicken bones. Nevertheless, Monger says, the love between the pets and their owners is



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evident when they pick up their pets from the clinics, calling it “the best part of the day.”

“I think there is a gross misperception that if you’re poor, you don’t tend to care about your animals as much, and that’s not true by any means. In fact, pets might mean even more to their owners because their lives are so hard and they have this one thing that gives them unconditional love,” Monger says.

So, as we celebrate 250 years of veterinary medicine, it’s important to keep the celebration of cultural differences in mind as well. It seems that regardless of income, norms or medical differences across the world, the human-animal bond endures.

Freelance journalist Jen Reeder lives with her husband and Labrador mix puppy Rio in Durango, Colo.



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