

Merely mean mongrels, or magnanimous marvels?

According to Kathmandu Animal Treatment (KAT) Center, our city streets are home to more than 20,000 such stray dogs that are seen as nothing but trouble the whole year around, except maybe on the day of Kukur Tihar.

UJJWALA MAHARJAN

A MONTH back, an English national daily reported on the carcasses of stray dogs in the six-lane highway at Koteswor and termed the animals as nuisance. Then a couple of weeks after that, they were being worshipped as guardians of the underworld and of our homes.

According to Kathmandu Animal Treatment (KAT) Center, our city streets are home to more than 20,000 such stray dogs that are seen as nothing but trouble the whole year around, except maybe on the day of Kukur Tihar.

Most of these animals live neglected lives - ill-treated, injured in accidents, suffering from diseases, starving or surviving on leftover scraps that they dig out from the city garbage.

Often referred to as the faithful friends of the humankind, dogs have been great pets and beloved companions of many. But when on the streets, many of the mangy undernourished dogs have to face contempt and even cruelty.

However, some people in Kathmandu have taken it to themselves to take care of these street mongrels for nothing but the love of the intelligent animals.

In the peaceful outskirts of the city, in Payutar of Kapan, Kate and



Kate and Douglas Clendon take the rescued stray dogs out for an afternoon walk around the open grassland at Payutar, Kapan. The couple maintain a shelter right behind their home in Payutar where they give necessary medical treatments and vaccinations for stray dogs of Kathmandu.

KESHAV THOKAR

around his groin," says Kate as she shows the operated area of the quiet dog. "He's also had two rounds of chemotherapy and is getting better faster than we'd expected."

She goes on about other diseases such as distemper that attack their nervous system, very painful and usually fatal. In some cases, she says they have to euthanize sick dogs but they don't resort to that unless the veteri-

rabies. In fact, dogs don't attack unless they're being hurt or threatened."

Moreover, both Kate and Douglas emphasize that most street dogs are very friendly and very used to having people around. As they are creatures of habit, they can be very easily trained and they will even risk their lives to protect your homes and locality.

"We once brought in a dog that had a huge deliberate khukuri cut at the back and some of the locals had put turmeric paste on the wound to help the dog heal," shares Kate. "We see cruelty but there's also a lot of love and respect. There's a whole range of attitude that people have for street dogs and we move the society more to the positive side."

Trying to tip the scale to the positive side are efforts of other people like Prerana Shah Rana and Toby Rana. Currently working for not just street dogs but bigger stray animals like donkeys, cows and mules, their non-profit organization DREAMS (Devoted Radical Environment Animal Movement Society) focuses on helping them through adoption programs, low-cost clinic services, local cruelty investigations and public education programs.

"We started this because we saw a lot of animals being treated very badly when we were traveling in Nepal. Not just stray animals but pets or even domestic animals such as mules are not well taken care of," shares a concerned Prerana over the phone.

Growing up in a family environment with lots of pets, both animal lovers stress that local involvement is essential in most rescue and treatment programs. It not just creates a sense of emotional attachment; they feel more responsible towards the animals.

"Individual efforts count as well. You can volunteer for animal care programs. Or whenever you see people being cruel to animals, stop them and speak out for these animals because they will suffer in silence," she adds.

Young individuals like Rohit John Chhetri do their share the way they know it. With facebook groups like "We for stray animals," they've tried to make people aware of animal laws and rights, the conditions of stray animals and about our responsibilities for animal care.

"We grow up seeing people kick or throw stones at stray animals and we don't defend them. What do you expect the younger generation to learn?" vents Chhetri. "The conditions that these dogs live in are pathetic already, and if you can't really help them, at least don't kick them around."

He also points out that there are some people who will take pride in owning expensive breeds of dogs but will treat stray dogs with utter contempt.

"It's not really about just stray and pet dogs. People have to learn about their pet responsibility and animal care and kindness as a whole," he says.

But it's also a common sight of locals feeding biscuits and caring for the community dogs. When the government had launched its dog poisoning campaign in the Valley, many people still recall hiding their neighborhood dogs that they loved in their homes.

People do care, and there have been community-level campaigns, though temporary, to better the lives of these stray animals. But with 16,000 cases of dog bites and 160 deaths due to rabies reported in Nepal every year, many people still fear them and gov-

ernments around the world address stray dogs as a "problem."

However, Jan Salter, founder of KAT Center, one of the oldest and respected organizations working for street animals in Kathmandu, says that the ultimate solution is to get their population under control.

"Poisoning and disposing their dead bodies in the river isn't a solution. That's cruel and makes the

stray dogs are referred to us and with our limited sources it's not always possible to attend to every case," says Salter with a sigh.

As the ABC programs have to be done in a careful and systematic manner, Salter says that without government support and commitment it's not possible to manage all the stray animals in and outside Kathmandu. Even though parts of India and Bhutan started the ABC program later than Nepal, according to Salter, they're way ahead and Nepal is still lagging behind.

"The government has to be more serious and realize that this is a matter of public health as healthier dogs means a healthier community," she stresses.

As the municipality is only concerned with the disposal of dead animals, it's organizations like KAT who have to take on the responsibility of stray animal management.

"We do realize that NGOs are doing what the government is supposed to do. We've realized that poisoning animals isn't the right solution. So we have it in our priority list that next year the government allocates a budget and takes on the responsibility for stray animal management in a more feasible way," says Baburam Gautam, Chief of the Department of Public Health.

Even though KAT Center has tried to create a pleasant park-like



PHOTOS: PRAJWAL BHATTARAI

Douglas Clendon maintain a shelter where they currently have ten street dogs undergoing medical treatments, recovering or waiting to be rehabilitated or adopted.

"We pick up sick and injured dogs from all around the city," says Kate as she and Douglas prepare to take them for their daily afternoon walks around the open fields. An energetic dog rushes out wagging its tail and excitedly starts circling and jumping around the new visitors.

"This is Punky, one of the most energetic dogs we've ever seen," says Kate, patting him and smiling. "He'd been injured in an accident and couldn't walk properly and must've had rickets as a puppy. Now he's all fit and happy, doesn't sit still and also has a new home. The people who've adopted him are coming to pick him up tomorrow."

As they walk the dogs to bark in the sun, Kate tells us that not many dogs are adopted or taken in by families. Most dogs they bring in are in very bad shape, with open wounds and skin diseases such as mange caused by parasitic mites, due to which the animals lose all their fur and have scabs and sores all over their bodies.

Canine Transmissible Venereal Tumor (CTVT) is another common and painful sexually transmitted disease among street dogs.

"Krishna here had a big tumor

narians think it's a terminal case.

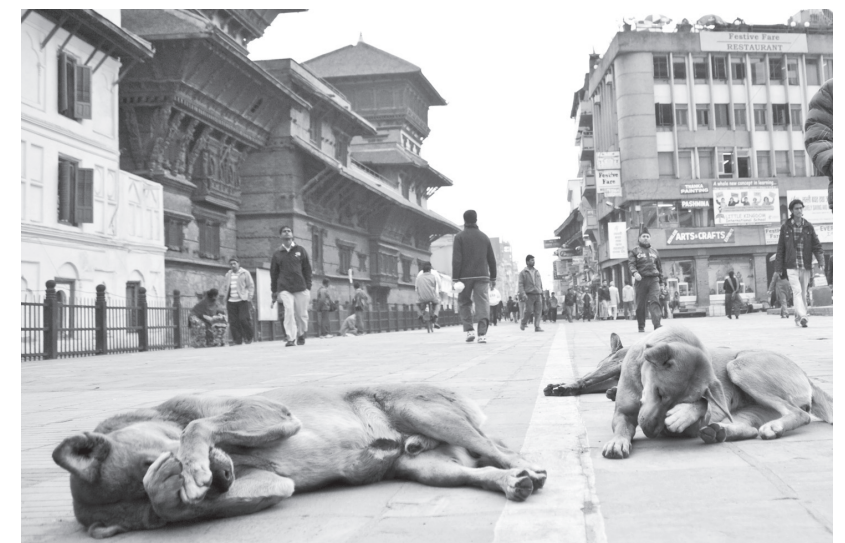
"But such cases are very few and most dogs we get respond very well to the treatments. Many recover and get healthy with just good food and regular diet," says Kate.

Back at the shelter, she shows some of the photographs of the previous dogs they've had and treated. The transformation you see is nothing less than amazing - from emaciated and ailing dogs to healthy and happy creatures.

The couple, who've kept six Tibetan mastiffs and five rescued dogs as their own pets, officially started their shelter one year ago. With support from a UK charity, now they don't just treat sick dogs but also vaccinate each of them against rabies and spay them to establish a healthy dog population.

Their work also focuses on getting the community involved to ensure that whenever dogs are taken back to their original neighborhoods, they are well taken care of.

"It's important to communicate with the community to maintain an amicable relationship between humans and dogs," says Kate who has held several awareness programs in the communities in and around Kapan. "There is a lot of misunderstanding about rabies that has to be cleared, like rabies vaccination has to be annual and it's not a one-time thing; and not all dogs that bite have



situation even worse," says Salter. She explains that dogs are very territorial. They guard their community from strangers but are usually friendly with the people of the locality. Moreover, they don't let other dogs come into their area.

"If you kill all the dogs of an area, other dogs will come in to fill the void and the movement increases the risk of bringing in more sick and even rabid dogs that may be hostile with the people who are new to them."

What Salter suggests and the center has been doing for more than seven years now is to spay dogs, specially focusing on the female dogs during the mating season.

"Once you spay these dogs, they can't reproduce and so gradually the population is under control. It's been tested and proved that Animal Birth Control (ABC) is the best way to manage stray dogs," she says.

With less number of dogs, it's not only easier to keep check of them and vaccinate them against rabies; they're likely to be healthier and well received by the community.

Over at Budanilkantha where the center is located, Salter is happy that they have been successful in bringing the number down. However, the stray dog population in Kathmandu is still too big for a single organization to handle completely.

"Most people who call the municipality for any help regarding

environment for the stray animals that are brought in, the area and the capacity is still too constricted. Salter imagines a bigger area, somewhere in the center of the city, so that more animals can be brought in and more people can interact with the work.

"I think it'll be a great attraction and probably then we'll have more people adopting these friendly animals, each of which deserves equal love and respect," she adds.

Most of these organizations or individuals who've worked with stray dogs in Kathmandu will tell you and show you for a fact how these sickly-looking mongrels are actually marvels - tough enough to survive hardship, face contempt but still remain friendly and loyal.

A day dedicated to these loyal creatures is only well deserved. Our tradition showers them with vermilion and garlands on the day. You can always do something different. For example, the annual rabies vaccination day can occur on or just before Kukur Tihar, and the cost would be no more than what you would spend on the day when you worship dogs.

But more importantly, the culture to follow would be to give them all year round what the garlands and vermilion actually symbolize: Appreciation, love and respect for our loyal and friendly quadruped members.