

Animal Care Manager Yogita Chettri writes about our animal shelters in Kalimpong and Darjeeling.

Written by: Yogita Chettri
Full-time carer

The Animal Shelters have been learning Centres for me over the years. It has brought me very close to the animal kingdom and has helped me become more compassionate towards all living beings. Firstly, I would like to thank Dr. Christine Townend, the founder of the Animal Shelters DAS (in Darjeeling) and KAS (in Kalimpong) for giving me such a wonderful opportunity to serve animals there. Both shelters are under the umbrella of a Trust set up initially in 1993 as the Darjeeling Himalayan Goodwill Unit of Service and Animal Shelter, and renamed as the Darjeeling Goodwill Animal Shelter trust in 1995 (DGAS).

I started as a volunteer at the Kalimpong Animal Shelter which was established in 1998. I became a full-time employee in 2017. Today, I work as the Animal Care Manager and I also handle some Public Relations for both shelters. The trip between Darjeeling and Kalimpong can take between 3 or 4 hours depending on conditions, through spectacular mountain scenery.



Yogita Chettri

KAS is a beautiful and friendly place for all the humans and animals there. The hardworking team comprises of eleven staff and one vet-in-charge, Dr. Deo Prakash Pandey, an excellent and skilled Vet, whose supervision in the veterinary field at KAS plays a pivotal role. The over-all management at DGAS is taken care of by Mr. Arpan Karthak. Trustees, Mr. Nirmal Jain, Ms. Yamima Dupont and advisor, Mr. Alain Dupont are of great support to DGAS.

Darjeeling Animal Shelter (DAS), opened in 2008, is another place of respite for the vulnerable animals and is an important project of the Darjeeling Goodwill Animal Shelter Trust as is the Kalimpong Animal Shelter. Both these sister shelters primarily focus on the Animal Birth Control Programme (ABC) and conduct visits to remote camps to render service to the community and animals living there. The dedicated team of 9 staff at DAS is headed by the Vet. Dr. Mihir Mazagaonkar from Mumbai and Manager Ms. Furmit. The team is only a phone call away for rescues and catching dogs where there is a need of ABC.

All enjoy their work at the Shelters and their team spirit is always alive in each one of them. All of us are very thankful to Dr. Christine, the founder of DGAS Trust as it is because of her great vision that the Animal Shelters exist today in these Indian hill towns of Kalimpong and Darjeeling. Lastly, I would add that, "animals need so much support like any human being in need, and we must allow our kindness to act in the right way and help them".

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The new Cattery at Kalimpong Animal Shelter

It was back in 2018 when a generous couple and Good Samaritans, Dr. Laura Louie and Harry Bohm from Canada visited Kalimpong Animal Shelter (KAS) along with a rescued stray dog. The couple were on holiday in India and were in Kalimpong for a few weeks. On their visit they had seen a sick dog in Kalimpong town, whereupon they wanted to help the dog and give her access to immediate medical care and treatment. So they admitted the dog at KAS and the team of KAS very dedicatedly nursed the dog every day. The dog was diagnosed with ascites and was malnourished. With proper nursing from the KAS team, the dog recovered gradually after a few weeks. The couple named her Lucky and visited her often whilst she was admitted to KAS. The couple were very impressed with the activities of KAS and they were thankful to the team for having saved the dog Lucky.

With time, they decided they wanted Lucky to be in Canada, where she could enjoy her life peacefully and not spend her days anymore on the streets of Kalimpong.

As street dogs in India have to suffer a lot for food and shelter, the couple definitely did not want her to be one of them, though Kalimpong is a very friendly place for the street dogs compared to other places in India.

Today, Lucky is thriving in Canada, Vancouver. No doubt she feels very fortunate to have found a loving home and parents.

During their visit to Kalimpong Animal Shelter, Dr. Laura had mentioned she was very fond of animals and especially, cats. Every time she was there she spent time socialising with the sheltered cats at KAS and performed Reiki on some of the sick cats.

KAS then had a Cattery that was able to shelter 30 cats though at times it would be a little constricted.

As she became a regular visitor with her purpose to visit the sick dog Lucky, Laura witnessed numerous pet owners discarding their cats frequently at the Animal Shelter.

It was heart-wrenching! She then perceived that KAS would require a large space for the healthy cats with a patio in future, whereas all the sick cats could be placed and sheltered in the old Cattery.



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Cattery Project



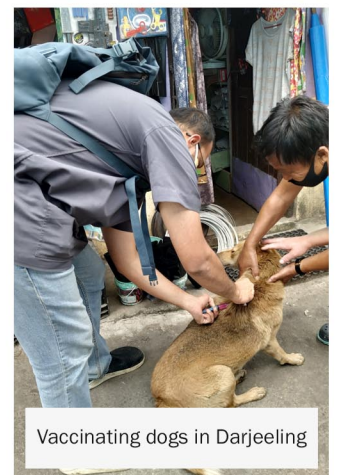
Subsequently, in 2020, her dream of having a big cattery for the cats at KAS turned into reality when she proposed to the KAS founder Trustee, Dr. Christine Townsend that she and her husband Harry would be very pleased to sponsor the Cattery. Dr. Christine agreed with the proposal and acknowledged that 'KAS indeed would need a Cattery', and thanked Laura for her wondrous idea and concern for the cats at KAS.

The building of the Cattery began during 2020. The designs were laid out by Harry and Laura and the blueprint was further designed by the French architect, Mr. Alain Dupont, who is volunteering as an advisor at KAS. But the world was struck by the Covid 19 pandemic, and work came to a halt when Indian towns and cities imposed lockdowns to contain the virus.

After a long wait, when the Covid restrictions had eased briefly in Kalimpong town, KAS resumed its Cattery project. This new establishment is very spacious with wooden chests and shelves for the cats and trees for them to sharpen their claws. The Cattery project is now complete and the cats have moved in to their new space. Our special thanks to Dr. Laura and Harry for sponsoring the Cattery, wherein many cat lives can be saved and many other homeless cats can seek refuge.

Impact of mass anti-rabies vaccination

To vaccinate each and every dog against rabies is a key object of Darjeeling Goodwill Animal Shelter Trust. Since their inception the animal shelters KAS (1998), and DAS (2008) have come a long way vaccinating the street and community dogs in towns and in remote areas and hamlets. Gone are the days when these hill towns Kalimpong and Darjeeling once encountered countless rabies deaths in both humans and animals. The start of KAS by Dr. Christine heralded a change in the lives of animals for the first time ever in these small towns. Further, this brought an end to poisoning of dogs with strychnine by the Municipality as the Animal Shelter initiated its project of door to door vaccinations against rabies in every corner of town. Bearing the risks in mind, the team embarked on a mission to vaccinate all dogs and keep the community and children safe. It took years of struggle and involved many challenges but the effort of the team did not go in vain that today there have been no cases of rabies deaths in humans in both these towns.



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Vaccinating dogs

The anti-rabies vaccination camp is one of the major projects run by the shelters like the Animal Birth Control Programme. The shelter teams independently run this Vaccination Programme, and ensures its follow-up on dogs every year. To cover the far-flung places and hamlets, the teams conduct Village camps, where dogs are vaccinated against rabies and also spayed and neutered. KAS, however, is waiting for its official declaration of a 'rabies free town'. Vet, Dr.Mihir, in charge of the Dogs Trust Worldwide funded ABC programme at DAS states, "There have been no cases of rabies as such in Darjeeling and even in Kalimpong, but we would like it to be officially declared as a rabies free town and henceforth, we are working on mapping and collecting data and census on all the dogs, we vaccinate every year." The two Animal Shelter Vets, Dr. Deo Prakash Pandey and Dr. Mihir are very instrumental and keen on their specific areas of work- the Animal Birth Control and the mass anti-rabies Vaccination Programme. Dr. Mihir has initiated a new technique of mapping all the wards in Darjeeling where the anti-rabies vaccination camp is carried out followed by the dog census. It is very time-consuming to work to map out the areas and count the number of dogs whilst all the team is fully engaged in catching to vaccinate the street and community dogs, which sometimes do not come to hand, but Dr. Mihir finds it very crucial and systematic to get the mappings done. He is hopeful by 2023 or prior to that, Darjeeling will also be declared a rabies free town officially.

Big thanks to Animaux Secours, France, One Voice, France, APN Network, Sweden, Working for Animals. Australia and Dogs Trust Worldwide for supporting the projects of Darjeeling Goodwill Animal Shelter trust.

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Lakpa preparing a dog at Village camp conducted by the Animal Shelter.



Ongoing ABC Prg. at Darjeeling Animal Shelter. Dr. Mihir and compounders.



Vet. Dr. Mihir from Darjeeling Animal Shelter mapping the areas where dogs are vaccinated.



A typical village makeshift spay and neuter camp.

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