

Society

NGOs help make stray animals' lives easier

(Xinhua)

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BEIJING - Beijing policewoman Zhang Jing is even busier when she's not in her uniform. For her, the National Day holiday week is seven working days feeding homeless animals, trapping cats for sterilization surgery and training green hands about animal care.

As opposed to other moonlighters who make extra money, the 28-year-old Beijinger spends at least half of her salary on food and medication for stray cats in her community in northwestern Beijing.

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Each day, she has lengthy telephone conversations and email exchanges with animal lovers who attempt to adopt some of the cats she adores, and ends with watching the cats devouring their meals. "Frankly speaking, I'm more devoted as a 'Lucky Cats' worker -- sometimes I even forget I'm a policewoman," said Zhang.

Lucky Cats, a non-profit volunteer group founded by 10 college students, is one of about a dozen animal welfare NGOs in Beijing.

Zhang joined Lucky Cats as a volunteer upon its establishment in 2001. When she graduated from college in 2003 she was promoted to a part-time employee.

This part-time job, however, is more tiring and stressful and has no economic returns -- all the 12 Lucky Cats employees are unpaid.

"We don't work for money," said Zhang. "We work for the well-being of Beijing's one million stray animals."

Stray cats and dogs are an apparent consequence of Beijing's fast urbanization over the past three decades: many old homes are demolished and pets are deserted when their owners move.

These deserted animals, plus those who went astray, often roam in schools, communities or around restaurants, relying on food provided by kind-hearted people or rummaging through garbage bins.

Despite their plight, these animals reproduce fast: a female cat gives birth three times a year, with four to eight cubs per litter. Lack of adequate care leaves many young cubs to starve or freeze to death during the bitter winter.

"Lucky Cats is not an animal shelter -- we help these animals find owners, set up nursing zones in places where they are routinely fed and get the help they need, and take them to the vets for sterilization operations," said Zhang.

Zhang and her colleagues have set up 220 such nursing zones across the city, tended by the 12 workers and up to 1,000 volunteers. They regularly update their official website at luckycats.net with photos and latest information of animals for adoption. The website also gives tips to the public on animal care and reminds people to be kind to animals.

During the past decades, the center has fed tens of thousands of homeless animals and helped more than 2,000 get adopted.

Lucky Cats has a 120-square-meter rehabilitation center where dozens of cats are waiting to be adopted or released to nursing areas in communities after they recover from wounds or sterilization operations.

International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) sponsors the rehabilitation center's office rental and part of the medical costs. Lucky Cats workers have to raise an additional 5,000 yuan and 100 kg of cat food a year.

Beijing has about a dozen volunteer groups like Lucky Cats, including Small Animal Rescue Society and Stray Angels. Besides, many individuals voluntarily feed and care for homeless animals in communities, at schools and around office buildings.

The Beijing municipal government has also worked with vet hospitals and NGO animal groups to offer 30,000 free sterilization operations to control stray animal population and reduce animal diseases, said Wei Haitao, head of the Animal Husbandry and Veterinarian Station under Beijing Municipal Bureau of Agriculture.

In Beijing, a sterilization surgery for animals costs 300 to 500 yuan (up to \$75). "But most vets offer discounts for stray cats," said Zhang.

Zhang said she was happy to see more people caring for homeless cats. "But I often feel helpless and depressed, too, because I fear there's no way out: the animals are constantly threatened by maltreatment, traffic accidents and diseases. On top of all these, China still has no laws protecting animals' welfare."

The draft of China's Animal Protection Law was released in September 2009 and is still under deliberation.

Love of life

World Animal Day, which falls on Monday, is of special significance in China, where animal abuse, ranging from killing dogs and cats for human consumption to the use of tiger bones and bear bile in pharmacy, is frequently criticized.

While young people like Zhang are devoted to saving homeless animals from their plight, the whole nation is learning to love animals as their government steps up publicity highlighting the risks of more species becoming extinct.

The country's protection for giant pandas, for example, has been exemplary, by expanding the population of the zooed animal to 310 through artificial breeding, and keeping the wild panda population at a stable 1,600.

In a latest campaign to raise public awareness of the endangered giant pandas, a research base in Chengdu, capital of Southwest China's Sichuan province crowned six "pambassadors" last week after several rounds of competition among more than 62,000 applicants from around the globe.

The six pambassadors have planted bamboos, panda's favorite food, cleaned enclosures and built outdoor climbing structures for the bears. They will work with panda keepers at the Chengdu research base for four weeks.

"It's our mission to remind people to care for pandas and all other animals," said Wang Yu-wen, a pambassador from Taiwan.



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