

Best Friends rescuing pets in quake-scarred Peru

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KANAB - They rescued 6,000 pets after Hurricane Katrina swamped New Orleans. They delivered 300 dogs and cats from war-ravaged Beirut and, earlier this month, they saved 600 felines from a Nevada shelter.

Next stop for the animal rescuers from southern Utah's Best Friends Animal Society: earthquake-rattled Peru.

The world's largest no-kill animal sanctuary, located five miles north of Kanab, sent a three-member team to the South American country to assess the damage and determine the resources needed to help the cats and dogs there after a huge Aug. 15 temblor killed more than 400 people.

"Some parts of the country are barely affected while there is massive damage in other parts," Best Friends President Michael Mountain explained. "One of the biggest problems is the Health Ministry destroying some cats and dogs that are infected and starving. Another problem is that people without food are eating cats while leaving kittens and dogs alone."

Mountain said a Best Friends veterinarian, a rapid-response manager and a photographer left for Peru more than a week ago. He expects the trio to help locals set up mobile spay clinics, treat injuries and provide vaccinations and food. The team also will work to reunite lost pets with their owners.

In one town, Mountain said, the rescuers found many dogs, but hardly any cats. "Most are street animals," he added, "and do not belong to anyone."

The society's rescue manager, Richard Crook, reported that the scene in Pisco, a city of 116,000, reminded him of the Katrina-caused destruction in Louisiana's St. Bernard Parish.

"The folks there [Pisco] are quite desperate and are more concerned with where they will get their next meal and their own medical attention versus how they can help their animals," Crook said in an e-mail. "To be honest, we've all heard the stories of folks eating their pets to survive. We are not comfortable getting out of the vehicle in Pisco."

In areas where they feel more at ease, the rescuers try to get help from residents.

"Engaging the locals is vital to our success," Crook said.

Peru's government is willing to provide storage areas for supplies, police protection and clinic space in various cities and villages, Crook said. It also helps alert villages that Best Friends is helping and when and where the crews will be.

"They will also let us use their only existing shelter in Ica," Crook said. "It was damaged by the earthquake but it is usable if needed."

He noted a mass euthanasia plan for the lost, sick and starving animals remains on the table for government officials as a last resort.

"They feel they would have no other option but to go this route if no other solution is presented," Crook said.

But Best Friends is offering a solution: a spay-neuter plan that would include vaccinations for rabies.

"If we can come in and begin this process," Crook said, "they would feel better about not euthanizing the animals."

Most of the critters, he added, appear to be well fed and fairly healthy.

"Their primary meal is table scraps," Crook said. "It appears that, as long as the people are getting food, the animals will also receive their share. However, it's only been a month since the earthquake so we may start to see the effects of a lack of supplies in the near future."

Crook said a Canadian animal-rescue team, which spent several weeks in Peru, brought with it three tons of food, but that more is needed along with medical supplies.

"Distemper is prevalent here," Crook said.

Mountain said that dogs and cats will be kept in shelters in Peru and not brought back to Best Friends' Kane County compound. He said the group has raised \$175,000 in donations for the rescue effort, but that more money is needed.

To critics who argue rescue resources and donations should be spent on humans rather than animals, Mountain points to all the humanitarian groups helping people.

"We are an animal charity," he said. "People are very happy when they see what we do."

Mountain said the rewards of rescuing pets and reuniting them with their owners were exemplified by the post-Katrina operation.

"Many lost their property and some lost family members so that all they had in their lives was little Fluffy," he said. "It's important to them and us."

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