

Caring for Stray Animals



By Diana Babish



The cities and villages in the Bethlehem Governorate are growing at a fast pace, and residential blocks and industrial compounds increasingly occupy most of the land. As of 2014, there were 30,200 residents in the three major cities of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour, which cover an area of 7 km², and 210,500 residents in the Bethlehem Governorate, which includes three refugee camps (Dheisheh, Aida, and 'Azza) and a number of smaller towns and villages. However, there is another noticeable population, equal to or even larger than the human one, which consists of stray animals: cats and dogs that roam the streets and live on vacant plots of land. These animals live in bad conditions, multiply without control, and have a negative impact on the environment. However, they are victims of their situations, and many of them do not make it to adulthood.

It is important to note that an estimated 800 stray animals live in the city of Bethlehem, and 10,000 stray animals, particularly dogs and cats, in the Bethlehem Governorate. A great number of these form packs and live in areas with a low population density. They venture out to high-density neighborhoods in the morning and evening hours in order to

find food, which exposes both the stray animals and humans to danger. Evidence suggests that this occurrence also has a negative impact on the much-needed tourist industry. Solitary strays are often chased and abused out of fear that they might be aggressive or sickly. Stray packs attack domestic animals, livestock, and humans alike. There are many documented cases of dogs attacking children and adults as they head out in the early hours of the morning or when they come home late at night.*

The strays, on the other hand, live in constant fear and under deplorable conditions. The absence of food and the infestation of fleas and parasites may lead to more serious diseases that can spread quickly and affect the human population and domestic animals alike, among them rabies, heartworms, tapeworms, and other pathogens. All these factors suggest that there is an urgent need to build an animal shelter with a capacity that allows it to serve not only the city of Bethlehem but the entire governorate.

In December 2013, the Animal and Environment Association (AEA) was established under an accredited license at 'Ush Al-Ghurab in Beit Sahour. Through its board of directors and dedicated members, the AEA proposed to design, construct, operate, and maintain a modern, state-of-the-art animal-control shelter that aims to provide services of the highest quality, including the rescue, care, and treatment of homeless animals. From its location in the Bethlehem Governorate, the shelter aims to care for animals from throughout the West Bank and to serve all municipalities that support this project by providing emergency rescue, medical care, and rehabilitation interventions that are carried out promptly and quickly, while keeping in mind the importance of caring for the environment. To support these activities, fundraising drives are implemented to solicit donations. At the

Until very recently there were no animal shelters in the Bethlehem Governorate or in other areas of the West Bank; and local governing bodies still lack animal control officers. The managing of stray animals is carried out at a most basic level by municipalities that simply kill the animals by poisoning or shooting them.

same time, the shelter hopes to be a venue for emerging veterinarians where they can receive hands-on training in various operations and the use of high-technology medical equipment. Experienced veterinarians will be available to do complicated surgeries when the need arises.

The Bethlehem Animal Shelter hopes one day to have a fully equipped operating room like this one located in Jerusalem.





Animals rescued from severe abuse and neglect usually suffer from acute and at times grave health challenges that are frequently related to starvation, dehydration, and physical abuse.

The newly built shelter features large kennels. The search is on for a larger piece of land where the dogs can roam more freely.

the public of the dangers that such practices pose and to shed light on the importance of preserving our environment from all forms of pollution.

The shelter does not use cages or chains and considers this method an important part of the process of relieving the animals' trauma – helping them to heal and redevelop healthy social instincts so that they can be adopted. The purpose is to facilitate healing and then transfer the animals to safe homes in order to create room for new rescues. In cases of severe trauma, a dog is provided a private area where it can feel safe while healing.

Thus, the shelter offers various options depending on the level of socialization and adaptation of which an animal is capable. The “Second Chance” option offers a place for cats and dogs to live as they wait to be placed into an adoption network that strives to find them a permanent home. The “Last Resort” is a program that provides a permanent sanctuary for unadoptable dogs, generally an option for a dog that may be less desirable to adopting families due to age, health challenges, or behavioral skittishness resulting from past abuse. These animals are provided

lifetime care and safety. On a regular basis Adoption Days are being held as public events in conjunction with local businesses in order to encourage and facilitate the adoption of companion animals. Last but not least, the shelter aims to provide a hostel service for dog owners who have no place to leave their dogs while they go on vacation.

Hoping to be able to change the view of the general public towards stray animals, the shelter intends to show how these animals can be beneficial once they are domesticated.

School and leisure activities will be offered to the general public, including children and youth, through promotional events that encourage citizens to get involved in acts of kindness and compassion.



The current shelter has a yard where dogs like Max, Muphin, and Gold can move around freely several times a day.

Intending to empower individuals to stand up for the humane treatment of animals, the shelter furthermore seeks to foster involvement of the general public through volunteer programs and workshops. It aims to serve people who need assistance with their own rescue efforts and to provide animal companionship by removing animals from circumstances in which they are unwanted or abused to places where they are wanted and cherished.

Diana Babish is a former bank manager with 23 years of experience in banking. She holds a master's degree in international cooperation and development from Bethlehem University, and is currently president of the Animal and Environment Association.

For more information, visit www.basau.org.

Article photos courtesy of the Bethlehem Animal Shelter.

* Humans are not the only ones who are attacked; there have also been cases that document humans attacking animals. See “Stray dogs a serious problem in the West Bank,” published on May 9, 2015, via Maan News, available at <https://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=765311>.