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Scrutiny for Puerto Rico Over Animal Treatment

By KIRK SEMPLE

BARCELONETA, P.R. — This much seems certain about the events of last October at three housing projects in this town near Puerto Rico's northern coast: Men working for the municipality entered the projects, rounded up dozens of dogs and cats that they said violated the housing authority's no-pets policy and took them away.

What happened next is less clear, but a lawsuit filed on behalf of 33 families claims that city employees and contractors drugged and brutalized dozens of animals and then flung them from a 50-foot-tall highway bridge into a weed-choked ravine and left them to die.

Witnesses say they found a pile of dog corpses and skeletons beneath the bridge, but the contractors have denied wrongdoing and city officials have denied responsibility.

News of the event became an international embarrassment for Puerto Rico and something of a vindication for animal rights ad-

The dogs were taken away. Then the questions started coming.

vocates here and on the United States mainland who had long tried to draw attention to the plight of animals on the island.

Animal rights advocates contend that the inhumane disposal of animals was routine, with unwanted dogs, cats and even farm animals hurled from bridges, intentionally crushed by vehicles or butchered with machetes. Government nonchalance, they say, has allowed this to go on.

But only with the Barceloneta case, they say, did anything start to happen. It spurred threats of a tourism boycott, inspired the government to begin addressing more forcefully the issue of animal welfare and precipitated soul-searching among the Puerto Rican people.

"In our culture we have not addressed these issues because, probably, we did not think they were important," said Carlos M. Carazo, director of the animal disease division of Puerto Rico's State Office for Animal Control, in an interview in San Juan last month. "In Puerto Rico, we have

ONLINE: ABANDONED DOGS

Audio and photographs on the plight of dogs in Puerto Rico: nytimes.com/national

so many issues to address, we haven't had the leisure time to think about animals. But this is probably the time to start thinking about it."

Puerto Rico, among United States territories, has long had a poor international reputation for the treatment of animals. There is no government program for mass sterilization or registration of pets and little animal welfare education in the schools. The island has only about a half-dozen animal shelters, and while municipalities are charged with rounding up strays, that duty has largely been ignored, government officials and animal advocates say.

Puerto Rican pet owners will often dump unwanted animals along roads or on beaches, animal advocates say. Roaming packs of mangy dogs are common in many towns.

One of the most notorious dumping grounds is a spit of land on the southeastern coast near the town of Yabucoa. It is known as Dead Dog Beach. According to animal welfare advocates, thousands of dogs have wound up there in the last decade.

"I've found dogs poisoned in the bushes," said Sandra Cintron, 37, an animal rescuer who lives in Yabucoa and drives to the beach every morning with a sack of dry food and jugs of fresh water for the shifting population of abandoned animals. "Sometimes they put them in bags and toss them in the jungle."

Ms. Cintron, whose volunteer work is supported by several Puerto Rican and international animal welfare groups, has been tending to the stray dogs at Dead Dog Beach since 2001. She has taken hundreds to be neutered and has found homes for dozens. She has named them all and keeps photographs of them in albums. Animal rights groups say that over the years they have been inundated with letters and e-mail messages from tourists offended by the stray dog problem.

One rights group in San Juan is the Save a Sato Foundation. The group's Web site explains that sato is slang for "street dog."

An e-mail message sent to the group by a woman who identified herself as Susan, was typical: "I visited P.R. a few years ago and was appalled and literally sick-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Stray dogs in Barceloneta, P.R. Animal rights advocates say such animals are often rounded up and disposed of inhumanely.



Wilma Gonzalez, 18, waits to have her dog, Pucha, inoculated at a Humane Society of Puerto Rico clinic near San Juan.



John Hower, 10, with Buster in Barceloneta. He refused to surrender Buster when animal control workers tried to take him.

ed by the homeless dog situation. I spent my entire vacation feeding stray dogs. The trip was miserable and horrible and I swore never to return and to tell everyone I knew about the experience."

A 2002 study by the Puerto Rico Hotel and Tourism Association estimated that the stray animal problem was costing the commonwealth about \$5 million a year in lost tourism. "Numerous groups and conventions have canceled plans to hold meetings in Puerto Rico after observing the stray dog and cat situation," the report said.

Still, it was five years before the government acted.

"In Puerto Rico, nobody has taught our culture animal control and protection concepts," said Mr. Carazo of the animal control office, which was formed last year. "We are now beginning to address those issues."

Since the Barceloneta case, the animal control office has accelerated new regulations and guidelines for animal control specialists, shelters and law enforcement agencies on how to manage strays, adoptions, spay clinics and licensing.

Completion of the guidelines

will result in the disbursement of \$1.5 million in seed money to establish animal shelters in each of the commonwealth's 78 municipalities, said Wilma Rivera, executive director of the office.

The government has also created a program to educate two police coordinators in every region, who will train the rest of the police force in the proper handling of pet cruelty cases.

The commonwealth's tourism agency has also formed a committee to push for more government action, complementing an animal welfare committee that operates under the auspices of

the hotel and tourism board.

Meanwhile, a group of lawyers is drafting more comprehensive animal protection legislation with stiffer penalties.

Still, animal welfare advocates are concerned that as the Barceloneta case wanes, the government's interest may flag. But Edilia Vazquez, director of the Save a Sato Foundation, said the Barceloneta case has unified the once-fractured animal welfare community.

"We realize we need to work with each other and keep the finger in the side of the government," Ms. Vazquez said.