

## TAPA

The target of this journey is Galle, where I will help a couple of days, on invitation of Tapa, the mobile clinic in Sri Lanka, to get an idea of the work of this organisation that helps mostly stray animals.

On Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> of October I arrive in the morning at Galle, where I will be picked up by the driver of Tapa who will drive me to the tents. This month, the mobile clinic has put up its tents in the neighbourhood of Unawatuna. I meet Dr. Thusira and the team. The welcome is heart-warming and because they are very busy with operations the shaking of hands will follow later. Dr. Thusira starts telling and I start making pictures. And so quite unexpectedly fast and a bit in awe I stand in the heart of Tapa (Tsunami Animal-People Alliance) and let it all come over me. A bit unreal feeling crawls upon me when I see them do a sterilisation like this. It is my first time to see an operation in such a way.



My first thought is how about sterility in such an open tent... is there no danger for infections? And why don't I see hardly any blood? Dr. Thusira explains that with the limited equipment they work as clean as possible. The finest scissors, needles, sewing thread and incision instruments. So they wounds can be stitched very properly and that there is hardly any danger for infection. They also sterilise the operation equipment in a sterilisation kettle. The needles are only used once. Dr. Thusira explains that the operations are done before the heat starts otherwise it would be too troublesome for the animals.

This day about 36 dogs are operated, in total already 19.500 animals were helped in Sri Lanka in this manner. Also the stray animals are helped when they have a tumour or skin problem. I see that they remove a piece of tire that was grown into the leg of a dog. The program of Tapa is more than sterilising; the animals are also vaccinated against Rabies. Rabies is a big threat to the human population, only in the last month 2 people died by rabies.

Beside the vaccination the dogs get a treatment so that the first hours they will have no pain or hunger feeling. They get fluid so they will not dehydrate the first hours after the operation in this tropical climate.



Because it will not be possible to remove the stitches after the release they use self solving material. Also a little triangle is cut out of the ear, the wound is burned close, this indicates tot the people that this dog has been sterilised and vaccinated and thus has no threat to their health. This is the CNR (Catch-Neuter-Release) program; the dogs will not be chased because they offer no health hazard. The rabies vaccination is valid for one year; medicines are imported from Colombo and saved in special cooling boxes.

Slowly I get the picture how this all works and I am impressed by their efficiency. Before Tapa arrives a information campaign is launched, there are articles in the newspapers, posters are spread and it is called for by the public address system. This is very important because in the poorest parts of Sri Landa, the spoken word is the most important way of communication, where there is poverty usually there is also illiteracy.



After this I take a tour with the dogcatcher. Again registration is very important, the dog must be replaced on the spot that it was caught because this is known territorial for the animal. Here he knows how to survive, the ways to find food. He does not have to fight with other dominant dogs to defend itself. It seems a very unorthodox way to catch a dog with a huge butterfly net of 4,5 kilo, the dogs are scooped of the road en put in the back of the car, rapped up in the net.. It does not look very nice but it is understandable when you think that each one of these dogs can hold a deadly disease, which is dangerous for the dogcatcher. Even a lick of the animal can transpose the contamination. It is also much more humane than using catchpoles, which can injure the animal's neck, and safer for the animals and team than catchpoles. As a precaution all the dogcatchers are vaccinated against rabies. The net is labelled with a number and registered by the driver. Also the spoken word through the public address system brings questions with the people of the remote

areas and makes people decide to have their animals helped. The service of Tapa is for free and that makes it for the mostly poor population an easier step to do something.



After having caught about 12 animals, the truck goes back to the tents. The dogs are unloaded, weighed and put on the pre operation department where they will be anesthetized, they get a number around their neck so they know where to return the dogs afterwards.

I get more and more impressed by this well organised team that does the work with so much team spirit.

Many people find their way to the Tapa camp and make a spontaneous visit with their dog. They are even picked up with a three-wheeled tuk-tuk and brought back. I see many happy faces of owners when the dog wakes up after their deep 'sleep'. Even a family with dog on a motor cycle pays a visit. Both children in front, father behind the steering wheel and mother with the pup in her arms on the back. The little one was too young to be helped and so everyone goes back home.



What I personally found difficult is that they release the stray after the treatment. I know I should not but I compare this to Holland where in such a case a dog would end up in a refuge, but these are hardly available in Sri Lanka. My feeling tells me that the dogs go back to what they had... nothing.

I however learn, in conversations with dr Thusira that this is the life the animal knows and maybe the best life for this creature. In a refuge it would probably have a hard time after leading a life of freedom for many years.

Against that argument there is not much to say, I comfort myself with the thought that it might have had a bad day now but the next days it will be better because of the antibiotics also people hopefully will not chase it now.



I see hardly any cats on the streets; they are only helped on request of Tapa since TAPA uses its limited resources to help dogs, because dogs are the most at risk by those who fear rabies. Anyway many cats are kept indoors by the population that is why you do not see them on the streets.

For this month's clinic, A a third of the costs that Tapa makes is paid by the government and two third are paid by Marina Mobius of VIER PFOTEN DOG CARE (Germany). TAPA operates on donations plus now partial government support in some areas. Today a smiling-dr. Thusira comes to me and says that the partial government support can continue another year. I congratulate him and tell him that I hope that many animals will benefit from this.

Tapa gets a daily visit from a PHI (Public Health Inspector), who checks the progress of the team. The government puts money in it so they want to be informed about it. The man looks satisfied.

I am also invited to see how Tapa gives information. The team around Galle has several places where they build camp, on each location they want to give 4 times a presentation. This time a school class is present. With a slide projector and a bag full of stickers the truck brings us to the school. I meet the head of the school who talks to me and I do not understand one word of it. I smile friendly and shy I say ' yes, yes... what else can you do?'



I am requested to take a seat beside the projector. I do not speak the language but I hear 'Rudy' and ' Hollanda', so I guess I am being introduces to the class as a visitor who comes all the way from the Netherlands

Several projects are being discussed and the class listens concentrated, some teachers also follow with interest. So now and then there is a laugh and the concentration stays focused. I think the presentation was a success by the way the Tapa volunteer makes its story.

Afterwards the PHI has some questions and hands are raised, I understand that he asks who has a pet and if this animal is helped. It gave a laugh when a child did not know if it had a pet!

What I found very positive is that you could see by the pictures that their story was not all about the Tapaproject but also about the love for animals in general. That is the essence of it all.

After three intensive days working with the team I have a good impression of their work. I am very impressed because everyone seems to know what to do, it is good organised and people are treated equally whether you are the doctor or the dogcatcher. They are ready for each other, with respect for each other. I am also impressed by the knowledge and skills of dr. Thusira who made time for me and answered all of my questions, during his so busy schedule. With pain in my heart I had to leave this wonderful team after promising that I would not practice all what I had seen on my own cat.

What can I say about animal love in general in Sri Lanka. I have been to places where there was no animal love present at all. I have seen heavily neglected animals but also well treated animals. But I also saw the last days people who were truly happy that their animal was safely back with them, and those were often poor people. Maybe animals are the lowest priority in the cities.

You could say that poverty is priority and many places below that comes the welfare of the animals. There is so much work to do. With my story I hope that there will be more knowledge and understanding for animal welfare in general.

Ruud Heilhof

