

# The Economic Impact of Stray Cats and Dogs at Tourist Destinations on the Tourism Industry

By Diana Webster

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Cover photo of Luna, found in the streets of a Cancun, Mexico neighborhood, by photographer Tracey Buyce.

## Introduction

Imagine it's a beautiful day on your much-anticipated and well-deserved vacation to that tropical paradise you've been dreaming about. The clear skies and azure waters beckon so you head out for a pleasant walk with your family down the white sandy beach in front of your luxury resort. The kids run in and out of the waves while your spouse picks up seashells. Then out of the palm trees a dog appears, tail wagging. As it gets closer, you see that the dog is obviously a stray and in bad shape, skinny and mangy. Your kids look at you and ask you to help the dog, but you're on vacation in a foreign country so you don't really know what you can do. After giving the dog a drink of water and some leftover snacks from the bottom of your beach bag, you reluctantly leave the dog, and head back to the resort, your spouse and kids in tears and your heart broken, the beautiful day ruined. You ask the resort concierge about the stray and she apologizes but offers no answers. The sight of that starving stray dog haunts the rest of your vacation and even when you get home--the stray dog is forever connected to your family's vacation memories of your luxury resort and tropical destination.

For many tourists, encountering cats or dogs that are obviously strays--starving, sick, or suffering--while on vacation leaves a lasting negative impression. From recent research, we have learned that once tourists have such an experience, many are less likely to return to that destination and will also share the incident with friends, family members, colleagues, and on travel review sites. Some tourists even *refuse* to travel to certain destinations because they don't want to see stray cats and dogs suffering or have heard that the destination country controls stray populations through inhumane and brutal mass killings—a solution that is inefficient, impractical and immoral. These tourists represent a substantial number of socially conscious consumers who may “vote with their wallets” to avoid seeing animals suffer--potentially impacting travel company profits and tourist destination economies in a big way.

This report will present research about how these tourist experiences of seeing stray cats and dogs while on vacation have a definite economic impact on tourism. It will also discuss important reasons why it makes business sense for tourism companies and tourist destination governments to help strays by creating programs that humanely control their populations through the only ethical solution—sterilization. Not only for tourism's bottom line but also because the humane treatment of stray cats and dogs is the right thing to do for the animals, the environment, and the community.

## Compassion is a Key Driver in Tourist Choices

What could stray cats and dogs<sup>1</sup> have to do with influencing the travel decisions of millions of tourists? A lot, it appears from the results of a survey<sup>2</sup> of over 1,200 U.S. and Canadian tourists recently completed by CANDi International<sup>3</sup>, a U.S. and Canadian registered animal welfare nonprofit and the Humane Research Council (HRC)<sup>4</sup>, a U.S. nonprofit research organization. Not only did this survey reveal that stray cats and dogs have a measurable effect on a substantial number of travelers' vacation experiences, but also that these experiences will impact their choices for future travel plans, especially to destinations where strays are as common as piña coladas, lounge chairs, and suntan lotion.

Further, there is support from global research that consumers will put their money where their mouth is: Two thirds (66%) of consumers from twenty-six countries say they prefer to buy products and services from companies that have implemented programs to give back to society.<sup>5</sup> Reducing the suffering of stray cats and dogs at tourist destinations is a way of giving back by improving the health and safety of communities and enhancing the experience of many tourists who reported that seeing animals in distress while traveling leaves bittersweet memories of their vacations.<sup>6</sup>

In essence, with the increasing competition among travel providers for tourist dollars and for many countries that are dependent on tourism as a major component of their gross domestic product (GDP), the humane treatment of stray cats and dogs at tourist destinations should be considered part of the economic equation for the tourism industry. Data from CANDi/HRC's survey provides only a snapshot of tourist opinions but strongly indicates that stray cats and dogs have more of an impact on tourism's bottom line than previously known.

To evaluate the potential impact of stray cats and dogs [exclusively<sup>7</sup>] on travel experiences and future travel purchases, CANDi and HRC conducted a survey of 1,200 U.S. and Canadian tourists. Tourists were asked whether they encountered stray cats and dogs, the effect of the experience(s), and the impact on future travel decisions. The survey also asked open-ended questions regarding tourists' most recent experience with stray cats and dogs while on vacation, what destinations they refused to travel to because of stray cats and dogs, and what actions they would take if they had such an experience.

Not surprisingly, nearly two-thirds of the respondents saw stray cats or dogs on their most recent vacation outside of the U.S. or Canada; specifically, 63% of U.S. travelers and 61% of Canadian travelers. In fact, almost 650 respondents had comments about the stray cats and dogs they saw while on their travels. Though not all comments indicated negative perceptions of the animals, the fact that travelers felt compelled to make a comment at all was an impressive representation that the existence of

these strays registered in their psychological impressions of a travel destination. Examples of comments included:

“There is a huge amount of stray dogs in St. Maarten. Most of them are harmless due to the heat, but it's still scary because you don't know if they are vicious or not.” [Female, age 55-64]

“There were lots of stray animals in Kathmandu, Nepal. Most of them were feral and not domestic and a lot of them had diseases (you can tell by their skin). I was warned not to touch or go near any of them since they were very unclean and probably carrying lots of diseases as well. So it was rather heart-wrenching to see them and that they were only reproducing wildly because none of them were neutered.” [Female, age 20-24]

“There were so many stray dogs at night that you did not dare walk in unpopulated areas.” [Male, age 45-54]

“When we were driving through a very poor part of Mexico, we saw many stray dogs. It really had a negative effect on me. I LOVE animals. To be staying in a beautiful 5 star resort and then travel 30 minutes to see starving dogs was really hard.” [Female, age 18-24]

“Resort where we stayed had a local population of feral cats. The resort had set up a feeding station for them and fed them regularly. Cats were also captured for spaying/neutering and then released. It was a good experience knowing the resort was taking care of these animals.” [Female, age 55-64, Canadian]

“I had taken a trip to the island of Puerto Rico. While traveling through various sites on the island, I saw many stray cats and dogs. They were very disheveled, looking thin and hungry. It was absolutely awful. I felt bad when looking at them and teared up a few times. I saw so many, I wanted to stop the car to help as many as I could. It was a very sad experience.” [Male, age 25-34]

“I saw a lot of stray cats, that seemed to be fairly well cared for.” [Female, age 65 or over]

“Just outside the hotel I was staying, there was a group of stray dogs. Although there were no dogs on the hotel grounds, walking out of the hotel on feet proved to be difficult. The one time I tried to walk out of the hotel to take a walk around the city, I was surrounded by a couple of strays almost instantly. Luckily, the security guards saw what happened and helped me to chase the dogs away.” [Female, age 18-24]

From a review of these comments there emerged two definitive concerns expressed by travelers about encounters with stray cats and dogs while on vacation. First, travelers were worried for their personal safety and thought the strays could be dangerous. However, by far the most-cited concern was the emotional impact of seeing suffering animals while on vacation. In fact, the top response (34%) for survey respondents when asked about their experience when seeing strays was that the experience upset them. These concerns solidly demonstrate that stray cats and dogs at a travel destination can negatively affect a traveler's vacation experience and thus influence future travel spending decisions.

Additionally, the sight of strays would spur a substantial proportion of survey respondents to take further action. About a third said they would report the experience to their hotel or resort (34%) and/or to travel agents or tourism companies (31%). Notably, nearly the same amount of respondents would share their experience on social networking sites (29%) and/or discourage family and friends from visiting the destination (25%). Another 22% would share the experience on TripAdvisor or Virtual Tourist and 17% would share it on another review site. A 2012 compilation of social media and tourism industry statistics reported that 92% of all consumers trust word-of-mouth and recommendations from family and friends above any other forms of advertising, while 70% said online reviews were the second most trusted source of information.<sup>8</sup> This data is extremely relevant to the travel industry [tour operators, airlines, hotels/resorts, and travel destinations], a highly competitive market that depends substantially on word-of-mouth to gain customers and satisfy customers for repeat visits.

## **Putting a Price Tag on Compassion—Implications for Travel Industry Bottom Lines**

Despite the turbulent economic climate of the past few years, it is clear that two markets remain fairly steady if not almost robust in growth—travel/tourism and the pet care industry. Travel--those much-anticipated holidays and vacations--top most of our "bucket lists." Retiring baby boomers and adventurous X, Y, Z generations have made the world a smaller place because of their urge to seek out new experiences and explore. And the travel industry is reaping the fruits of our collective yearning to hit the highways, skyways, and waterways of this glorious planet. In fact, travel and tourism accounted for 9.1% of the world's GDP in 2011, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC).<sup>9</sup> The WTTC also expects long term growth will remain positive even with the current challenges of the global economy.<sup>10</sup>

And we're increasingly becoming a global society of pet lovers. The global pet care market continues to grow despite rollercoaster economic conditions worldwide, with a whopping US\$94 billion price tag in 2012.<sup>11</sup> Analysts predict that sales will continue to grow over the next five years, especially in emerging markets such as India and Brazil, who lead the "pack" as their growing incomes allow owners to afford pets for the first time.<sup>12</sup>

The U.S. and Canada, traditionally pet loving countries, make up the bulk of global pet industry sales, with U.S. sales reaching \$56.7 billion in 2011<sup>13</sup> and Canadian sales hitting a respectable \$3.6 billion in 2010 with an expected market value of \$4.9 billion by 2015.<sup>14</sup> That's a whole lot of catnip, collars, and squeaky toys. Contributing to the growth of the pet care market is what the industry calls "pet humanization." Paula Flores, Head of Global Petcare Research at Euromonitor explains that "[t]he trend, which observes that more pets are being treated as members of the family, has manifested itself in the growth of products such as premium pet food. However, owners are taking the trends to other levels, with products such as dog houses that are miniature versions of owner's houses, and the first television channel for dogs."<sup>15</sup>

These two economic factors and their growth drivers (i.e., increasing desire for travel and pet humanization) indicate tourist buying decisions could be influenced by their love for animals. For example, a substantial proportion of travelers (41%) said they would be less likely to travel to a location with many stray cats and dogs in the future. 41% of 1,000 is 410 travelers who would be less likely to return to a vacation destination because of stray cats and dogs. The possible effect of this percentage on the total group of travelers to Mexico in 2012 would be significant. For the U.S., 10,231,372 visitors traveled to Mexico through June 2012 as reported by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Office of Travel and Tourism Industries.<sup>16</sup> For Canada, over 800,000 Canadian tourists traveled to Mexico from January to April, 2012.<sup>17</sup>

Extrapolating these figures indicates that over 4 million U.S. travelers are *less likely* to travel to Mexico because of concern about stray cats and dogs. Tour operators, airlines, hotels, and local tourism bureaus that focus on generating positive word-of-mouth and maintaining repeat visits<sup>18</sup> by tourists may take a hard look at these projections and evaluate the potential ramifications. For example, many hotels consider repeat guests as "the base of their business," according to Robert Mandelbaum at PKF Hospitality Research.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, many travelers (7%) named destinations where they actually *refused* to travel because of stray cats and dogs. Out of the travelers who indicated they avoided certain vacation spots because they saw homeless animals, Mexico was the most frequently selected country that they would not visit. [See Figure 1.]

**Figure 1**

<b>Mexico</b>	<b>19%</b>
India	16%
Asia or Asian countries (excluding India)	16%
None or “not sure”	9%
Yes (non specific)	5%
“Third world” countries	4%

**Results of survey question “Please specify which destinations you refuse to travel to because of stray dogs and cats.”**

In other words, not just a few but *millions* of travelers will not only consider whether a destination has stray animals before booking their travel, but also *avoid* certain countries if they know a stray animal problem exists. For travel destinations that rely heavily on tourism dollars for their fiscal well-being such as tourist communities in Mexico, the Caribbean, and many European and Asian destinations, these figures could potentially represent the difference in prosperity vs. economic catastrophe in today’s uncertain economic climate.

### **Other Costs for Communities**

Beyond tourism, the costs of stray cats and dogs already have an impact on local tourist destination economies by affecting the environment, destroying and disrupting delicate ecosystems and local agriculture and livestock businesses.

Local tropical tourist destination ecosystems also entice millions of travelers with their exotic flora and fauna, which have been profoundly altered by stray, roaming and feral cats who are opportunistic predators and eat small birds, mammals and lizards.<sup>20</sup> Further, “a pair of cats producing two litters a year can exponentially produce as many as 420,000 over a period of seven years. Feral cats can therefore, by their sheer numbers compete with wildlife for space and for food reserves,” according to Dr. Mark Trotman, Veterinary Services, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development Barbados.

Destruction of biodiversity by stray animals represents a significant cost to local and global communities. The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) states that “[b]iodiversity allows us to live healthy and happy lives. It provides us with an array of foods and materials and it contributes to the economy. Without a diversity of pollinators, plants, and soils, our supermarkets would have a lot less produce.”<sup>21</sup> Key to maintaining any ecosystem is the controlled and humane management of stray cats to prevent the loss of indigenous species that play the role of pollinators.

Amos Bien from the United Nations Environment Programme has researched the economic benefits of protecting biodiversity in “green tourism” efforts and determined

that this area provides the best return on investment of any such initiatives. “Capital expenditure on greening the tourism sector can quickly be offset by the savings in operation costs, which include not only the costs of greening initiatives, but also the socioeconomic effects of lost tourism revenue,” Bien states. In one example, a leading sun and tourist destination in Spain, Bien found that “[s]avings by reducing operation costs from green programmes, compared with the capital expenditure, range from 174 per cent (hotel buildings operation efficiency) to 707 per cent (biodiversity conservation).”<sup>22</sup> This indicates that investing in strategic programs to humanely manage feral cat populations are business initiatives that merit investment.

In his discussion of the impact of stray cats and dogs on communities, Dr. Trotman further points out that stray dogs, often running in packs, harass and kill livestock regularly in Caribbean countries. He states that the damage inflicted on local agriculture businesses is problematic and worthy of being included in the economic impact of animal welfare programs at these locations.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, the World Health Organization (WHO) (1996) estimates that 25,000–27,000 domestic production animals (i.e., “livestock”) contract rabies as a result of exposure to dogs or other rabies vectors. While dogs pose little predation threat to African wildlife, leopards, lions, and hyenas do prey on dogs. Wild carnivore predation on dogs creates the risk of disease transmission for rabies, distemper, and parvovirus.<sup>24</sup>

All of these direct and indirect economic impacts related to stray cats and dogs represent serious considerations for not only local communities being affected, but also the larger community of the tourism industry that generates revenue from the health, safety, and well-being of these destinations.

## **Big Picture Benefits—Building Better Tourist Destination Communities**

The reasons that tourism businesses should care about tourist destination communities might seem obvious, but too often these conspicuous truths get blurred in the pursuit of corporate goals. According to the non-governmental organization (NGO), Pro Poor Tourism, there are four (4) facts that deserve consideration:

1. Tourism, more than most industries, depends on a stable operating environment within a destination.
2. Tourism is particularly vulnerable to local or international instability.
3. Tourism to poor destinations is growing.
4. Market trends reveal growing consumer awareness of socio-economic issues.<sup>25</sup>

In considering the impact of stray cats and dogs on local tourism communities, these factors play an important role in relating the economic benefits of the humane

management of stray animal populations to improving the community, and thus investing in building strong tourist destinations.

For example, a stable environment (in terms of community services such as reliable power, safe water and food, adequate accommodations, access to professional health care, and protection against crime) can be seen as a must-have within a tourist destination's qualifications. Notably, however, it was seen in the survey comments that many tourists have concerns about their personal safety when encountering stray cats and, especially, stray dogs. Yet, it appears that there is a lack of awareness on the part of the tourism industry and local tourist communities about the benefits to humanely managing stray animal populations as an important part of community stability. A properly managed and humane animal welfare program in a tourist destination community not only adds to the desirability of a destination and represents the community as a responsive partner to tourism companies, but also offers the community itself the benefits of improved safety and health. Such a program would further give travelers who care about socio-economic issues and animals an added incentive to visit this destination.

And socially-conscious consumers put their money where their mouth is, according to Nielsen's March 2012 Global Social Responsibility Report.<sup>26</sup> In fact, "two-thirds of (66%) of consumers around the world say they prefer to buy products and services from companies that have implemented programs to give back to society. That preference extends to other matters, too: they prefer to work for these companies (62%), and invest in these companies (59%). A smaller share, but still nearly half (46%) say they are willing to pay extra for products and services from these companies."<sup>27</sup> Not surprisingly, 45% of socially-conscious consumers think that companies should support the cause of animal protection.<sup>28</sup> In North America, animal protection was ranked 5th out of ten causes in importance of social causes that companies should support.<sup>29</sup> These socially-conscious consumers, willing to "vote with their wallets" represent an opportunity for companies to direct their corporate social responsibility efforts toward making real differences for communities by supporting programs for the humane management of stray cats and dogs.

## **Helping Animals Helps People**

Developing countries, often the site of luxury tourist accommodations and attractions, are also home to free-roaming dog populations resulting in animal welfare and public health problems. "Free-roaming dogs face high mortality, malnutrition, starvation, disease, and abuse; account for 99% of cases of rabies transmission worldwide (WHO 2004); and are associated with more than sixty other zoonotic diseases (Beck 2000; Reece 2005). Additional social problems with free-roaming dogs include road accidents, fighting, noise, bitten children, fecal contamination, spread of rubbish, and uncontrolled breeding."<sup>30</sup>

Campaigns such as The World Society for the Protection of Animals' Red Collar Program address the need for rabies vaccinations to protect communities and promote the end of mass killings of dogs as a solution to rabies.<sup>31</sup> All leading global health organizations that are committed to controlling rabies<sup>32</sup> "agree that killing dogs does not control canine rabies and therefore has no impact on reducing the incidence of rabies in humans."<sup>33</sup> "Collars not Cruelty" is the campaign slogan inspired by the efforts of Bali Animal Welfare Association (BAWA ) to end the unnecessary killing of dogs by giving rabies vaccinated stray dogs at this tourist destination red collars to identify them and protect them from being brutally killed to control rabies. This compassionate effort was extremely successful after 210,000 dogs were given rabies vaccinations; there was a 48% decrease in human rabies cases and a 45% decrease in canine rabies reported in the tropical tourist destination of Bali.<sup>34</sup>

Though international health agencies and animal welfare organizations have mainly focused on eradicating the most deadly zoonotic diseases (diseases that can be transmitted from animals to people) such as rabies because of the sad physical conditions that most strays are in, the multitude of other zoonotic diseases associated with strays can affect the health and safety of local community residents and tourists. For example, roundworms, Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain Fever, both transmitted through tick bites, along with other parasitic conditions such as scabies, ringworm, and toxoplasmosis can be transferred from strays to humans.<sup>35</sup> The costs of these health issues on the local population have not been quantified but still represent significant impacts on tourist destination communities.

There is also significant evidence that the inhumane treatment of animals is a leading indicator in violence against other humans. According to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), "[a]cts of animal cruelty are linked to a variety of other crimes, including violence against people, property crimes, and drug or disorderly conduct offenses (Arluke & Luke, 1997)."<sup>36</sup>

Further, the HSUS cites research by the National School Safety Council, the U.S. Department of Education, the American Psychological Association, and the National Crime Prevention Council that animal cruelty is a warning sign for at-risk youth and indicates that children showing this behavior pose a risk to themselves as well as to others. In addition, chronic physical aggression by elementary school boys increases the likelihood they will commit continued physical violence as well as other nonviolent forms of delinquency during adolescence, with animal cruelty being a significant form of physical aggression (Broidy, et al., 2003).<sup>37</sup>

Domestic violence victims also can point to animal abuse as a forerunner to actual physical abuse against family members. Academic scholar Frank Ascione, a professor at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work Institute for Human-Animal

Connection, supports this thesis with numerous studies and research that makes it clear that there are connections between animal abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse.<sup>38</sup>

What does this mean for tourist destinations that struggle with humanely managing their stray cat and dog populations? Education on the humane treatment of animals can make a difference by giving tourist destinations a tool to address hidden sources of potential violence by community members through awareness of the link between these behaviors and crimes against persons, including domestic and child abuse. Awareness leads to positive changes for people and animals.

## **Combining Compassion and Cost Effectiveness for More Attractive Travel Products**

There is a growing awareness of the need for travel companies, tourist destination governments, and NGOs to address the humane management of stray cats and dogs at tourist destinations. Several high profile travel companies have stepped forward to lead initiatives to help communities compassionately care for their strays. For example, Air Transat, a business unit of Transat A.T. Inc., and Canada's leading holiday airline, carrying over three (3) million passengers to nearly sixty (60) of the world's top tourist destinations every year, is a leading contributor to the success of CANDi International's spay/neuter clinics at the resort destination of Cancun, Mexico.<sup>39</sup> Concerned with helping the communities it serves and also aware that stray cats and dogs can affect the holiday experience of their passengers, Air Transat's support has allowed CANDi to spay or neuter well over five thousand cats and dogs since their clinics began in 2008. Air Transat's commitment to customer service further extends to investing in research about the impact of stray cats and dogs on their passengers' vacations by providing funding for the CANDi/HRC survey on which this report is based, in order to gain insight for the company on customer opinions.<sup>40</sup>

CANDi International has also partnered with the Association for Canadian Travel Agents (ACTA) to help spread the word to the association's fourteen thousand (14,000) travel professionals about how tourists can help.<sup>41</sup> ACTA came on board as a direct result of feedback from hundreds of clients. Additionally, CANDi International has also recently begun a partnership with Riu Hotels and Resorts, an international hotel chain with over one hundred (100) properties worldwide. In recognition of their corporate social responsibility at travel destinations where they have properties, Riu Hotels helps with accommodations for volunteer veterinarians and support staff and also maintains stray cat facilities (called Cat Cafés) at several of their properties including one in Playa del Carmen, Mexico. Meanwhile Thomas Cook Group plc, another major international travel provider, includes animal welfare in its sustainability efforts, and has also developed a corporate Animal Welfare Policy and strategy that recognizes the impact that tourism can have on animals.<sup>42</sup> These are powerful examples of how tourism companies are

helping show other businesses how they can incorporate such initiatives within their own framework.

Other international NGOs that are leading the way for animal-friendly vacations include: the Spanish animal welfare organization, The Foundation for the Adoption, Sponsorship and Defence of Animals (FAADA), which offers a Responsible Tourism guide for tourists;<sup>43</sup> the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), offering tourists an online form to report animal cruelty at vacation spots;<sup>44</sup> The Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad (SPANNA), an organization that has published a guide for ethical animal tourism;<sup>45</sup> and Care for the Wild's "Right Tourism" campaign to engage travel companies willing to take a pledge that they care about responsible and animal-friendly tourism.<sup>46</sup> Though the emphasis for these organizations is on raising awareness for all animals impacted by tourism, not just stray cats and dogs, they all persuade tourism companies and local governments to focus on creating travel products and experiences that are animal-friendly for tourists that care, a model that can be extended to the humane care of stray cats and dogs.

## **The Role of Travel Companies to Get Local Government Support for Stray Cats and Dogs**

Whether it is to improve customer vacation experiences or in recognition of their corporate social responsibility, these billion-dollar travel companies and travel associations (such as Air Transat, ACTA, and Riu Hotels) all recognize the importance of the humane treatment of animals at the tourist destinations they serve. Additionally, their support can take it one step further by influencing local governments at these destinations to partner with their efforts in humane population managements programs for stray cats and dogs. All of these organizations have an enormous economic impact on communities by bringing millions of tourist dollars to these destinations, and therefore many travel companies are looked at as key partners that drive local economies.

The political ramifications of this influence in helping promote the humane treatment of animals cannot be understated. Working with local governments, these corporations can create sustainable change for stray cats and dogs and communities by emphasizing how this will attract more visitors and improve civic revenues. Further, based on the tourist preferences presented in the CANDi/HRC survey data, travel companies in fact should acknowledge that it is a business imperative to begin these discussions. If large travel companies express their support for humane solutions with local governments and offer their partnership, communities will be more likely to agree to take action.

Realistically, it is human nature that the desire to do good deeds is always predicated on "what's in it for me." So if travel companies and tourist destinations take heed of the

survey data as a small leak in a large ship that will only lead to a bigger hole to plug, and take immediate action, there could be change on a scale heretofore unknown at tourist destinations. This will bring much-needed help for animals and communities that have little resources of their own to implement humane solutions.

## **The Solution is NOT Mass Killings**

Stray and unwanted cats and dogs cost governments throughout the world billions of dollars each year in lost revenue and funding spent on ineffective population control programs. It is estimated that in the U.S. alone, billions in tax dollars are spent on dog population control every decade, with millions of healthy but homeless dogs euthanized every year.<sup>47</sup> Sadly, communities in developing countries currently try to solve the stray cat and dog problem through many methods which are often inhumane and all of which ultimately do not adequately address the problem. For example, electrocution, drowning, poisoning, hanging, and other unthinkable methods of euthanasia are common in the developing countries where top tourist destinations are located.

Especially heinous are the mass culls or roundups of strays that happen when stray populations get unmanageable or before tourist season and special events. Many of these have been well documented such as the recent spotlight by PETA on the Ukrainian government's plan to cull stray cats and dogs before the Euro 2012 football championship being held in this country.<sup>48</sup> Tourism companies and governments that sponsor and profit from these events need to be proactive and change the way they "do business" so that companies and communities are not economically hurt by the stigma of being known for these cruel mass culls and also to protect the animals from such cruelty.

What most tourists don't know is that mass killings go on in numerous popular tourist destination countries before peak tourism seasons begin. These killings are conducted on a regular basis and often involve cruel strategies to kill as many strays as possible for the least amount of resources. In some areas, bounties are placed on strays with tax incentives or cash payments offered, resulting in not only strays being killed but also family pets who are sacrificed for the reward money.<sup>49</sup>

These solutions are not only inhumane, but they also do not work because they do not address the root of the problem—uncontrolled reproduction of cats and dogs.<sup>50</sup> The International Companion Animal Management Coalition (ICAM), a group made up of top international animal welfare organizations<sup>51</sup> asserts that "[k]illing roaming dogs does not address the source of the animals and so will have to be repeated indefinitely."<sup>52</sup> These mass killings may even contribute to greater population growth because the remaining animals will have access to greater resources and reproduce faster.<sup>53</sup>

Unfortunately, the knee-jerk reaction by tourist destination communities to the tourist survey data presented above—that tourists are less likely to visit a destination where stray cats and dogs were seen while on vacation—could make the mass killings of stray cats and dogs sound like a solution. However, aside from being brutal, inhumane, and apt to attract global negative publicity to the destination, these mass killings are only a quick fix at best as the only long-term solution to managing stray cat and dog populations is sterilization. But many countries with limited resources mistakenly think they do not have the capacity to conduct ongoing sterilization programs in their communities. Conversely, sterilization is not only cost effective but also a permanent solution.

In fact, many NGOs caring for stray cats and dogs at tourist destinations have dramatically reduced the cost of spay or neuter surgeries by effectively using donated resources.<sup>54</sup> Exciting developments in cat and dog oral contraceptives could make costs even lower. 600 Million Stray Dogs Need You, an organization started by PETA co-founder Alex Pacheco, reports that it is currently in clinical trials for its revolutionary new birth control dog food, soon to be followed by a formula for cats.<sup>55</sup> What if a world class tourist destination like Mexico, already considered a leader in the global eradication of rabies, could partner with these NGOs to support sterilization programs and also invest in exciting new technologies such as sterilization dog food? Stray cat and dog populations would disappear over a few years. Such an investment would pay for itself by attracting more tourists and benefiting local communities. Though there are no publically available figures to substantiate the costs of mass kills and inhumane euthanasia, it can be postulated that the operational costs of rounding up millions of cats and dogs on an ongoing basis is more expensive for local communities over time than conducting regular sterilization programs that permanently end the problem of stray cats and dogs and improve the community forever.

## Conclusion

Today, most of us can travel anywhere in the world we want, just by pushing “enter” on a travel provider’s website and packing our suitcases. The choices of where and how to travel have become increasingly abundant. From the CANDi/HRC survey data, however, 41% of us, representing millions of concerned tourists, are less likely to choose travel destinations where we have witnessed the suffering of stray cats and dogs, while 7% will not even consider traveling to these vacation spots *at all*. Additionally, many tourists will seek travel opportunities within their own countries or destinations where they know safety nets exist for these animals. For example, travelers in search of a tropical vacation destination with fewer stray cats and dogs may turn to destinations such as Hawaii where there are programs in place that promote the humane care of any strays.

For travel companies, the implications are clear— helping stray cats and dogs at tourist destinations makes a lot of business sense. Companies can make their customers happy

by including the humane management of stray cats and dogs as a corporate social responsibility and working with travel destinations to implement ongoing cost effective but humane solutions to reduce the stray population and also take care of the cats and dogs already suffering. These solutions have economic impacts far beyond just pleasing tourists; the humane management of stray cat and dog populations improves the environment by conserving biodiversity, safeguards the health and safety of tourists and tourist destination community members, protects agricultural concerns, and supports education and awareness that violence against animals leads to violence against people.

Showing tourists that they care about stray cats and dogs could keep millions of customers from booking with a competing travel company or change the minds of the thousands and thousands of tourists who will opt to visit another tourist destination. But perhaps more importantly, with the help of the tourism industry, the cats and dogs who are suffering in the most beautiful vacation spots in the world will finally get a chance at the lives they deserve.



No longer starving and emaciated, Cancun street dog Luna (shown on the cover of the report) enjoys a happy, new life after her rescue in 2013 by Tracey Buyce and CANDi International.

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## About the Author

Diana Webster is a Los Angeles-based writer, attorney, and business professional with over twenty years of experience in the travel industry. After a life-changing encounter in 2006, with a stray dog while on vacation in Mexico, she began working to find a solution for the problem of strays at tourist destinations. Her website and blog, Humane Advisor, [www.humaneadvisor.com](http://www.humaneadvisor.com), focuses on animal welfare and how tourists can help. For more information, contact her at: [Diana@humaneadvisor.com](mailto:Diana@humaneadvisor.com).

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