

Utopia September 2012- AMRRIC Dog Health Program

Utopia is an area covering about 3500sq kilometres located 300 kilometres North East of Alice Springs in Northern Territory. It primarily has an indigenous population living at 16 outstations spread over the Utopia area. We have been invited into the homelands at the request of the local traditional owners.

”The Canberra Mob” have committed to visiting Utopia twice a year to provide de-sexing clinics, internal and external parasite control and education on animal health and management to the locals.

This trip was funded by Urapunja Health services, by generous donations from the public and businesses such as ADVANCE pet foods and from fundraisers organised by “The Canberra Mob”.

This trip was also made possible by members of “The Canberra Mob” volunteering their valuable time as well as assistance from people at Urapunja Health, The Barkly Shire and AMRRIC.

A team of 5 eager and excited volunteers left from Canberra early on Sunday 23rd of September heading for Alice Springs and then onto Utopia. The team included Michael Archinal- Veterinarian who has visited Utopia several times before, Louise Nicholls- Veterinarian, Naomi Trealor- Veterinary Nurse, Kathryn McKinley- Veterinary Nurse and Bill Taylor- Veterinarian.



We landed in Alice at about 1.00pm and headed straight for the supermarket to stock up with supplies and to meet up with our fellow traveller John Skuja from AMRRIC. On arrival at Utopia we joined up with the rest of our team consisting of- Brian Radovic- Barkly Shire Animal Management and Malcolm MacDonald- Veterinarian from Tennant Creek. John, Brian, Malcolm and Michael had all been to Utopia on previous trips, which is important as their continual presence during visits helps contribute to the consistency and familiarity of faces to the local people.

Before our arrival at Utopia a banner had been put up at the clinic to help spread the word of our upcoming visit. It's an important part of the program for the locals to be aware of our presence and purpose and for them to know we will be visiting to "fix the dogs so there's no more puppies and make them healthy".



On Monday morning we started our week by setting up our clinic in Arlparra at the basketball courts in a brick building. We set up 4 surgery tables with overhead lighting and anaesthetic machines, a pharmacy, recovery area and scrub room- everything we needed for a functional clinic.



Some of our supplies and equipment such as leads, anaesthetic machines, syringes and surgical instruments had been left and stored at Utopia from our previous trip. Other items such as collars, cleaning materials, drugs and consumables were transported to Utopia in our own luggage and as excess luggage.

During our unpacking and setting up everyone dug in and helped each other out, the team worked well together right from the start. There was an air of excitement and a growing anticipation of our week ahead and a strong eagerness to get started. This excitement was slightly dampened when it became evident that all our surgical instruments had gone missing, they were nowhere to be found! This caused a huge challenge as surgical instruments are obviously vital for us to be able to perform surgery. We managed to scrounge a few instruments from the health clinic but not enough for us to have a successful week. As a group it was decided that Malcolm would drive the 900km/8 hour round trip to his clinic in Tennant creek on dirt roads to collect some surgical kits. Naomi went along as company for the long trip. They returned home later that night weary but with extra surgical equipment.

After our initial set up we headed off to some outstations to speak to the locals and collect dogs for de-sexing. We travelled to the outstations in 4 vehicles- The Canberra Mob had hired a car in Alice Springs but no dogs were transported in this vehicle, 3 utilities with cages on the back were supplied by the Barkly Shire and AMRRIC.

At the outstations there were 2-10 houses or humpies at each community with several families living at each house and several dogs belonging to each person. At each house in the communities we spent a lot of time talking to the members of each house about the health and condition of their dogs, how many puppies they had and if they would like their dogs to 'have an operation to have no more puppies'. It took some time for us to communicate our reason for being there and time for the owners of the dogs to allow us to take the dogs away for surgery. Care was always taken to respect their culture and we only took dogs once permission was given by the owner. We were received well at most of the outstations with some people willingly bringing their dogs to us from their houses for us to take for surgery.



Once we had the “OK” to take a certain dog for surgery we caught them, sedated them on sight and put them in the holding cages in the vehicles for transportation back to the clinic. At some outstations the owners of the dogs assisted us by catching and restraining the dogs while we sedated them. We would then get the owners to place the dog in the holding cages or we would wait until the sedation was working and then pick them up and put them in the vehicles once they were sleepy. We found both methods worked well.



Once we had all the dogs they wanted us to do surgery on a few of us returned to the clinic to start surgery with the few instruments we had while others continued on to other outstations to do the same thing. Dogs were identified with paper collars to ensure we knew which dogs came from which outstation.

In the clinic we had 4 surgery tables set up, 2 with anaesthetic machines for doing speys and 2 plain tables for doing castrates with top up intravenous anaesthetic. Most of the time we had 4 surgery tables busy with patients on them either having surgery or surgery preparation occurring. There was an organised order to the process and everyone did their jobs well which kept the flow steady and kept us on our toes. This enabled us to be constantly busy and allowed the vets to continuously be doing surgery.



Patient preparation consisted of anaesthetising, intubation, clipping the surgical site, scrubbing the surgical site with chlorhex scrub x 2 and a final spray with sterilising liquid. Whilst under anaesthetic each patient was given an ear tattoo, an injection of antibiotic and on recovery an injection of pain relief. Most dogs also got an injection of ivermectin to treat internal and external parasites such as intestinal worms and sarcoptes. For every dog we recorded which outstation they came from, approximate age, sex, sarcoptes score, body condition score and if they were pregnant. After the second day the female dogs got a tattoo in both ears in the hope that they would be easier to identify in the future. We decided to do this as we were having trouble seeing some of the tattoos that had been done on previous trips.



On the second day we started with a full complement of surgical instruments allowing us to do multiple surgeries at the same time and enabling us to get more surgeries done each day.

Each morning we all headed out in smaller teams to different outstations to talk to the communities and collect dogs for de-sexing. Once we had collected the dogs we headed back to the clinic to get started on surgery. Often the dogs would be dropped off at the clinic where the vets and nurses would start surgery and the other helpers would head out again to a different outstation to talk to the locals and gather the next group of dogs. Once the dogs had had surgery and recovered they were returned back to their homes. When returning the dogs to the outstations we would place the dogs in the shade under verandas or under trees to continue to rest and recover. On the return trip to the clinic other outstations would be visited to collect dogs or check on the status of dogs that had had surgery the previous day. Whilst at the communities we gave the dogs' Ivermec bread to treat internal and external parasites and checked the general health of the dogs.

During our second day some locals dropped by to see what we were doing and to see if they could help. John showed Sean, Cedric and Martin what we were doing and how to do it. They assisted us for the remainder of the week by restraining dogs, preparing them for surgery- clipping and scrubbing and they also accompanied us to many of the outstations to talk to the locals. Whilst at the clinic several other interested people dropped in for a look throughout the week.



During the week Eileen the AMRRIC education officer brought the Arlparra school students to the clinic for a visit. They had a look around the clinic, saw what we were doing and they got to see dogs with scabies which was special as they had been learning about sarcoptes and looking at them under the microscope in class.

Whilst at the communities we gave the dogs' Ivermec bread to treat internal and external parasites and checked the general health of the dogs.

At some of the outstations such as Rocket Range there was a marked improvement noticed in the health of the dogs and their coat condition (due to sarcoptes). It was noticed that the dogs around Arlparra tended to have higher sarcoptes scores and extra effort was taken to ensure the dogs at Arlparra were given Ivermec. In general the overall health of the dogs in Utopia has improved significantly since AMRRIC began a program in the area. It also seems that the number of puppies in the communities has reduced with some people in the communities saying they had recently got puppies from Tennant Creek.



During our visit we serviced 10 out stations in the Utopia area. We de-sexed 58 females and 48 males, in total 106 dogs were de-sexed over 5 days. Included in this figure were several female dogs that were pregnant, from these dogs there was a total of 50 pups in utero. We gave as many dogs as possible Ivermec treatments either by injection at the clinic or in bread at the out stations. No euthanasia's were performed during our visit.

Sep-12	Arlp arra	Athley	Boundry Bore	Camel Camp	Kurra jong	Rocket Range	Soak age	Soapy Bore	Three Bore	Urapuntja	Total
Females	16	2	4	11	2	0	14	2	6	1	58
Males	19	2	3	6	2	2	5	2	6	1	48
Total	35	4	7	17	4	2	19	4	12	2	106
Age Av	2	3.25	1.3	2.6	2.75	0.3	1.1	1.5	1.87	0.6	1.7
Sarc Av	1.11	0.25	0.3	0.4	1.5	0.5	0.21	1.25	0	0.6	0.6

Total number of dogs: 106
 Total males: 48
 Total females: 58
 Average age: 1.7
 Number of pregnant dogs: 8
 Number of pups in utero: 50
 Average body condition score: 2.9/5
 Average sarcoptes score: 0.6/5



In the future it will need to be considered that some entire dogs remain so as the communities can still have a few puppies and continue to have selected dogs breeding. Also in the future it may become harder to catch dogs as at the moment we are collecting the more approachable dogs and it's the cheeky dogs that are escaping each time and not getting de-sexed.

Overall the trip was enjoyed by everyone who volunteered and helped. This trip would not have been possible if not for the excellent help and support from Mr Brian Radovic and the enthusiastic team of Colin and Linda from Urapuntja Health Services.

