

# Towards Gross Animal Happiness in the Country of Gross National Happiness

In broad daylight and enjoying the warm afternoon sun, I could see the culprits, sleeping, resting in the middle of the streets after another active and loud night.

by SONIA V. JOSSERAND-MERCIER

It was 14 years ago, at the turn of the new millennium when I came for the first time to the barely known, small Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan tucked between China and India, to teach basic computer skills to the youth. The capital city, Thimphu, had the feel of a large amiable village with a population estimated, at that time, at around 45,000 souls. Nobody knew much about this little “Shangrila” and I had no idea of what to expect, what it looked like, felt like. I only had some bribes of eclectic information such as the beauty of its rugged landscapes and ever white soaring peaks, a very humane, compassionate and intelligent King, the friendliness of its people, its colourful and unique national dress, Mahayana Buddhism at the heart of the country and people’s lives, very cold winters and the lack of heating system. Nowhere did I read, and no one had told me, about packing a pair of ear plugs.

I did not sleep much on my first night. The wonderful excitement of the new life I was embarking on was, however, less a reason to keep me awake than the incessant barking and fighting of various dog gangs roaming the otherwise peaceful street my hotel room was overlooking. It took me a while to get used to the local canine night life and to learn how to walk safely back home after nightfall without unintentionally encroach onto a fierce dog’s territory. It took me a little longer to get used to, and sleep, in spite of their barking concerts.

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Dogs in downtown Thimphu





middle of the streets after another active and loud night. I had never seen so many street dogs in my life and, at a closer look, certainly never seen so much animal misery either. Besides the obvious malnutrition most were suffering from, the majority was affected by horrifying skin diseases; others had terrible injuries, or tumours. The car accidents, the night fights for whatever they could find in the garbage, often resulted in terrible and painful injuries that, when infected, could be fatal. The lack of nutritious food, water, medical care, love and attention was taking a toll on many of these street wise and starved animals. I am no veterinarian, and have no medical knowledge but I can give food to starving dogs, like so many Bhutanese people do. I was however feeling very sorry for these suffering dogs and did not know what to do apart for carrying a pack of biscuits in my bag to feed the friendliest ones in my street. Then I met Marianne

Guillet, the “Mother of Dogs”, or *Rochi Ama* in Dzongkha, the local language, an amazing French woman who, since 1997 and with the unrelenting support of her Dutch life partner Hendrik Visser, has actively followed her own compassionate mission to save, and care for, animals in need.

On my first visit to their house at the time, on the hill of Serbithang just outside Thimphu, I was taken aback when I arrived to find myself instantly surrounded by a hundred barking dogs, some happy to see me for some reason, but others obviously eyeing me as an intruder to be intimidated and possibly chased out. Marianne came to my rescue and I was safely taken inside the house, with a barking escort all the way to the main door. The house inside was an Ali Baba’s cave with a myriad beautiful traditional Bhutanese masks, painted furniture and numerous other visual treasures. A dozen cats could be spotted lazing on a shelf, dozing on the sofa, walking about

or appearing silently from nowhere, while as many dogs were lying on old and warm blankets on the floor, some

handicapped, some on drip, others with freshly tended injuries or just out of surgery. This was a house, but this was also a small animal hospital and a real shelter, a safe haven for all those furry creatures that would have no chance of survival on the street.

I enjoyed my first afternoon there with cats sitting on my shoulders, on my lap and sharing the sofa with me and could not help but laugh at a very clever cat who knew how best to steal a piece of cake on the table without anyone being able to react on time. I felt very sad also at seeing all these sick animals and hearing some of their tragic stories, but happy to know they were now in the best place they could have hoped for, to get a second chance for a happier life.

Some unfamiliar sounds were also coming from a far corner of the garden and Marianne explained that they





At "The Barnyard" in Paro



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also had a dozen rescued monkeys in cages outside, among which Pilou, the first monkey Marianne and Hendrik rescued, who gave his name to Marianne's informal homely animal hospital, and later to the Dutch NGO Pilou Animal Rescue and Care. The Pilou NGO was set up to support the local NGO Bhutan Animal Rescue and Care (BARC) centre that is currently located in Yusipang, 12 kms outside Thimphu, Bhutan's capital.

While living and working in Bhutan I got to know Marianne and her work more and used to ask her for advice related to street dogs in my area, or spotted in the street, or even on the Ministry compound where I used to work. I was soon carrying basic medicines and vitamins, a tin of processed cheese, and scraps of good food along with the packs of biscuits.

Marianne rescued and treated numerous street dogs in miserable condition including the ones I had

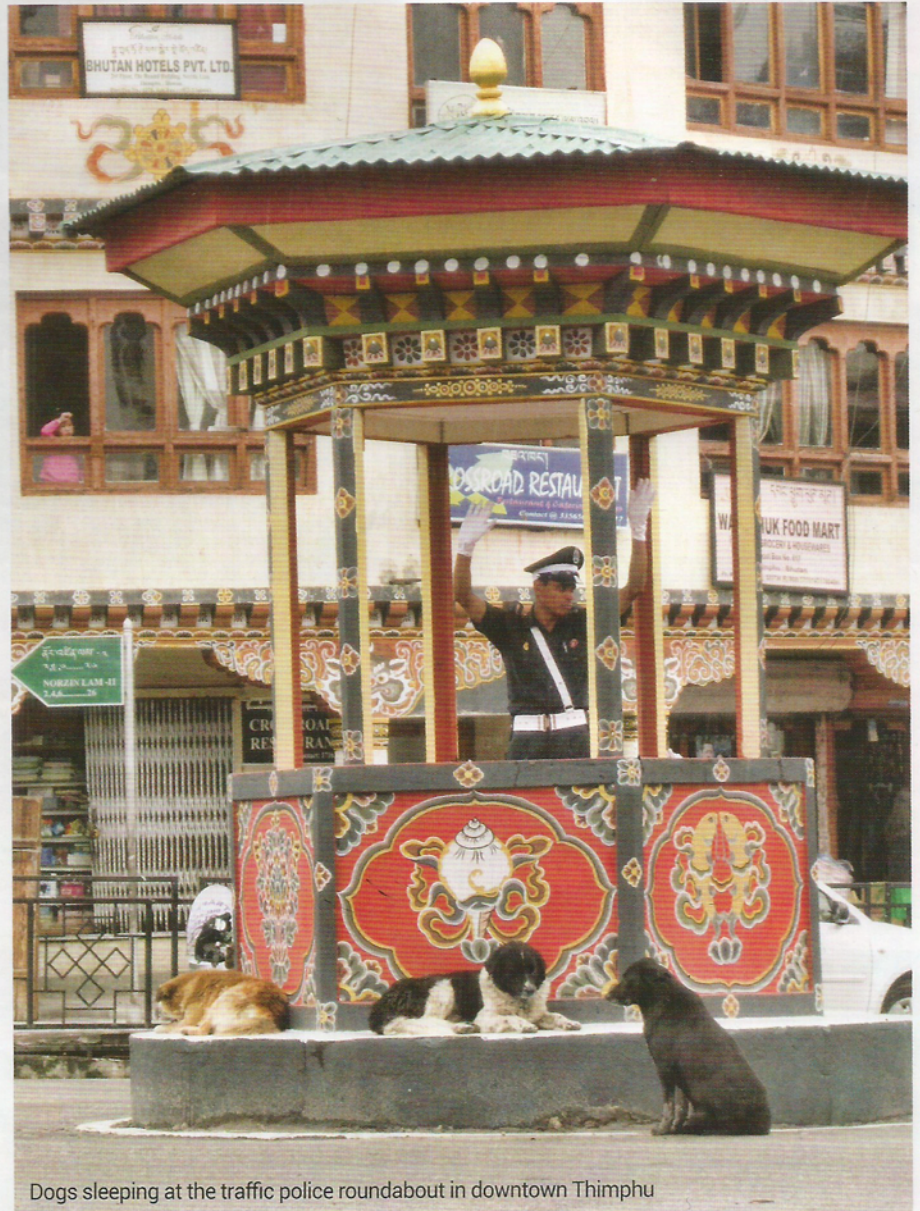


spotted in my neighbourhood or in the streets and alerted her about. I went sometimes with her on these rescue operations, some of them not so easy as dogs can be fearful of humans, others in such obvious pain or terror that they made me want to cry.

At that time mange, in its most advanced stage, was the number one skin disease affecting a large majority of dogs living off the street garbage for survival. These dogs could not be easily treated in the street and had to be caught and transported to Marianne's house, her informal animal hospital until they were free of mange (a 10-week treatment), de-wormed, vaccinated, sterilised, fed and provided with an old wicker basket or cardboard box to sleep in.

While Marianne sterilised the dogs she rescued, she also participated in sterilisation campaigns organised by the Royal Government of Bhutan or the Thimphu City Corporation in an effort to control the stray dog population. She mended and nursed back to health many of these dogs in conditions I would have personally assessed as hopeless cases. Her passionate dedication however, gave her the strength and skills to save many lives and carry on her compassionate mission towards animals in need.

During my last visit to Bhutan this year I noticed a visible improvement in the stray dog population in Thimphu. Marianne's work, along with government initiatives to control the stray dog population and prevent outbreaks of Rabies, have proved the relevance of stray animal welfare in also addressing human health concerns. More recently, a National Dog Population Management and Rabies Control Programme was initiated by the government with the support of the Human Society International and more than 40,000 dogs have been neutered and vaccinated since the programme implementation in 2009. Most of the dogs I saw in the street had a clipped ear as a sign of sterilisation and it is true that I did not see so many street puppies as many years ago. I found they also looked relatively healthy, or at least much healthier than the hundreds of dogs of a decade ago. In spite of these improvements, many



Dogs sleeping at the traffic police roundabout in downtown Thimphu

## The Bhutanese do care about animals but what they need is an easy avenue to get the help needed in time.

animals are still living a life of misery, struggling to survive, or suffering from serious illness or injuries in Bhutan.

This year, I also went to the recently established Bhutan Animal Rescue and Care (BARC) center in Yusipang just outside Thimphu, where Marianne and Hendrik moved along with the numerous animals under their care. Since then new dogs have arrived, and while I was there, two handicapped dogs were brought in by compassionate people, with other arrivals such as a bunch

of puppies suffering from the most severe malnutrition I ever saw. A staff from another local NGO, Jangsa Animal Saving Trust, also brought a couple of dogs that had been caught in snares, one of them a mother still feeding her pup. I have a soft heart but while so much misery was heartbreaking I also felt relieved to know that these latest "patients" were now in skilled and caring hands and had found a safe haven where their chances of survival and a much happier life had increased tenfold.





Marianne and Hendrik have self-financed their compassionate work for animals in need since the early days. They also have now the support of many people in the country who donate old clothes or blankets for the dogs, or provide sometimes financial donations that help towards buying medicine and medical equipment. The vendors at the local vegetable market also donate left over vegetables and fruit that provide extra food for the 24 monkeys at the BARC center and the Thimphu Tashi Taj Hotel also donate their refuse, be it old towels, used soap bars or half eaten sandwiches that are put to good use at the BARC centre.

The BARC centre is now home to around 200 dogs, 15 cats and 24 monkeys, but while I was visiting, a mule was also brought in. We heard

that a tourist had seen the poor animal suffering from severe malnutrition and neglect and felt so appalled by this suffering in the land of happiness that the tourist guide had alerted Marianne. The BARC staff went to pick up the weak and suffering animal while some fodder was collected and the garage was quickly re-organised to provide a safe shelter for the mule. Unfortunately, the mule had already been neglected for too long by its owner that it did not survive more than two days. It was a sad moment as we all knew that, would the mule had been brought to BARC much earlier, it could have recovered and be nursed back to health.

When I left Thimphu for Paro where the airport is located, I decided to stop by another animal shelter Marianne had told me about before getting my flight.

“The Barnyard” as her place is known, is where Jamie Vaughan, an American woman, lives and provides shelter to animals in need. Overwhelmed with the suffering and sad plight of animals in the Paro area where she settled in 2006, Jamie soon started to rescue animals and at first brought them all the way to Marianne’s house in Thimphu for help. Animated by the same passion and compassion for furry friends in need as Marianne and Hendrik, Jamie has, since then, turned her home and property into an animal shelter to give suffering animals the chance of love and life that all sentient beings deserve. “The Barnyard” has quickly evolved into a sanctuary for many kinds of disadvantaged and rescued animals.

I arrived at “The Barnyard” in the middle of an emergency treatment for an injured mule and realised that while dogs are the main suffering species, mostly because of their greater numbers, other species too need care. As Paro is a much smaller urban center than Thimphu and more of an agricultural area, many of the animals Jamie is caring for are large animals brought or referred to her by the local community. When I visited, “The Barnyard” was home to no less than 180 dogs, 11 cats, four cows, one ox, three goats, one donkey, two mules, one pig and even one field mouse.

Similar to Thimphu, dogs are also mostly rescued from the streets, suffer injuries related to vehicle accidents, are plagued with various diseases, or are orphaned puppies left at Jamie’s gate. In Paro, the farming animals such as horses and cows brought to “The Barnyard” usually have severe injuries that require long-term care and special recovery technologies that are not available anywhere else. Years ago she arranged a surgery done in Bhutan by a U.S. equine specialist, one of her mules wears a custom-made orthotic, and another mule whose leg had to be amputated is waiting for a prosthetic leg to arrive.

The large animal injuries are often impossible for their owners to manage because of the time and care required, or often because they do not have the resources required for their treatment and rehabilitation. So Jamie takes care of them, coordinates with the district veterinary hospital, consults





with specialized veterinarians abroad, as well as other local animal welfare NGOs. Jamie also self-finances most of her compassionate activities at “The Barnyard”, and gets support from the local community such as vegetables and fruits from a local vegetable shop or the occasional donations of old rice, biscuits and other food items from animal owners.

Jamie, with the support of friends in her home country, has recently set up The Maya Foundation, a US-based NGO to help further her rescue efforts, and to enable such innovative medical care such as prosthetics for the people in the country. She hopes to be able to bring technologies such as portable x-ray machines and a large animal rescue vehicle to Bhutan that could be available for use throughout the Kingdom.

Over the years, in both Thimphu and Paro, animal welfare has and continues to improve considerably. Many people from students to shop keepers or old villagers now take time to either bring to the BARC centre in Thimphu or “The Barnyard” in Paro injured or sick animals. The Bhutanese do care about

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animals but what they need is an easy avenue to get the help needed in time. Both Marianne and the BARC centre in Thimphu, and Jamie at “The Barnyard” in Paro, fill this gap and provide out of compassion and their unrelenting love for animals, a round-the-clock animal rescue service and long-term care and recovery facility available to all.

I left Bhutan, the land of happiness, with not only memories of a beautiful country and lovely people, but also with a heart touched by the compassionate actions of true animal lovers who have not only dedicated their time, love, efforts and personal resources for animals in need, but who also, through their activities in animal welfare, are

contributing to Bhutan Gross National Happiness by incorporating Gross Animal Happiness.

As all visitors to Bhutan will at some point be in Paro and in Thimphu, I would recommend any animal lover among them to see for themselves what these two amazing women are doing and contact them to visit their respective animal shelter. They, and the numerous animals they share their lives with, will touch your heart and soul.

**Pilou Animal Rescue and Care:**  
<http://www.pilou-animals.org/>

**The Maya Foundation:**  
<http://themayafoundation.org/>