

Beyond the Shoreline: What a Coastal Cat Project Taught Me About Conservation

When people hear the term animal welfare, most immediately think of dogs and cats.

- Rescue.
- Sterilisation.
- Vaccinations.
- Adoption.

As someone who has spent much of my life working around animals and animal welfare organisations, I probably would have answered in much the same way.

What I would not necessarily have thought about is marine conservation.

Yet recently, a project along Thailand's coastline challenged some of my own assumptions about where animal welfare ends and where environmental conservation begins.

Rob's Dogs Foundation recently partnered with the Aerial Recon & Recovery Initiative (ARRI), an organisation focused on understanding and addressing threats to marine ecosystems, including ghost nets, marine debris, biodiversity loss, and the wider pressures facing our oceans.

At first, it may seem like an unusual partnership. One organisation works primarily with dogs and cats. The other focuses on marine environments. On paper, there is very little overlap.

In practice, there is far more than most people realise.

A Bigger Conversation

One of the challenges facing animal welfare globally is that it is often discussed separately from broader environmental issues.

Animal welfare organisations talk about sterilisation. Conservation groups talk about biodiversity. Marine scientists talk about ecosystem health. Public health experts talk about disease prevention. The reality is that all of these issues are connected.

Increasingly, researchers, governments, and NGOs are recognising that the health of people, animals, and ecosystems cannot be separated. This approach, often referred to as One Health, acknowledges that problems rarely exist in isolation, and neither do the solutions.

The more I learned about ARRI's work, the more obvious those connections became.

In fact, one of the things that struck me most during this project was how often we create artificial boundaries between causes. Animal welfare sits in one box. Conservation sits in another. Public health sits somewhere else entirely.

Nature does not recognise those boundaries.

A disease affecting one species can impact another. Pollution entering a waterway can affect an entire ecosystem. The welfare of animals living within a community can influence environmental outcomes far beyond that community itself.

The more we understand those relationships, the more effective our solutions become.

The Link Most People Never Consider

One of the topics discussed during this project was toxoplasmosis, a parasitic disease caused by *Toxoplasma gondii*. Most people have never heard of it. Many animal welfare organisations rarely discuss it. Yet it provides a fascinating example of how interconnected our world really is.

Cats are the primary host of the parasite. Infected cats can shed microscopic oocysts into the environment through their faeces. During rainfall events, those oocysts can enter drainage systems, waterways, and eventually coastal environments.

Once there, they can be consumed by marine species.

Research from around the world has linked toxoplasmosis to illness and mortality in a range of marine wildlife, including sea otters, dolphins, seals, and seabirds.

This does not mean cats are the enemy. Far from it. What it does highlight is that unmanaged animal populations can sometimes create unintended consequences beyond the immediate welfare concerns we typically focus on.

For me, that was one of the most important lessons from this collaboration. Good animal welfare is not simply about helping individual animals. It is also about understanding the wider systems in which those animals live.

Environmental Pressures Are Growing

The timing of this conversation is important.

Across the world, ecosystems are facing increasing pressure from habitat loss, pollution, climate change, biodiversity decline, overfishing, urban expansion, and unsustainable human activity.

Thailand's coastal ecosystems are no exception. Mangrove forests, seagrass beds, coral reefs, and marine wildlife all play a critical role in maintaining ecological balance, supporting local

livelihoods, and protecting coastal communities. Yet many of these environments are under increasing strain.

When ecosystems are already stressed, additional pressures, whether from pollution, disease pathways, invasive species, or habitat disruption, can have disproportionate impacts. This is why conservation today is increasingly focused on prevention rather than simply responding to damage after it occurs.

It is also why animal welfare has an important role to play in broader environmental discussions. Responsible population management, disease prevention, and community education are not only welfare interventions. In many cases, they are also conservation interventions.

I think this is where many of us in the animal welfare sector need to challenge ourselves.

For years, success has often been measured by the number of animals rescued, treated, or rehomed. Those outcomes remain critically important. But if we are serious about creating lasting change, we also need to think about prevention, sustainability, and the broader environments in which animals and people coexist.

Sometimes the greatest impact comes not from the animals we rescue today, but from the suffering we prevent tomorrow.

Why Sterilisation Matters

Much of the public discussion around sterilisation understandably focuses on preventing unwanted litter's and reducing animal suffering. Those remain the primary reasons why organisations like ours invest in sterilisation programmes. Every litter prevented reduces future suffering.

Every cat sterilised is one less animal likely to face disease, injury, abandonment, or a difficult life on the streets.

However, projects like this remind us that there can be wider benefits too. Stable and healthy animal populations are generally better for communities. They are often better for public health. And in some circumstances, they can be better for the environment. Animal welfare and conservation are not competing priorities. In many cases, they are working towards the same outcome through different pathways.

75 Cats and a Shared Purpose

As part of this initiative, 75 stray cats living along Thailand's coastline were sterilised, vaccinated, and health checked. That number matters. Seventy-five animals received care they would otherwise have gone without.

- Future litters were prevented.
- Disease risks were reduced.
- The welfare of those animals was improved.

But what I find most interesting is that the project also opened the door to a wider conversation. A conversation about how conservationists, scientists, and animal welfare organisations can work together more effectively. A conversation about prevention rather than reaction.

And a conversation about recognising that many of today's challenges do not fit neatly into a single category.

Standing on Thailand's coastline during this project, watching community cats move between fishing villages, beaches, and mangrove areas, I was reminded how connected these environments really are.

The cats do not recognise the boundaries we create between animal welfare and conservation. Neither does the environment. Everything exists within the same system, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. That may seem like a simple observation, but I believe it is one of the most important lessons this project offered.

The Future of Animal Welfare

If there is one thing this project reinforced for me, it is that the future of animal welfare cannot be viewed through a narrow lens.

The environmental pressures facing our world are becoming increasingly complex, and the challenges we face are rarely confined to a single species, ecosystem, or sector.

The organisations that will have the greatest impact in the years ahead will be those willing to collaborate across traditional boundaries and recognise the connections between them.

That does not mean every animal welfare organisation needs to become a conservation organisation. Nor does it mean every conservation organisation needs to become an animal welfare charity. What it does mean is recognising that our work often overlaps in ways we may not immediately see.

Looking back, the most important outcome of this project was not the number 75.

It was the reminder that meaningful change often happens when organisations with different expertise discover they are working towards the same goal.

- Healthy animals.
- Healthy ecosystems.
- And ultimately, healthier communities.

Because animal welfare does not stop at the shoreline. And neither should our thinking.

At Rob's Dogs Foundation, we believe lasting solutions come from collaboration, education, and a willingness to look beyond traditional boundaries. Whether we are supporting sterilisation programmes, improving access to veterinary care, or working alongside conservation organisations to address broader environmental challenges, our goal remains the same: creating a better future for animals and the communities they share.

If this conversation resonates with you, we invite you to be part of it.

Supporters, researchers, conservationists, veterinarians, businesses, and community organisations all have a role to play in building sustainable solutions that benefit animals, people, and the environment.

Together, we can move beyond simply responding to problems and begin addressing the causes behind them.

Because protecting animals is not just about compassion. It is also about stewardship, responsibility, and the future we are building together.

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