

John and Gill Dalley moved to Thailand to retire. But when they learned of the illegal dog meat trade, their plans changed.



COURTESY OF JOHN DALLEY

FRIENDS, NOT FOOD: John Dalley (second from r.) relaxes with Soi Dog Foundation staffers and dogs rescued from Thailand's illegal dog meat trade.

By **Tibor Krausz** / Correspondent

YOU HEAR THEM BEFORE YOU SEE them. From inside seven well-equipped enclosures at an animal sanctuary within a remote forest in rural Buriram Province comes a canine cacophony of barks, woofs, and yelps. The spacious runs are home to some 1,500 dogs – young and old; big and small; white, tan, brown, spotted, blotched, dappled, and black. They loll in the shade, bicker over chew toys, or leap about, tails wagging, as visitors approach.

Until recently a terrible fate awaited all these dogs: They were destined for dinner tables. In Thailand's clandestine dog meat trade countless dogs – pets and strays alike – have been seized from streets and outside homes by criminal gangs that cater to vendors and restaurants selling canine meat from Thailand to Vietnam.

John Dalley will have none of that. The retired chemical engineer from Leeds, En-

gland, and his wife, Gill, a former bank employee, set up the Soi Dog Foundation in 2003 on the tropical island of Phuket in southern Thailand, where the couple had just relocated for their retirement.

“We had a dog back home, but I wasn’t

‘I wasn’t ... involved with animal rights. But you see these dogs suffer, and you want to do something to help them.’

– **John Dalley**, who with his wife, Gill, set up the Soi Dog Foundation in Thailand

particularly involved with animal rights,” recalls Mr. Dalley, a lanky, cordial man. “But you see these dogs [in Thailand] suffer, and you want to do something to help them.”

So they do. The animals here owe their lives to the Dalleys. Their charity has built a canine shelter with treatment and adoption areas. It pays for its operating costs through donations from Soi Dog's global network of supporters.

The nonprofit has helped rescue thousands of dogs from being slaughtered. In the northeastern province of Sakon Nakhon, a hot spot for the underground dog meat trade, Soi Dog pays rewards to locals for tips on dog thieves and works with local police in arresting them.

The charity also has its own task force, which has intercepted dozens of trucks with cargoes of stolen dogs bound for Vietnam's booming canine meat markets. The unit has also uncovered illegal butchers, tanneries, and holding centers, shutting them down and freeing scores of dogs.

According to the Thai Veterinary Medical Association, half a million Thai dogs were smuggled to Vietnam and China in 2011. Today the number is no more than

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one-third of that.

“The numbers are down. We’re winning,” Dalley says. “But we have a long way to go yet.” To evade capture, the criminal gangs have changed their tactics. They used to transport dogs on torturous journeys across borders in cramped poultry cages without food or water, or hidden in sacks under their trucks’ false floors. Not anymore.

“With the last two trucks we’ve caught, all the dogs had already been butchered with their meat placed in iceboxes,” laments Varaporn Jittanonta, a nurse who works as Soi Dog’s relief coordinator. She’s standing beside kennels of young rescues earmarked for adoption. Recently, four dogs from Buriram – easygoing Malt, bouncy Midnight, mischievous Sam, and affectionate Paige – were taken for adoption in the United States by the Virginia-based A Forever Home Rescue Foundation.

Yet successes in some areas come with setbacks in others. The drive spearheaded by Soi Dog to curb the cross-border dog meat trade has driven up demand for live dogs in Vietnam where thieves, often armed, scour villages and towns for unguarded pets.

“Dog thieves like to target pets because, unlike strays, they’re friendly and approachable,” Dalley notes. “Pets also command better prices [at meat markets] because they’re healthy and well fed.”

In areas where dog meat is considered a delicacy, such as Thailand’s Sakon Nakhon Province and Hanoi, Vietnam, curbside food stalls sell roasted dogs and entire eateries specialize in dog meat dishes. The animals’ skins often end up being used in leather goods, including golf gloves exported to the West.

“There are a lot of weird beliefs about dog meat,” Dalley observes. “In Vietnam people like to eat it in winter because they consider it a warming dish. In [South] Korea they eat it in summer because they see it as a cooling dish. In Cambodia some men believe they gain virility from eating black dogs.”

In Sakon Nakhon, a kilo (2.2 pounds) of dog meat jerky costs about 300 baht (\$9) – the daily wages of a laborer. “It’s a luxury food,” the Englishman notes.

“I abhor this trade because of the shocking cruelty involved in it,” he says. No effort is made to ensure humane treatment of dogs before slaughter. In fact, the killing methods used can be intentionally brutal – still-conscious animals are often beaten or burned. Some in the trade believe the release of adrenalin in a frightened animal enhances the flavor of dog meat.

Recently, comedian Ricky Gervais, actress Judi Dench, and other British celebrities joined Soi Dog’s petition against Thailand’s “dark secret,” endorsing the animal charity’s campaign in an online viral video. The move helped to put pressure on Thai lawmakers, whom Dalley has long been lobbying for more stringent animal welfare laws – or rather, for any meaningful legislation at all. Until recently, people who abused or maltreated animals faced only a small fine (the equivalent of \$30).

Then last December, after consultation with him and other animal rights advocates, Thailand’s parliament finally passed the country’s first Animal Welfare Bill, which has increased penalties to a maximum of two years in prison and 40,000 baht (around \$1,200) in fines.

Yet for Dalley the new law has been a Pyrrhic victory: Despite his advice, Thai lawmakers failed to ban the slaughter of non-livestock animals for their meat and skin. “The only way to measure a law’s effectiveness is to see how it affects the level of crime it’s meant to stop,” he says diplomatically. “We’ll see.”

But it isn’t just dogs threatened by meat traders that need the Dalleys’ help; many others do, too. Soi Dog provides emergency and veterinary care for abandoned pets and feeds hundreds of strays on the streets and at Buddhist temples.

The Dalleys also run a shelter and adoption center for some 400 dogs on their tourist island. Most arrive malnourished and diseased. Thanks to round-the-clock care from several veterinarians, dozens of other paid staff, and volunteers, hundreds of neglected and discarded dogs have made remarkable recoveries.

The couple also has had to overcome pain and sorrow. In October



How to take action

Universal Giving (www.universalgiving.org) helps people give to and volunteer for top-performing charitable organizations around the world. All the projects are vetted by Universal Giving; 100 percent of each donation goes directly to the listed cause. Below are links to the Soi Dog Foundation and Globe Aware, two organizations that protect animals in Thailand:

■ The mission of the **Soi Dog Foundation** (<http://bit.ly/SoiDog>) is to improve the welfare of dogs and cats in Thailand, resulting in better lives for both the animal and human communities. Take action: Here are three Soi Dog Foundation programs seeking help. Support efforts to rescue dogs from the dog meat trade (<http://bit.ly/StopDogMeat>). Volunteer to help street dogs and cats (<http://bit.ly/VolunteerSoiDog>). Donate \$30 to give a stray animal medical treatment (<http://bit.ly/ThaiDog>).

■ **Globe Aware** (<http://bit.ly/GlobeAware>) promotes sustainability, helping communities prosper without relying on outside aid. Take action: Volunteer to help elephants in Thailand (<http://bit.ly/VolunteerElephants>).

2004, a stray dog, groggy from being tranquilized for a neutering procedure, fled into a boggy water buffalo field. To save him from drowning, Ms. Dalley waded in after him. Within days, however, she developed a serious bacterial infection. Eventually both her legs were amputated below the knee.

Then on Dec. 26 that same year a devastating Indian Ocean tsunami ravaged much of Phuket, claiming the life, among thousands of others, of a close friend of Gill’s who had been helping her save dogs.

“I went into shock for 24 hours,” she recalls. A day later, though, using a wheelchair, she was out and about in the island’s worst-affected area helping counsel relatives of victims and tending to displaced dogs languishing without food and shelter.

She now uses prostheses to get around. “As I was learning to walk again, I thought of the dogs that still needed my help,” Gill says. “Pure joy for me is changing an animal’s life.”

Her husband isn’t slowing down, either. “I was going to spend my retirement in Thailand playing golf and diving,” John says. “Instead, in all my time here I’ve gone diving once and never swung a club. But one thing I want to do before I die is to end the dog meat trade.” ■

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