



HELL

Thousands of traumatised dogs are languishing in shelters across Thailand. **Max Crosbie-Jones** talks to John Dalley of the Soi Dog Foundation about the cross-border trade in dog meat that put them there. Photography by **Nick McGrath**.

ON EARTH

The undercover footage is hard to watch. Using nooses or iron tongs, dogs big and small are wrestled off Thai streets or farms, crammed into rusty metal pens and driven northeast to the Mekong River. After being shipped illegally across the river into Laos, usually at night, they are driven hundreds of miles in blazing heat or driving rain to the slaughterhouses of Vietnam — up to half a million dogs a year according to pessimistic estimates.

"The dog meat trade is inhumanity at its worst," says John Dalley, director of the Soi Dog Foundation, a Phuket-based NGO spearheading the expat-led arm of the ongoing rescue and government-lobbying

efforts. "The lucky ones suffocate to death on the journey, and the unlucky ones survive and are then killed in accordance with local beliefs — beaten or their legs broken, skinned or boiled alive."

Vietnam's taste for dog meat is well documented, part of a cultural tradition stretching back centuries. That some people in Tha Rae, an impoverished district in northeast Thailand with a large Vietnamese immigrant population, also eat it and are involved in dog-smuggling syndicates worth millions of dollars is also old news. It's only recently, after a string of interceptions by the authorities, that the Thai end of the supply chain has made headlines.

Social media-savvy animal welfare groups like Soi Dog have been exposing the trade and trying to shame the authorities into action, as has traditional media. The aforementioned undercover footage, which surfaced recently in a documentary, *Hell on Earth*, that's available to view on YouTube, has also helped. But there's another, more emotive reason the dog meat trade is suddenly very hard to ignore — pets.

Until recently the dogs sent for export were strays that loiter on streets or on the edge of farms and that many Thai officials were secretly happy to see the back of. No longer, explains Dalley.

"As well as the old fashioned method of purchasing unwanted animals in exchange for plastic buckets from poor parts of the country, gangs are now snatching dogs," he says. "We reckon as many as 90 percent are stolen pets. You can tell by their collars and how friendly they are."

CHANNELLING THE OUTRAGE

A broad coalition that includes the Soi Dog Foundation, Animal Activists Alliance, Thai Veterinary Medical Association, politicians and celebrities is pushing for animal cruelty laws to be introduced.

Online petitions with tens of thousands of signatories and Bangkok demonstrations — the last of which in early September drew 1,000 people — are signs there is widespread public support for such a move, although according to Pheu Thai politician Somsak Kiatsuranont, "it could take two or three years" for animal welfare laws to be ratified by Parliament.

For its part, the Soi Dog Foundation is pushing for stronger enforcement of existing laws, with limited success. "Since we started our 'Trade of Shame' campaign a year ago, more arrests of smugglers have been made than in the preceding 15 years, but they're still not being prosecuted," says Dalley.

Even when the Thai police, navy or border patrol units do intercept dogs, the law courts often rule that the traders can have them back. Dalley cites a recent case in which 70 dogs were rescued only for the judge to rule that the Tha Rae-bound smuggler could continue with his cargo if



he paid a 9,000 baht fine. "Fortunately, he didn't have it, so we paid it and in effect became their owners," he says.

Poverty is another reason why the trade thrives. "Many of those out rounding up dogs are poor rice farmers who need an alternative income source during the rainy season," says Dalley. "I've heard that the Thai livestock department may start educating them about different ways to make money."

The underlying reason why this barbaric black-market exists, however, is because demand exists. And that's not likely to change soon. With the opening of the new highway from Laos direct to southern China — another dog meat marketplace — it may even increase in the coming years.

SHOULDERING THE BURDEN

None of this bodes well for Soi Dog's depleted coffers. The organisation, founded in 2003 to look after strays in Phuket, is, to an extent, a victim of its own campaign's success. Now supplying

food, veterinary care, vaccinations and medicine for more than 3,000 dogs at four government-owned livestock shelters (three in the northeast, one in Kanchanaburi) its operating costs are currently running 40 percent higher than normal.

Dalley believes things may soon reach a tipping point. Not just because finances are tight, but also because there's no more shelter space to go round. "If there's another big interception the authorities are going to be stuck for somewhere to house them," he says.

Adoption offers the best possible hope for a better life believes Dalley. "In the past three months about 300 dogs have been adopted by people in Thailand and overseas, but that's still only a small minority," he says.

As for the rest, the sad reality is that, having escaped the dinner table, they are destined to grow old in captivity — that is unless they starve, succumb to disease or, worse still, fall back into the clutches of the dog catchers. ■