

Okinawa, Japan is a beautiful Island located in the East China Sea, about two and a half hours by plane from Tokyo. It is a favorite vacation spot for many Mainlanders, and is home to approximately 30,000 U.S. military personnel and their families, teachers and civilian contractors. To the majority of us, Okinawa is paradise. The culture is intricate and fascinating; the people are friendly and welcoming. However, living on Okinawa can be a tragedy of the heart for animal lovers, and an even bigger tragedy for the animals themselves.

The pet overpopulation problem continues to intensify on Okinawa. Only 10% of the animals that are taken to the Okinawa Prefecture Animal Protection Center (also referred to as 'Ozato') will be adopted or claimed. That means that nearly 12,000 dogs, cats, puppies and kittens were gassed to death in 2004. These statistics are deplorable, especially given the fact that Okinawa is only 65 miles long and 3 to 7 miles wide. For example, the city of Tokyo has ten times more homeless animals than the island of Okinawa, but Okinawan Animal Control euthanizes three times more animals than Tokyo Animal Control each year. In addition to the animals that are taken to Ozato, many others are abandoned by their owners, left to fend for themselves on the Island. These animals often meet a gruesome fate through starvation, disease, and accidents involving cars. The Okinawan-American Animal Rescue Society was established to become a voice for these unfortunate animals.



Holly, pregnant, tied to a tree and left to die at the Onna village site

Since its inception in July 2004, the Okinawan American Animal Rescue Society (OAARS) has proven to be a very effective organization. We believe that, in order to combat the extreme animal crisis on island, a multi-faceted approach is required. Since OAARS was established, we have successfully re-homed approximately 200 dogs and cats through our Foster Care program. We have also helped numerous people move back to the States with their pets by assisting with airline pet reservations, driving animals to the airport quarantine office, helping to fill out required forms, and bringing animals to the vet for health certificates. In addition, many OAARS members volunteer countless hours at the only two local no-kill shelters on island.

One of the shelters on Okinawa, ironically referred to as 'Sweet Home,' relies solely on OAARS to provide care (food, clean-up, vet costs) for its 30 dogs. Due to the previously deplorable conditions at Sweet Home before OAARS arrived, the Health Department had threatened to take all animals to Ozato to be gassed. Fortunately, OAARS stepped in and worked hard to improve the conditions so that the shelter could successfully meet Health Department regulations and expectations. At both shelters, we have constructed dog runs, built fences, poured cement, and the improvements have been tremendous. And perhaps most importantly, we have assisted financially with spay/neuter campaigns. We have raised money through fundraisers, flea markets, bake sales, and other events so that we have been able to provide funding for the spaying and neutering of many of the animals in our care and in the shelters. This is one of our proudest achievements as an organization. OAARS members, along with

the help of the Single Marine Program on island, have also been volunteering our time and effort to Cherubims, the second no-kill shelter on Okinawa, in order to build the island's very first low-cost spay/neuter clinic. This is an incredibly exciting development that we hope will provide an impetus for change in the future.

One of the most dramatic rescue stories happened last year in a small west-coast town called Onna. Two OAARS members happened to be driving north when they took a wrong turn and ended up in the middle of the woods. They suddenly came upon an area in the middle of nowhere, with about forty or more dogs in the most devastating conditions. Most of them were tied to trees without food or water, left to die. Some were old, some were puppies, some were even pregnant. Many were sick and all were starving. OAARS discovered later that this was a favorite 'dumping' spot for local Okinawans that wanted to get rid of their longtime companions. Needless to say, we were appalled, and this horror drove us to immediate action. Within months, we managed to find homes – both foster and permanent – for every single dog that we found. Sadly, two of the dogs passed away before we could get them out; we had reached them too late. But the rest had a happy ending. Some are even in the States now living out their lives in total happiness and peace. It was an amazing and emotional experience that none of us at OAARS will ever forget.

OAARS would like to see a change in the methods used to euthanize the strays. The use of gas is an inhumane, torturous death for these unfortunate animals. We hope the Government of Japan will soon utilize lethal injection to replace gassing. In Okinawa, no animal is allowed to be adopted if over three months old, only in some rare instances will it be considered by the Officials at the Animal Protection Center, this even when the animal is healthy and friendly.

OAARS members are diverse. They include: (1) active duty members from all U.S. military branches; (2) military spouses and other dependents; (3) School teachers and students; and last but certainly not least, (4) Okinawans themselves from every part of the local community. Okinawans and Americans have come together to help rescue these homeless and abandoned animals. We have formed a strong relationship and we believe that, with our eyes set on a common goal, this relationship will only continue to grow and strengthen over time.

Please visit us at www.oaars.com for listings of our adoptable pets, information on volunteering & donating, upcoming events, and contact numbers.



This is Holly after Christine, OAARS' member, rescued her from Onna. "Holly had just given birth the day we made a trip there. That same night, Christine could not sleep thinking about the crows eating the babies, we had been told it had happened before. Christine and a few other got in the car and made the long drive to get Holly and her babies. Christine and her husband, Sea, decided to give Holly the loving home she needed, all her babies were sent to the States to wonderful families."