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Volunteer tourism and dog rehoming: collaborating for interspecies cultures of care

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Abstract

In transnational practices of animal rescue and rehoming, homeless animals are brought to shelters and subsequently made available for rehoming through charities in other countries. This chapter explores experiences of volunteer tourism within transnational dog rescue practices in Romania, Bulgaria and Russia, based on interviews with volunteers from animal rescue charities in Finland. The chapter focuses on how animal rescue work is experienced as tourism by volunteers from Finland collaborating with actors in another country, caring for homeless animals in the host communities. In Finland, the charities involved operate on a voluntary basis, and the volunteers travelling to the host country do not participate in a specific programme. The role of travel combined with the rewarding experiences gained by volunteers assisting with transnational animal rescue, however, place these practices within the realm of volunteer tourism.

Introduction

Since the late 20th century, a form of international volunteer tourism has emerged that contributes to the lives and welfare of homeless non-human animals (hereafter ‘animals’). In transnational practices of animal rescue and rehoming, homeless animals, mostly dogs, are brought to shelters in Southern and Eastern Europe and subsequently made available for rehoming through animal rescue charities in Northern and Western Europe. In Finland, the rehoming of homeless dogs from abroad is organised by charities that almost exclusively operate on a voluntary basis. The volunteers who run the charities regularly travel to the dogs’ countries of origin to support local volunteers, groups, and charity organisations responsible for rescuing the animals and organising their care in the

shelters. They assist in the daily care of the dogs and choose the ones to be rehomed based on the dogs' health and perceived ability to cope with life as a companion animal.

In tourism studies, scant attention has been paid to free-roaming domesticated street animals such as dogs (Blaer, 2022). In this chapter, I explore experiences of volunteer tourism within transnational dog rescue practices in Romania, Bulgaria and Russia, based on interviews with volunteers participating in these practices from animal rescue charities in Finland. I ask, how is animal rescue work experienced as tourism by volunteers from Finland collaborating with actors in other countries, and what is the significance of volunteer tourism for maintaining transnational animal rescue practices. Throughout this research I paid close attention to encounters between the volunteers and the dogs as well as the situated care practices evidenced in dog shelters, where homeless dogs found in the street, local animal advocates, and volunteers from another country meet. In this context I further ask, what kind of meaning volunteers give to interspecies encounters and interactions in these practices.

This chapter builds upon literature concerning volunteer tourism (e.g. Wearing, 2001; Wearing *et al.*, 2017), human–animal relations (e.g. Despret, 2008; McFarland and Hediger, 2009), and interspecies care (e.g. Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012, 2017). In the analysis, the emphasis is on the volunteer's experiences of interspecies care practices within transnational animal rescue and rehoming, in the wider frame of international volunteer tourism and the dynamics of how the experience of volunteering abroad may or may not become a tourist activity. I also pay attention to how the volunteers interpret the dogs' experiences, needs, and agencies situationally and understand them as individuals with their own life history and ways of responding to care and other actors.

Volunteer tourism and animals

Volunteer tourism, sometimes also called voluntourism or alternative tourism, is a phenomenon that brings together leisure travel and voluntary work for the benefit of different social or environmental causes in communities that are most often located in the Global South (Wearing, 2001, 2003; Wearing and McGehee, 2013). According to Wearing (2001), volunteer tourism includes “those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment” (pp. 1). A specific purpose of voluntourism is to provide the tourists “a critical means towards self-actualisation” (Jakubiak and Iordache-Bryant, 2017, p. 213), that is, enlightening experiences that are supposed to

promote their personal growth but also further their career. Smith (2014, p. 31) thus characterises volunteer tourism as “a form of moral consumption” through which

“the ethics of care can and should be extended beyond people we have existing contact or relationships with, such as friends and family members, towards ‘different and distant others’, who we have no personal connection with and who are dispersed in time and space.” (p. 32)

Despite its good intentions, volunteer tourism has been heavily criticised for its inherent consumerism and for being centred on the self-development of the volunteer instead of on the benefit of the host community (e.g. Guttentag, 2009; Sin, 2009; McGehee, 2014). Blaer (2022, p. 3) draws attention to voluntourists’ “egotistic” motivations and the ways in which voluntourism may “reinforce rationalisations of colonialism and poverty in less-developed countries.” Moreover, Wearing *et al.* (2017, p. 512) argue that voluntourism can be “seen to reinforce the dominant paradigms associated with development aid whereby rich Westerners help the poor communities of the majority world”, noting further that some voluntourism operators are primarily focused on generating profits and thus taking advantage of the tourists and the communities who ought to benefit. Some critics suggest that the negative impact of volunteer tourism on the host communities could be overcome by benefits brought by long-term relations of collaboration, including interspecies interaction (e.g. McGehee, 2014; Blaer 2022).

Animals have always played a role in tourism: they have been observed, interacted with, and consumed (Kline, 2018a, 2018b; Winter, 2020). It is no wonder, therefore, that animals have been central in the growing sector of volunteer tourism from the 1990s and, similarly to ecotourism during the 1980s and 1990s, animals have been part of discussions concerning the ethics of volunteer tourism (Taylor *et al.*, 2020; McGehee, 2014). Most of the cases of voluntourism involving animals have focused on wildlife conservation, with large carnivores being especially popular (Lorimer, 2009; see also Rattan *et al.*, 2012). While several studies have explored wildlife in captive settings such as zoos, aquaria and circuses, less attention has been paid to domesticated animals (Winter, 2020). Taylor *et al.* (2020), however, suggest that volunteer tourism may have potential to challenge the objectification of animals and, in so doing, enhance animal welfare.

To describe practices that focus on rescuing animals and improving their welfare, for example including visitors helping with the rescue of injured and ill street animals needing medical care, Blaer (2022, p. 7) proposes the term “animal rescue tourism”. What sets animal rescue tourism apart from other animal-related tourism, Blaer argues, is the hands-on experience of interacting with and

caring for animals, sought after by many tourists who look for opportunities to help animals abroad. In programmes that focus on wild animals this is not always possible because of the harmful effects of touching the animals (see also van Tonder *et al.*, 2017). Such practices have the possibility to place “animals’ sentience and interests above those of the visitor” (Blaer, 2022, p. 12), even though the volunteers may have other, more egotistic, motivations. In any case, for the volunteers these interactions with individual animals provide another, situated dimension of voluntourist experience, becoming an essential part of the relational moral engagement of volunteer tourism (Bertella, 2014; Taylor *et al.*, 2020).

Interspecies relations and care

Encounters and relations between humans and individual animals, such as those in animal-related tourism, are affected by the spaces in which they are produced and experienced (Philo and Wilbert, 2000). For companion animals, the primary space they share with humans is usually the home but, for homeless animals rescued from the street (and later rehomed as companion animals), animal shelters are transient spaces of dog-human interactions that are usually experienced at some point during their lifetime. The ways in which these spaces are experienced by humans and animals are intertwined and, therefore, it can be argued that the spaces are co-produced by both through their mutually affecting agencies (Schuurman and Syrjämaa, 2021).

By the agency of animals I refer to the ways in which animals act, respond to the actions of others (humans and animals), convey to others their subjective experiences including feelings, emotions, and perceptions, and shape the actions of others (McFarland and Hediger, 2009). With their actions and communication with humans, animals thus contribute to their relationships with humans and other animals (Schuurman, 2021b). Whether and how the agency of an animal is acknowledged and appreciated is defined situationally, in relation to prevailing norms, discourses, and practices. Dogs that live on the street, separate from but in close proximity to humans, cannot be understood as purely wild or domestic but occupy a liminal position between the two categories (Srinivasan, 2019). For homeless animals, therefore, their agencies have been situationally shaped by their past interactions with other dogs and humans and this affects any understanding of their individual experiences and needs (Schuurman, 2021b, 2022).

To a large extent, interaction between humans and animals consists of care, the core of their mutual relationships. A major part of interspecies care relies on embodied interaction including, for example, touching, feeding, and caressing as well as providing housing and company. As such, care

is always relational and situational (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012), and it is practised in specific spaces with their own responsibilities, norms and values, ethics and morals, as well as social, emotional, physical, and material aspects of caring (Milligan and Wiles, 2010). In these spaces, the social, political, and cultural dimensions inherent in care relationships and practices (Tronto, 1993) can further be understood as distinct “cultures of care”, a novel concept coined by Greenhough *et al.* (2022, p. 2) and defined as the:

“norms of caring behaviour, practices of care and modes of relating which promote and enable effective care and implicate the display and exchange of what are seen as ‘appropriate’ affect and emotional responses for a particular institution or social group.”

The niches of interspecies care that can be found in volunteer tourism can be considered specific cultures of care, illustrating also how care is not restricted to local communities or proximity between the carer and the cared for but can reach over long distances (Milligan and Wiles, 2010). One example of this is the practice of volunteering for transnational dog rescue.

Transnational dog rescue and rehoming

In Finland, there are currently 21 charities rehoming homeless animals from abroad, in collaboration with local actors in the animals’ countries of origin: animal advocates, volunteers, shelter workers, non-governmental organisations, and veterinarians. According to the interviewees in this study, the Finnish charities almost completely operate on a voluntary basis, most of them under the umbrella organisation Responsible Rescue (RR), with standard practices regarding animal welfare, ethical guidelines, and biosecurity. The members of RR have been operating for years, even decades, but there are also smaller, more recently established charities that operate independently. The charities in Finland follow an international trend, but what is special to the Finnish context is that, for as yet unknown reasons, there are no free-roaming dogs in the country itself. Thus, the term “rescue dog” solely refers to homeless dogs imported transnationally. For cats, the situation is different: there are large free-roaming cat populations, and animal welfare organisations have declared a cat crisis in Finland (Animal Welfare Finland, 2022). Therefore, the scale of importing homeless cats from abroad is minimal compared to dogs. The charities importing rescue dogs do not have shelters of their own and, after arriving in Finland, the dogs either go directly to their new home or to a temporary foster home. It is notable that not all dogs end up in

shelters in the host communities, and of those that do, many cannot be rehomed because of poor health, old age, or difficulties in interacting with humans.

Against this larger background, the attraction of volunteering for transnational dog rescue, with the travelling involved, becomes understandable as an opportunity to do good deeds for animals in a foreign cultural environment. However, this travelling for voluntary work differs from what is usually understood as volunteer tourism (see Wearing *et al.*, 2017). The volunteers in transnational dog rescue practices do not participate in a specific programme nor do the charities advertise for any. Instead, the practice of rehoming homeless dogs to Finland as a whole is run by the volunteers, and the people who volunteer transnationally are those who run the charity in Finland – as volunteers. Moreover, most of the host countries are located in Europe instead of the Global South. Yet, the activities the volunteers participate in are part of their leisure and involve travelling internationally for the sake of supporting a cause and, at the same time, creating relationships between actors in the destination communities. Thus, transnational dog rescue can create a sense of contributing to social change but, as the volunteers organise their activities collaboratively with the host communities, they also become aware of the challenges involved.

Methods

This chapter is part of a larger study of transnational rehoming practices of homeless animals in Finland (see also Schuurman, 2022). The materials analysed here include eight interviews with volunteers from Finnish animal rescue charities visiting Romania, Bulgaria, and the Vyborg region in Russia, close to the Finnish border. In these countries, the numbers of free-roaming dogs are high; PETA (2018) estimates there are over 600 000 homeless dogs in Romania alone, with several charities involved in rescuing and rehoming dogs to other countries. It is difficult to obtain figures for the other two countries, but in the Bulgarian capital Sofia, with approximately 2 million human inhabitants, there have been estimated to be around 10 000 free-roaming dogs (The Youth, 2021).

Respondents for the interviews were chosen from the webpages of dog rescue charities in Finland (where the volunteer staff are publicly listed), with the aim of including different charities in terms of size, history, location in Finland, and country where dogs were rehomed from. The interview questions focused on the practices of rehoming dogs transnationally: what happens before rehoming, what is the rehoming process like, and what happens afterwards. There were also questions about the personal experiences of the interviewee, and the answers to these questions form the basis for this chapter.

The interviews were conducted in Finland in March 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, and thus reflect pre-pandemic practices. All charities have continued their visits to the host countries within the limits set by the Covid restrictions and, in the case of Russia, the war. Due to the restrictions, however, a second phase of the project focusing on the views of the local actors was cancelled and therefore remains to be conducted. The interviewees were all women, reflecting the gender demographics observed in the charities, and their ages varied from late twenties to late forties. All had more than one year's experience of volunteering in transnational dog rescue, with more than one visit to the host country; the most experienced interviewees had participated close to ten years, with dozens of visits. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised.

The interviews were then analysed thematically, with a contextualist focus on revealing how people make meaning of their experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For the purposes of this chapter, I coded the whole material according to themes related to experiences of volunteering in the host country, transnational collaboration, human–animal encounters, understanding animal agency, and interspecies care. After re-checking these themes throughout the whole material, I created a dataset for this chapter, including eight of the nine interviews conducted, as one interviewee did not travel. In the analysis, the dogs' actions and interactions with the volunteers are interpreted according to the volunteers' understandings of these actions as part of the dogs' agencies and subjective experiences (Schuurman, 2021a).

In the following sections, I present the results of the analysis, focusing on the following three themes: being a voluntourist in transnational dog rescue, experiences of encounters with dogs at shelters abroad, and collaboration between volunteer tourists and the host community.

Becoming a volunteer in transnational dog rescue

The shelter is a space with a distinctly temporary character. The international volunteers as well as most of the dogs are not supposed to stay there for long, which affects and shapes their mutual encounters and sets them apart from many other human–dog encounters. In this section I focus on the backgrounds of the volunteers I interviewed and their activities at the shelters they supported. For many volunteers, their personal involvement with dog rescue often starts with rehoming a homeless dog themselves, into their own home. For others, the inspiration for volunteering may come from seeing free-roaming dogs or visiting shelters while travelling abroad:

“I travelled in Thailand and there I saw that the dog problem was really drastic, it opened my eyes really a lot to how big these problems truly are in the world. After that, in Finland, I started following all information on rescue charities about how I could do something about the situation and ended up volunteering for [the charity].”

(Int7 / Romania)

Transnational dog rescue is thus closely tied to touristic experiences, and many of those involved in volunteering are already motivated to travel to contribute to the cause of homeless animals. Many of the volunteers are also equipped with previous experience of acting in other cultural environments and interacting with animals, skills that are necessary for creating contacts with local grass-root animal advocacy groups and caring for animals in a foreign country. Establishing collaboration with these groups is possible after familiarising oneself with dog shelters and their specific rescue operations and cultures of care (Greenhough *et al.*, 2022), as explained by one volunteer:

“The networks started emerging through these first two animal advocates. We got to know more Romanian animal advocates and supporters and vets [...] We explored carefully, as we didn’t know people. For example, we tried out the rehoming scheme with two dogs, how it worked, and then we tried with five dogs, and then we tried with ten dogs, and if it worked we went on and expanded, and if it didn’t we stopped.”

(Int6 / Romania)

The Finnish volunteers typically commit themselves to dog rescue for several years, visiting the shelters on a regular basis, learning about the practices, and participating in caring for the dogs. Some charities organise regular visits to the shelters for their own regular volunteers:

“I’ve visited the shelters ever since I started, about twice a year. I got to like it when we do advocate trips there from [the charity] every couple of months and, as I’ve had fairly flexible schedules as I work part-time and still study, it’s been fairly easy for me to go and visit.” (Int7 / Romania)

The role of travelling is a central part of volunteering for dog rescue practices in Finland, but it appears in the interviews that visiting dog shelters is not primarily experienced as a tourist activity. The charities support the shelters long-term and, during the visits on-site, the focus is on the dogs and their care, based on the needs expressed by the shelter staff. This can be demanding for someone not used to street dogs. The volunteers need good skills and experience of interacting with dogs that may not have any background in communicating with humans. One of the interviewees clarifies why visiting the shelters is not possible for everyone:

“We don’t recommend that anyone goes there on their own, you should always come with us. We have people who come there and then just cry in a corner somewhere. We don’t actually want such people there. You have to be able to cope with the dogs. There are 250 dogs there. [...] You mustn’t be afraid of them. Almost all the dogs there are ok. Then there are those dogs that you just don’t go to. It’s for that reason too that you can’t go wandering there on your own, because it’s not nice at all to get bitten.” (Int2 / Russia)

The example illustrates how the dogs at the shelter set limits for interspecies interaction and, in consequence, the possibility that their care could be framed from a purely human perspective, as a touristic experience. For the volunteers, this suggests an unstable dynamic of transnational dog rescue as tourism and, therefore, limits to understanding the space of a dog shelter as a touristic space (see MacCannell 1973).

At the shelters, the Finnish volunteers take part in everyday care practices such as cleaning pens, feeding and worming dogs as well as clipping their nails: “we clip nails, one after another, dozens of dogs per visit” (Int3 / Russia). With donations received by the charity, the volunteers pay bills and purchase materials for the shelter – dog feed, towels and sheets for bedding, and equipment such as nail clippers and brushes. One of the tasks is to take dogs to the clinic. The volunteers also spend time with the dogs, something that the local shelter staff often do not have time for, taking dogs for walks and getting them used to being with humans: “we always try to take as many dogs as possible on walks on leash, just for the sake of the dogs themselves and that they get used to walking on leash, if they’ve been taken to the shelter as puppies” (Int5 / Russia). The visits are usually short, lasting only days, or in the case of Russia, day trips are made on a more frequent basis. Some volunteers, however, establish relationships with local actors and spend longer periods in the country, as in this example from Bulgaria:

“As a family, we have usually spent a week there in May. The shelter people, they have the shelter at their farm. The family are friends with us [...] Mostly the day is spent at the shelter. If you get to eat out twice during the week that’s fine. But we make use of the time we’re in the country. I think it’s important that the shelter people have a breather, at least that one week. So they can maybe relax a bit when there’s someone else there doing something.” (Int8 / Bulgaria)

Bringing the whole family is not common practice in volunteer tourism which is dominated by adults seeking, for instance, experiences that would be valuable in the job market (Germann Molz,

2017). The example above, however, highlights the possibility of sporadic visits to develop into long term collaboration, including personal friendships based on shared values, something that can have real potential for contributing to the cause in the host community. It is, therefore, interesting how the interviewee distances herself from more conventional touristic experiences such as “eating out” by emphasising the support her family gives to the locals by participating in the work at the shelter.

Meeting the dogs

The homeless dogs that the volunteers meet at the shelters have usually arrived there after being found in the streets, woods, or abandoned buildings. Some of them have been born in the street and lived there all their lives; they can therefore be understood as feral – not completely wild but not tame either (Schuurman, 2022). Others have lived with humans as companion animals, although not necessarily in a similar way to most companion animals in the West but often residing in an outbuilding, a doghouse, or a backyard. These dogs have nonetheless had an owner once and have later been abandoned for a variety of reasons. One of the most common is the abundance of puppies – in many areas dogs are allowed to move around freely and neutering is often not possible because of the cost involved (see Brown, 2018). The situation is well known by the local actors, as explained by a volunteer: “[shelter workers] regularly go to the countryside to feed dogs, and they know these typical places, old factory yards, where dogs are taken. They are by the motorway and people abandon dogs there” (Int4 / Romania). In addition, dogs are sometimes brought to shelters directly; this may typically be a litter of puppies:

“In Romania there are millions of homeless dogs and, of course, there are so-called feral dogs among them who have been homeless for many generations and who were born without human contact. [...] But the dogs in the shelters we collaborate with, most of them are previously owned dogs or their close descendants and these are abandoned dogs, they are dogs that were left on streets and roadsides, or dogs that were born there.” (Int5 / Russia)

The dog’s background plays a central part in whether they will be rescued and brought to the shelter or left to live in the street. Crucially, this depends on what is known about the dog: dogs get priority if they will likely not survive in the street, that is, old and sick dogs, puppies, and recently abandoned dogs. Those that were born in the street are left alone if they are seemingly able to take care of themselves and find something to eat. These dogs have often had no human contact during

their lifetime and the shelter environment would probably be difficult for them to cope with. As the dogs living in the street are known to the local actors, it is easy for them to identify newcomers and those that cannot fend for themselves: “The [local] shelter manager knows every single street dog” (Int7 / Bulgaria).

The abandoned dogs entering the scene remain outsiders and subsequently become a target for rescue operations. Those that are rescued end up at the shelters, where the volunteers observe the dogs and try to make contact with them. The purpose is to find out how the dog is coping but also whether they might be suitable for rehoming in Finland. At the time of their arrival at the shelter, the dogs are typically fearful, but they are expected to settle with time. While interacting with them the volunteers try to read the dogs’ actions and expressions and thus seek to understand how they feel and whether they are afraid of or interested in humans. Experiences of successful interaction with the dogs can be very rewarding for the volunteers:

“When I arrive, they’re all in a big pen at the centre. When I last came, a shelter worker had left all the doors open and they were in the street, in front [of the shelter]. When they saw me the whole group followed me to the pen in the middle. I thought that was pretty great.” (Int2 / Russia)

For homeless dogs, the change from street life to a life in a home with a human or multispecies family requires considerable potential for adaptation (Schuurman, 2022). Not all dogs with a background in the street can be rehomed, and those that are considered more vulnerable will stay at the shelter permanently. For the volunteers, one of the aims of encountering dogs and observing them at the shelter is to find out what kind of individual care the dogs need and whether they can be rehomed:

“I visit the pens, check which ones let me touch them [...] When you sit for a while they calm down and then you see how the dog [behaves], what their energy levels are and so on. When you go there, same as when you go into a cage, they might just jump and bounce for a while and want your attention.” (Int1 / Bulgaria)

By interpreting the dogs’ feelings, emotions, experiences, and individual needs in their mutual interaction within the care practices, the volunteers and dogs co-produce the culture of care at the shelter (Greenhough *et al.*, 2022). This is illustrated in the following example about a volunteer encountering two young dogs. As soon as the dogs have the courage to approach her the volunteer makes contact with them and, eventually, takes them out for walks:

“There were these two brothers. As soon as I went to the shelter [...] I went to them right away and they were kind of shy and terribly kind but they circled me and didn’t dare come over. Next time, they came and took treats from my hand, and the third time they let me scratch them. And then they were transferred to a smaller pen [...] by the outer edge of the shelter so they could be taken for walks. We took them out every single time and I spent a lot of time with them.” (Int2 / Russia)

Managing space is an integral part of the care practices that the volunteers participate in at the shelter. To avoid conflicts between the dogs in the pens, intra-species interaction is controlled by choosing the right pen for each dog as well as the correct size and social composition of the group within it. For this purpose, the dogs have to be observed so that any challenges to their wellbeing can be noticed and understood. As one volunteer explains, “the ones at the shelter that are in really bad shape, many of them gain weight and get better. But there are those that end up being bullied by other dogs; they have a worse time of it” (Int2 / Russia). By tinkering with the care practices, that is, adjusting them to changing situations (Mol *et al.*, 2010), the volunteers come to know the dogs as individuals with their own needs and ways of responding to care, spaces, and other actors. For those dogs with a possible future as a companion animal, the shelter serves as a transitory liminal space, but for others, it becomes a permanent home. The volunteers frequenting the shelter know these dogs: “There are old dogs that have been at the shelter many, many years, they live there freely and will always be there” (Int1 / Bulgaria).

Collaborations and hierarchies

The support that the Finnish charities provide the local actors is diverse, ranging from fundraising and rehoming dogs in Finland to voluntary work at the shelters and campaigning for the neutering of homeless dogs in the host countries. There are also special projects including, for example, building new shelters for local actors. The volunteers see the locals as dependent on this support, but in caring for the dogs, the volunteers themselves rely completely on the expertise, experience, and contacts of the local actors who are familiar with the situation in the area, manage the shelters, and do most of the rescuing work. There are also practical challenges that arise from the logistics of operating in two countries:

“Usually they’ve been contacted about a homeless dog with puppies somewhere , [they’ve been asked] if they can help out. They then take up the issue with their own volunteers. They catch the dogs and try to get them to a foster home somewhere [...]

But we are here [in Finland] and there's also the language barrier. We ask a lot but, of course, we don't know much about their origins, we're not there to see them caught. Pretty soon we're there at the shelter, though, we see that this is a new dog, ask where it's come from and maybe get a few photos of where they've been." (Int3 / Russia)

One of the challenges is to find the actors to collaborate with. Reliable contacts are valued highly, as one interviewee explained: "I am really grateful that I've found them because they're just the kind of local actors who report the shelters that abuse animals [...] The local actors do lots, lots, lots of work on these issues" (Int8 / Bulgaria). Despite mutual trust and interdependency, however, the relationship between the local actors and the Finnish volunteers is not equal. The homeless dogs are in one country and the foreigners from another have taken the role of helpers, donating money, time, and other resources for promoting their welfare. Although the host countries are situated in Europe, the resemblance to development aid and neo-colonialism is clearly visible. For example, the situation is rarely compared to the volunteers' home country – only one respondent makes the connection between free-roaming dogs in the host country to feral cats in Finland.

As a consequence, in mutual collaboration the line between control and care may be thin. In the interviews, abandoning animals is sometimes seen as a problem rooted in local culture, something that cannot be erased. A few of the interviewees talk about the negligence of animal welfare in the host country: "Myself, I've also found a few dozen little puppies in the street there and seen that they are probably offspring of dogs that are owned by somebody" (Int1 / Bulgaria). The volunteers try to assess the situation from the viewpoint of the free-roaming dogs, based on what is known about them in each context. Returning to the notion of street dogs as transgressing the boundaries between wild and domestic (Srinivasan, 2019), it can be asked if removing free-roaming dogs from the streets completely is a viable motivation for voluntourism in transnational dog rescue and rehoming. Ultimately, it is a question of whether the dogs are seen as a "natural" population of a species living alongside humans – to be left alone – or if they are defined by their shared background and present dependency on humans, an argument in favour of active care and control.

Some answers can be found in what the interviews tell about the street as a place for the dogs to live. Because of their varied backgrounds, the dogs have different potential for survival – they are not a homogenous population, nor are all free-roaming dog populations the same. Apart from their inherent dynamics, the populations are shaped by their shared history and present relations with humans. Each population has developed differently; street dogs in one place are different from street dogs in another in terms of, for example, how and where puppies are born, how they are

treated by humans, and whether the population is managed by humans by removing or rescuing dogs. There are mutual agencies, boundaries, and power hierarchies to be taken into account, on multiple levels and between different categories – within humans, within dogs, as well as between humans and dogs (Despret, 2008). As canine and human lives are intertwined in such situationally complex ways, it is doubtful whether leaving the dogs alone in any given context would represent ethical care. Following Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p. 6): “the ‘ethics’ in an ethics of care cannot be about a realm of normative moral obligations but rather about thick, impure, involvement in a world where the question of how to care needs to be posed.”

For the volunteers, the ways in which they understand the situation and possible future of homeless dogs in the host countries contributes to their own motivation for participating in the rescue work. These vary between saving individual animals to give them a better life and helping the situation of homeless dogs in the country as a whole. The volunteers emphasise that although they see the rehoming of a rescue dog as an ethical way to acquire a canine companion, for the dog populations it will not change much:

“For the individual dogs it’s crucial, it changes their lives, but the rehoming practices don’t solve anything. Neutering is everything. Especially in the countryside, people are being made aware, so that there wouldn’t be unwanted puppies born if they were neutered.” (Int4 / Romania)

For many volunteers, their motivation ultimately comes from the tangible results of the care practices, where the survival and welfare of homeless dogs result from the collaboration between the host communities and the international volunteers: “you don’t just make believe that you’re changing the world, but you can really, visibly, do it. To me that’s really rewarding” (Int8 / Romania). Despite all the differences in their organisation, therefore, here is an argument for placing transnational animal rescue practices within the realm of volunteer tourism.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have analysed the case of volunteering for transnational dog rescue, centred on the care of homeless animals, as a possible form of international volunteer tourism. To conclude, there are some points to make concerning the components of voluntourism within these practices.

The volunteers in transnational dog rescue do not necessarily see themselves as tourists, as the volunteering they do includes independent decision-making in collaboration with the actors in the

host community. There is also no clear difference between the volunteering they do in Finland and in the host country. The biggest difference concerns their interaction with the animals in the shelters, which is different from managing the rehoming in Finland. At the shelters, interaction with the dogs may sometimes be demanding and requires experience but, at the same time, it can be very rewarding when communication is successful and the dogs contribute to their own care and, further, to the wider cultures of care in transnational animal rescue (Greenhough *et al.*, 2022). These practices thus epitomise how connections between animal welfare and volunteer tourism can emerge through experiences that are able to evoke empathy, compassion, and feeling (Taylor *et al.*, 2020).

Wearing *et al.* (2017, p. 518) suggest “a future for volunteer tourism as a partnership between volunteers and destination communities which seeks to provide opportunities for rich intercultural exchanges and intercultural understanding.” The type of voluntourism studied in this chapter may already be part of that future. Despite the hierarchies between volunteers and the local actors they collaborate with in the rescuing of homeless dogs, there are aspects that contribute to such intercultural benefits. The volunteers typically dedicate themselves for the care of the dogs for several years, learning to know local actors personally, creating friendships and a feeling of responsibility. As a consequence, they gain experience and understanding about the local situation that enable them to collaborate with the local groups in a productive way. As such, transnational animal rescue and rehoming practices provide an alternative to mainstream voluntourism.

This study widens the understanding of volunteer tourism in the 21st century by providing an example on the different ways in which volunteering and tourism can intertwine in order to contribute to a cause that is not in the radar of established programmes. The tourism involved in transnational animal rescue practices suggests the emergence of international networks of interspecies care cultures that are, in part, shaped by animals in interaction with humans. These networks are flexible yet long-standing and include proximate and distant care encounters as well as collaborative relationships and practices. Moreover, they accumulate expertise on understanding, interacting with, and caring for animals with situationally specific experiences and needs.

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