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**Beach Dogs, a Bitten Girl and a Roiling Debate in Bali**

By JOE COCHRANE MARCH 4, 2015



A dog roamed Kuta Beach after strays there were killed in response to a case in which a vaccinated dog bit a girl. Credit Ulet Ifansasti for The New York Times

KUTA VILLAGE, Indonesia — The controversy began a few weeks ago when a small, cream-colored mutt named Sheila bolted unexpectedly from under a beach hammock and bit a 10-year-old Australian girl in the leg.

Kuta Beach, the most popular spot on the getaway island of Bali, is well known for good surfing, cold beer, loud music and mangy-looking beach dogs. The dogs are something of a tourist attraction and generally harmless, except when they are not.

Sheila’s bite on Jan. 27 set off a chain of events that has once again plunged this community into a vigorous debate about the island’s canine cohort and what some residents say is the government’s draconian effort to control them, with prime tourist season only a few months away.

Minutes after the bite, witnesses said, members of Kuta Village’s security team, armed with clubs, arrived at the beach and surrounded the dog, which in a panic ran to the surf.

“One man chased her with what looked like a large paddle and started repeatedly hitting her on the head, and intermittently drowning her,” said Praveen Elango, a tourist from [India](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/india/index.html?inline=nyt-geo). “Another man approached with a brick and started whacking her with it.”



Stray dogs are caught in Bali to be vaccinated against rabies. Credit Ulet Ifansasti for The New York Times

Tourists gaped in horror. Sheila escaped and was taken away by a surfing instructor. The Australian girl was rushed to a nearby clinic.

But the next day, the other dogs of that section of Kuta Beach, where about half a dozen strays usually roam, were gone. People who work at the beach say the government rounded them up overnight and killed them.

“Usually, the dogs are there every day, but since this happened, we have not seen any dogs on Kuta Beach,” said Dedi Suherman, 35, a surfing instructor who also said he witnessed Sheila’s beating. “People are pretty angry.”

Two days later, Bali’s governor, I Made Mangku Pastika, invited the public to join the government in killing every stray dog on the island, which he estimated to be 500,000 animals.

“Please help,” he said, according to a [report](http://regional.kompas.com/read/2015/01/31/17073091/Gubernur.Bali.Tolonglah.Kalau.Lihat.Anjing.Liar.Dimatiin.Saja) in Kompas, a prominent Indonesian daily newspaper. “If you see a stray dog, just kill it, eliminate it. Don’t let them hang around spreading the disease. It’s dangerous and makes people scared.”

Bali’s government provides free medical treatment, including vaccination shots, to any resident bitten by a street dog, but the governor said the province had run out of money to buy the vaccine.

On average, more than 4,000 people a month were bitten by dogs on Bali, an island of four million people, from 2010 to 2012, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. While few of the dogs are rabid, it is not always possible to know whether one that bites is, so treatment is usually prescribed. If not treated immediately, people can die of rabies.

The governor first called on the public to kill street dogs in 2008, after rabies appeared on this island.

He did so again last July, complaining about the expense of the vaccines and noting that dog owners were violating the law by letting their pets run free.

“There is no need to catch them — put them in a shelter or something,” he said then, [according to The Jakarta Post](http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/06/27/stray-dogs-must-be-culled-bali-governor-says.html). “Just cull them. It is the dog owners’ fault for letting their dogs stray.”

The local news media reported that more than 120 dogs were culled, mostly by animal control officers, in two remote districts in December and January.

The most common methods the government uses include shooting dogs with strychnine-laced darts or administering fatal injections, a practice that has been denounced by animal rights groups and documented in gruesome videos on YouTube.

“It’s a terrible way to die,” said Janice Girardi, an American resident of Bali for more than 30 years and the founder of the Bali Animal Welfare Association, which has campaigned against culling. “It’s like torture.”

Animal rights groups [denounced](http://www.animals24-7.org/2015/02/03/bali-governor-pastika-invites-public-to-kill-dogs/) the governor’s comments as “an appeal for a pogrom,” one as likely to kill healthy vaccinated pets as rabid strays.

At Kuta Beach, locals share pictures on cellphones and by email of their missing beach dogs wearing the special collars proving that they have been vaccinated for rabies. Moreover, village officials say there has not been a reported case of rabies in dogs or humans at Kuta Beach.

Economic and religious themes also play into the debate. This being Bali, where tourism and related industries account for about 80 percent of the economy, news reports of dog bites and rabies outbreaks undermine the image of a tropical island paradise.

“Many people don’t like the idea” of killing stray dogs, said Wayan Suarsa, the chief of Kuta Village, “because it affects our image. But in some cases, they disturb tourists, and we clearly want to expand our tourism industry.”

But other residents argue that dogs are an important part of the culture on this historically Hindu island, as noted in the Mahabharata, an ancient Indian epic, and are worthy of respect.

Putu Sumantra, the head of Bali’s animal husbandry department, said the governor’s comments about “inviting” the public to kill stray dogs had been taken out of context.

“It was the public that asked the government to do it, either during local meetings or through government offices,” he said in a written reply to questions.

He said that the government would continue to cull dogs “selectively,” including unvaccinated semiferal dogs, but that vaccination was the government’s primary rabies-eradication strategy. The government has carried out mass vaccination operations and has plans for another one from April to July.

That is the right path, public health experts say.

“Vaccination is the most effective way to stop rabies,” said Eric Brum, a rabies expert and chief technical adviser for the United Nations agriculture agency, which financed the rabies vaccination program in Bali until last year and has trained the dogcatchers there.

Culling, on the other hand, is counterproductive, he says.

Killing dogs does not reduce contact between sick and healthy animals, while vaccinating the majority of dogs — 70 percent is thought to be effective — can provide herd immunity. Without other susceptible dogs for rabid animals to pass the disease to, the disease will ultimately die out.

“We’re trying to flood the environment with immune animals,” he said. “We want vaccinated dogs to go out and meet the virus.”

Rabies cases have dropped rapidly in Bali since the virus first appeared, a fact Mr. Brum attributes to the vaccination campaign, which inoculated more than two million dogs from 2008 to 2014, according to provincial government data.

In 2010, there were 421 confirmed animal cases of rabies and 84 human deaths, according to United Nations data. Last year, there were only 132 canine cases and no human deaths.

“The problem is not the dogs — it’s the virus,” Mr. Brum said.

Not for the Australian girl, however, who underwent treatment as a precaution but was probably never in danger of contracting the disease. Sheila had been vaccinated and was wearing her collar proving it, even as she was being beaten by village security.

The dog, who has been in hiding with a local family, should not be marked for death, advocates say, but instead should be back on the beach, her immunity helping to keep the virus from spreading.

“They are our warrior dogs,” said Ms. Girardi, the animal welfare advocate.

A version of this article appears in print on March 5, 2015, on page A9 of the New York edition with the headline: Beach Dogs, a Bitten Girl and a Roiling Debate in Bali.