

International Outreach

Transformed by volunteering, Nora Livingstone helps others do the same | By Jayme Moye

FOURMONTHSAFTERHURRICANE Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August 2005, college student Nora Livingstone decided to drive from her home in Toronto to New Orleans to assist at an animal shelter during winter break. Livingstone, a double major in environmental studies and anthropology, thought she'd be walking and grooming dogs who had been separated from their owners during the flood, in an otherwise comfortable setting. The experience wasn't what she expected. "Up in Canada, we had no

idea how bad things had gotten in New Orleans," Livingstone, now 29, says.

Her first clue to the chaos came when she entered the city. Beside the road, a dead horse hung from a tree. "Everyone was too busy helping themselves and their families to deal with the horse," says Livingstone. "It sort of set the precedent for the rest of the week."

The section of the city where Livingstone had signed up to volunteer didn't even have full power. She spent her Christmas vacation working up to 20-hour days at a makeshift animal



Nora Livingstone knows dog love has no borders.



Puppy clinic (Mexico)



Left: Garlanded puppy, Tihar festival (Nepal); opposite, clockwise from top left: scarlet macaw (Guatemala), Dr. Heather Reid works with turtle rehabilitation and conservation (Canada), snorkeling with whale shark (Mexico), Pacific leatherback turtle hatchling (Guatemala), baby elephant and Livingstone (Thailand), jaguar (Guatemala).

shelter at Celebration Station, a former fun park. She slept on a cot alongside other volunteers in a second-floor loft overlooking hundreds of displaced cats caged on the floor below. Outside, chain-link fences separated the runs that housed about a hundred homeless dogs. “At that time, there were still houses on top of houses,” Livingstone says. “There was tons of debris. There was no food. There were stray dogs everywhere.”

Livingstone’s volunteer work in New Orleans was difficult, both physically and emotionally. Each morning, she fed hundreds of dogs and cats, and cleaned just as many bowls and litter boxes. She picked up countless piles of dog poo. By the time she had completed the breakfast routine, it was time to feed the animals dinner, and the whole process started all over again. The sheer number of dogs meant that she could only spend a couple of minutes with each. “I cried every day,” Livingstone says. “There were some dogs who were just so bewildered and scared. The hard part about working with animals is that you can’t rationalize with them. You can’t explain what happened, and that things are going to be okay. All you can do is lie down beside them and pet them.”

Despite the challenges, Livingstone considers her time volunteering in New

Orleans as some of the most rewarding in her life. The sadness she felt was tempered by the joy of witnessing daily reunions with families who had come to claim their lost pets. She learned that in many cases, people had had their pets taken from them by authorities who prohibited them at human shelters, or were forced to leave their animals behind at gunpoint by the National Guard during evacuation. “I realized that the work I was doing was helping not only animals, but also people struggling to make their families whole again after a really awful situation,” Livingstone says.

While she didn’t know it at the time, her experience planted the seed for what would become her life’s work. Six years later, Livingstone co-founded Animal Experience International (AEI), a travel company dedicated to providing animal volunteer opportunities around the globe.

But before the idea for AEI could materialize, Livingstone would return home to Canada and finish university and a post-graduate program in Outdoor Adventure Leadership, which involved activities like canoeing and kayaking. Unsure how to combine her education, her outdoors experience and her love of animals into a career, she headed to Nepal in 2007 for another

round of volunteer work. She hoped to find some direction, or at least the same satisfaction she had discovered in New Orleans.

While in Nepal, Livingstone volunteered at a medical clinic and as an English teacher. She noticed that dogs were not treated the same as they were in the west. Dogs in Nepal guard homes and gardens, and are not typically considered pets. Most Nepalese believe dogs are the reincarnations of bad prophets — humans fated to live as dogs as punishment for past misdeeds.

One day at a bakery in Kathmandu, Livingstone discussed her observations with a British woman she’d just met. The woman had been living in Nepal for more than 30 years and told Livingstone about a groundbreaking dog clinic, the Kathmandu Animal Treatment Center (KAT). Shortly after, Livingstone showed up at KAT’s door and offered to volunteer. She wound up spending several weeks at the center, which aims to improve the lives of street dogs through vaccination, injury rehabilitation and spaying/neutering. After dogs are treated, experts at KAT evaluate them for pet potential, and keep those with promise at the shelter for adoption instead of returning them to the streets. “I loved being there,” Livingstone says. “A place like KAT is so rare in Nepal. I wanted to find a way to get more people involved, to let more people know about it.”

An idea formed once Livingstone returned to Canada. Wouldn’t it be great if there were a company that connected standout animal sanctuaries, shelters and conservation programs around the world with interested travelers like her? The vision stayed in the back of her mind even as she took a job as volunteer



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coordinator at the Toronto Wildlife Centre. It was there that Livingstone met veterinarian Heather Reid, who helped bring her idea to fruition.

Reid shared Livingstone's passion for travel and her interest in volunteer work with animals. One step ahead of Livingstone, Reid had been considering what it would take to create international animal-based volunteer experiences for other veterinarians. "My brain practically exploded after talking to Dr. Heather because it was just so obvious," says Livingstone. "I'm passionate about volunteering and encouraging others to volunteer and travel and stir up their lives, so why not get paid to live my dream while helping other people live theirs?"

In 2011, the two women founded AEI, launching it in March with five trips, including one to KAT, the dog clinic where Livingstone had volunteered in Nepal. Within a couple of months, they had 20 travelers signed up. In June, a volunteer tourism portal, GoVolunteering.com, picked up some of their trips and blasted them out to more than 13,000 subscribers. A few months later, AEI's client list doubled. "We knew there was a market for this," Livingstone says, "We were just surprised at how quickly it took off."

Animal-based organizations from all over the world started contacting AEI to create volunteer travel programs at their locations. But Livingstone has been careful to add trips slowly. One of AEI's core values is to partner with only the best and most effective organizations; Livingstone or Reid visits each before adding it to the lineup. After one year of operation, AEI offers 26 trips to locations ranging from Canada to Thailand and Australia. Travelers can choose to volunteer with dogs, cats, bats, turtles, monkeys, elephants, parrots, bears, leopards, tigers, crocodiles and kangaroos, among others. "People have been knocking down our door, which is both inspiring and a little overwhelming," says Livingstone.

AEI travelers can also customize the length of their trip, from two weeks to

A GAME

My dog and I
play a game nearing sleep.
I draw my leg away,
and hers follows inevitably
as a clock's hand toward the future.

I repeat.

Each time we end up tangent,
as we began.

*How does one record a match
in which neither player wins,
or both do?*

—J. D. Smith

two months, with longer options available. One client signed up for a full year working with orangutans in Sumatra. Her cost of C\$4,390 includes accommodations, meals, transportation, travelers' insurance—everything except airfare. While \$4,390 seems like a bargain for a full year abroad, Livingstone recognizes that money is the biggest inhibitor to international travel. She and Reid have devised aggressive fundraising techniques for clients, as well as a scholarship program. "If someone is inspired enough to go on one of our trips, we're going to do everything in our power to get them there," says Livingstone.

Trips also include cultural experiences and sightseeing excursions. Both Livingstone and Reid want AEI travelers to experience the natural and man-made wonders that draw tourists to the destinations where they are volunteering. But they are also clear that AEI trips are not typical getaways. "We're not offering a vacation," Livingstone says. "This is not going to a resort, this is work. But it's work that's transformational—through the animals you work with, through the family you homestay with, and through the community you live in." ³

animalexperienceinternational.com

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