

Savior of strays runs animal farm

As soon as Hu Xiuping steps out of the taxi, a bag of dog food under her arm, hundreds of hungry mouths bark a chorus of greeting for the woman who saved their lives.



Hu Xiuping with her dogs at her farm. [Photo by Zhu Lixin/China Daily]

Over the past 18 years, 62-year-old Hu has rescued numerous lost, abandoned and injured dogs—even some that were on the verge of being butchered for meat.

She now lives with 560 of them on a grape farm in Hefei, Anhui province, but could not afford their upkeep, which stands at about 40,000 yuan (\$5,990) a month, without a little help.

“Thanks to donations from across the country, I am able to keep them here, though sometimes there are still food shortages,” she said.

Though Hu seldom speaks of her own upbringing, the retired hospital accountant remembers the back story of almost every animal in her care.

Born into an impoverished rural family, Hu had a tough childhood. Her mother died when she was 6, to be replaced by a stepmother “who treated me badly”, she said. She would often sleep in the kitchen of her home with the family dog.

Even after moving to the big city, Hu still pined for canine companionship, and would provide food to the homeless dogs she saw around her neighborhood.

Her first rescue came in 1999, when she brought home a dog that had been badly injured after being hit by a car. “After that, I started bringing back more dogs—and also some cats—to my apartment, to protect them from danger,” she said.

Running an ad hoc animal shelter in her apartment building didn’t go down too well with the neighbors, however, and she was the subject of numerous

complaints. So, after amassing 32 dogs and a handful of cats, Hu eventually moved to the countryside in 2006.

“You can’t say my neighbors had stony hearts, they had tolerated me and my animals for seven years,” she said.

In 2009, a group of animal welfare advocates rented a grape farm in Dawei township of the city’s Baohe district and offered it to Hu as a place to keep her dogs.

The township has hundreds of such farms and is a well known for grape growing.

“They thought we could grow grapes and keep dogs there at the same time, but we later found we couldn’t keep the business running with so many dogs,” Hu said.

Every time she spots a homeless dog, Hu brings it back to her farm, which has become something of a haven for castoff canines. Even the local police, who find it difficult to humanely deal with strays, have been known to approach Hu for help.

“The farm is firmly fenced-in and considered the best place for them. Dogs keep coming in, but we will not let them go out,” Hu said.

“People want to kill them and eat them, I don’t understand,” she said, pointing at two golden retrievers with tear in her eyes.

“At least I can be happy knowing there are caring and understanding people out there, who volunteer to join me in helping these lovely animals.”