

French side government to fund animal sanctuary

~To be used as tourism boosting point ~

GRAND CASE--The French government will build an animal sanctuary in St. Martin, Vice President responsible for Environment Pierre Aliotti announced Friday during a reception attended by animal welfare advocates and other concerned individuals.

Aliotti said: "We are delighted to be the first country in the Caribbean to take positive steps toward addressing a widespread problem of stray cats and dogs."

This step to change the island's image into "The Animal Friendly Island" came about through the intercession of tourist Cathy Kangas of New Canaan, Connecticut. She is a member of the Regional Council of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), the world's largest animal welfare organisation with more than 15 million members.

Kangas submitted a proposal to the French government detailing how an animal sanctuary could increase tourism to St. Martin. If only one per cent of the 15 million members of HSUS travelled to St.

Martin as a result of a concentrated marketing campaign to make its membership aware of the island's commitment to animals, it would amount to 150,000 extra tourists.

An average tourist spending \$1,000 will provide US \$150 million in revenue at a time when the recession in the United States will definitely have an impact on travel to the entire Caribbean.

The proposal was accepted and land has been acquired and construction of the sanctuary will commence soon. In addition to caring for stray animals and providing spay and neutering programmes, the sanctuary will also be a tourist attraction.

HSUS will not only promote "St. Martin - The Animal Friendly Island" to its membership, but also to other organisations such as World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) and American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and through a concentrated campaign in the travel press.

Many tourists, far more than one might expect, choose not to visit the Caribbean islands because they find the crisis of stray dogs, in particular, too upsetting and will not risk having their vacation ruined by such a sight. The visual impact of homeless dogs and cats roaming the streets and the knowledge that nothing is being done to address this crisis affects many potential tourists.

In addition to building the animal sanctuary, the French government will work with organisations such as I Love My Island Dog to implement a sterilisation campaign.

Kangas said: "The government of St. Martin should be congratulated for this unprecedented commitment to animal welfare on the island. We are confident that tourism to St. Martin will increase, as people who love animals will respond to our campaign to position the country as the 'Animal Friendly Island.' St. Martin will be the shining star of the Caribbean."