



Our Hen House

CHANGE THE WORLD FOR ANIMALS

a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization

Interview with Tod Emko

By OUR HEN HOUSE

Published December 14, 2013

*Following is a transcript of an interview with **TOD EMKO** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 205.*

JASMIN: I'm excited about today's interview with Tod Emko. I've known Tod for a while; he's here in New York. And he heads up Darwin Animal Doctors, which he's going to talk all about. He's also the creator of a brand new comic book that is about a very special three-legged dog. So, Tod has a lot to tell us about, and I'm thrilled to bring you that interview with Tod Emko.

Tod Emko is the founder and president of Darwin Animal Doctors, which you can find at darwinanimaldoctors.org. Tod is a conservationist from New York City. He came to Galapagos for the first time in 2008, serving with an international marine conservation group. While working to protect the marine reserve, Tod fell in love with the islands and wanted to ensure the survival of its amazing and important animals. He soon saw that veterinarians were in dire need in the Galapagos, where many introduced dangers threatened the local biosphere. He started Darwin Animal Doctors to fill the void and bring qualified vets to Galapagos to help all the animals of the islands.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Tod.

TOD: Thank you. It's great to be here, Jasmin.

JASMIN: It's really, really great to have you. We are so thrilled that we live in the same city as you, though it perplexes us why we don't see you more often, but you're very busy. You're going all over the place doing all kinds of great things. Now, before we get into the specific projects that Darwin Animal Doctors is involved in, can you just start off by telling us what is so special about the Galapagos Islands?

TOD: Oh yeah. Well, the Galapagos Islands, I think is one of the most important ecosystems on the planet. It's Darwin's playground; it's where he came up with the theory of evolution. And it has unique wildlife you won't find anywhere else on the planet. And the more research that comes out of the Galapagos, the more important we find it is. So many endangered species have a last refuge in the Galapagos. So many animals, both from the land and sea, count on the Galapagos as a migratory route. And it's such a critically important ecosystem, not just for research, not just for our own knowledge, but for the whole planet. So, if there's one place that I think is worth putting all of our effort into saving, it's the Galapagos.

MARIANN: And just for those of us who are geographically challenged, can you tell us exactly where the Galapagos are and how many islands there are?

TOD: Ah, yes. So, the Galapagos is on the equator, and it is roughly 600 miles west of Ecuador, so it's just west of South America, and it's on the equator. It's actually less than one degree south of the equator, but it actually has surprisingly very extreme seasons for being so close to the equator. It's actually known for having the coldest temperatures on the equator because of the Humboldt current and the water currents that come up from the bottom of the ocean because they are volcanic islands. And it's really interesting to see the culture that has developed there, 'cause even though it's so close to the equator, when it's the technical wintertime there, you'll see all of the locals wearing scarves and winter hats and winter jackets while they're walking to the beach in shorts and a t-shirt.

JASMIN: Hm, interesting. So, what is Darwin Animal Doctors' approach to protecting the animals of the Galapagos?

TOD: So, Darwin Animal Doctors, we are the only animal hospital in the Galapagos Islands, and so we have our work cut out for us. We take a two-pronged approach to solving the ecological issues of the Galapagos, which is: the first one is simply counterbalancing the damage that's being done to the animals, so we are there as an emergency animal hospital. And we are also providing spaying and neutering for the invasive dogs and cats in the Galapagos year round, so before Darwin Animal Doctors came to the Galapagos, the only population control that was year round in the Galapagos for dogs and cats that were invasive to the environment were mass killing programs. But the thing is, by the government's own admitted numbers, the number of cats and dogs in the Galapagos kept increasing every year. So, clearly, these approaches, we could do better than that. So, we try to advise government agencies on these more humane and more effective alternatives. And we do spaying and neutering for the government in the Galapagos, all over the Galapagos, to try to humanely curtail the number of cats and dogs while providing emergency veterinary services to animals there.

And the other prong approach that we take is that we have a very in-depth humane education program in the Galapagos. So, we've been very, very lucky to have Lush Cosmetics sponsor our humane education program, which is both a formal education program to teach in schools as well as an education program to teach the community through community outreach, to teach all of the pet owners that come through our clinics, through anyone that we can reach through our work in the Galapagos. And so, by giving the people the chance and the knowledge to take better care of their ecosystem through better animal care, we're arming the people who can really change the Galapagos for the better, we're arming them to save the environment, because if anyone can save the Galapagos, it's the people who live there.

MARIANN: So, can you explain the links between the work you do for domestic animals and the preservation of the wild animal populations? I think it's so fascinating 'cause you used the term "invasive," and I think the Galapagos in some ways appear to be -- they're not only a microcosm of the world because they have all these species, but they're also a microcosm of the issue of what happens when invasive species come and why that is humans' fault, and what we can do about it, other than killing. I went on too long, but can you just explain the links between the existence of those animals and why the government feels they should be killed to preserve wild animal populations?

TOD: Sure. First of all, we want to make very sure that we're not demonizing cats and dogs, first of all, because it's ultimately not really their fault. They didn't choose to be there. They're just trying to get by. But their presence is very disruptive to the Galapagos. So, cats and dogs, for instance, they are competitors for sea lions for space. They are predators of the birds and the natural lizards of the ecosystem. And worst of all, they could possibly bring invasive diseases like parvo and distemper to the Galapagos. And distemper, we know for a fact can be spread to sea lions. So, if dogs bring distemper to the Galapagos and it spreads to sea lions, that could wipe out the whole native Galapagos sea lion population, which would be an ecological disaster. So, by treating dogs and cats, by curtailing their numbers humanely and by treating them for problems that could potentially have spread to the environment, we are protecting the ecosystem a lot more than if we just did a mass killing campaign and didn't educate people on better animal care.

JASMIN: Why is there a ban on animal vaccines in the Galapagos, and what are the implications of that?

TOD: Okay, so, vaccines in the Galapagos is a very complicated topic. But ultimately, since there hasn't been recognition that there's an ongoing problem with invasive diseases in the Galapagos, vaccines for animal diseases like parvo and distemper have been outlawed in the Galapagos because the idea is that if these diseases don't exist in the Galapagos or they're not acknowledged to exist there, then bringing the vaccines for these things would be introducing a virus to a pristine environment. So, the first step in what we need to do is do comprehensive disease testing, and we've started doing a lot of this disease testing, some of the first of its kind done in over ten years, and work with the government on getting them these numbers to show that these diseases still exist in the Galapagos and that they are spreading and that we really need to take them seriously. So, that's the link and this is the approach on how we're taking to try to address this problem.

MARIANN: Yeah, it's fascinating, and it does seem to be impossible to address without getting a handle on that. And I love that you're doing all that research. Stepping back a bit, I just wonder if you could talk a little bit, because this is an issue that comes up so often in my class and it's one of those issues, it's one of the few issues that people in animal rights really struggle with, that find it to be -- there are some difficult questions here. And that's the whole question of what constitutes an invasive species and what should be done with invasive species and when is a species just there and when is it a problem. Can you talk a little bit about your philosophy of invasive species?

TOD: Sure. Well, if the presence of a species is automatically quite invasive or damaging to the ecosystem, then it's really invasive. In the Galapagos, there's a lot of introduced species but they are not invasive. So, for instance, there are birds that eat parasites off of the backs of cows in the Galapagos, and these birds are not endemic to the Galapagos, but they're causing no harm by being there; they're simply eating parasites off of the backs of cows that people brought to the Galapagos. There are coconut trees in the Galapagos, giant coconut trees that are nowhere near the Indian Ocean, but they are not invasive either because they're easy to keep a handle on, they don't spread like wildfire, they are very easy to tame. But animals like dogs and cats, unfortunately, they spread very, very fast. They breed very fast, and their population increases at a very, very rapid rate, and they bring all sorts of parasites and diseases with them. And they're often damaging to the environment simply by being there because they eat the natural species of the environment there. So, because of

that, they are invasive unfortunately. But also as unfortunately, the answer of just trying to wipe them out hasn't been working, and is not really the ultimate answer. And research and empirical evidence really shows us that the humane answer is really the only effective answer here.

JASMIN: Tell us a bit more about the humane education program. We understand that you're partnering with HEART on that?

TOD: Oh yeah, so HEART, the humane education group out of New York, they are writing the formal education program for us. And they have given us lots of guidance over the past couple of years in helping us create a lot of our informal education programs too, as far as pamphlets and outreach materials and things to teach the community. And HEART has been an invaluable partner in developing our humane education program. Our education program before we met HEART started off as us, environmentalists and a group of veterinarians, trying to come up with humane education materials to teach the kids. Through a convenio, an agreement with the Galapagos government, we were allowed into schools once a week to teach kids humane education. So, we had pretty much a blank slate and we were trying to teach all sorts of different things. We were trying to teach about invasive diseases, we were trying to teach very, very basic pet care. And we found that the best approach was a very, very simple approach of showing PowerPoint presentations showing, these are animals that belong here, these are animals that humans brought, and this is why it's important to take care of both. And it was an education program that we gave to elementary school kids. And we thought that was great, it was something for the kids.

The government actually liked it so much that they invited us to start teaching it to branches of the government too, so that branches of government like the Ecuadorian Navy, which is tasked with protecting the marine reserve, can get an appreciation of what to protect and the ecological scene and why it's important to protect the ecosystem as well. And so, based on that support, we went to Lush Cosmetics, and Lush Cosmetics gave us a grant to develop our humane education program, which was already pretty successful at that time, to make it a much more professional program. And so, we took that budget and we approached HEART and asked them to partner with us to develop this new curriculum. And they've been fantastic, they've been absolutely, they've been working nonstop, they've taken the reins, they've been writing, they've been communicating with teachers in the Galapagos. It's been fantastic.

MARIANN: Wow, that's great to hear. One of the things that you mentioned which seems so important is that your relationship with the government seems to be pretty good. That's certainly not always the case for animal protection organizations. So, can you offer some of what you consider the best ways to foster a proactive relationship with the government regarding animal issues?

TOD: Well, one of the most important things to do to foster such a good relationship is to keep in mind what their goals and what their needs are. And if you can provide services which they need and which is a vital service to the community that they are serving while also serving the needs of the animal world and the ecosystem, then that's a great way to get them to want to work with you. So, for instance, providing a free veterinary care as a social service to the community is a really great thing to provide the community and it's something that the community really wants and invites us for. And when the government found out that there were veterinarians who were doing vet work in the Galapagos full time,

they invited us to treat animals on every island of the Galapagos that was inhabited by people.

And so, that was a really important step, and so also providing them with -- saying that we have medicine and we have mass spay-neuter campaigns lined up that we can provide to as much of the Galapagos as you would allow us access to really opened up a relationship with them. And then, this past year, the government had brought us to work on multiple islands of the Galapagos, and several parts of the inhabited islands of the Galapagos, just this past summer alone. And we've been able to access thousands of animals that way, and again, just fostering the relationship by giving the government services that they need and services that the community wants and invites you to bring. That's the way that you can really, really make a dent in fostering a good relationship with the government.

JASMIN: Good to know. What would you say your biggest needs are right now to advance your work in the Galapagos?

TOD: Well, we're always on the lookout for long-term veterinarians. We have a lot of veterinarian volunteers from all over the world, which I'm really lucky to have. I mean last year alone, we had veterinarians from North America, South America, Europe, and Australia. And all of them bring a unique perspective and a very, very badly needed knowledge base to the Galapagos, where there is almost no veterinary care without this. And so, long-term veterinary care, long-term veterinarian volunteers who can stay there for the longest time possible, especially in the off-season, which would be our winter and our autumn and stuff and so forth when people are going back to school here in the States. That is always what we need to further our reach in the Galapagos and reach more animals. We also need more scientific research in the Galapagos because we're always looking for more measures of success and more ways to gauge how we can be more successful in the Galapagos and the way to do that is through more research.

MARIANN: So, how can people get involved, where can they find you to get involved in that kind of volunteering, if we have people listening who are interested?

TOD: So, people can always find us online at darwinanimaldoctors.org, and at that site, there is pages where you can learn more about volunteering and you can contact us through the volunteer links there. And we don't just take volunteers who are veterinarians. We take vet students, we take vet techs, that we've had people who are human nurses in the past who have become vet techs in our campaigns, and people who just have a lot of skills that are valuable to further a nonprofit, like people who are good at photography or social media or things like that. Those are things that we'll always need to further our mission there in the Galapagos.

JASMIN: Well, let's switch gears a little bit because you have so many exciting programs going on. Aside from Darwin Animal Doctors, you just created this amazing comic book, and it's called *A Piggy's Tale*. Tell us about *A Piggy's Tale*.

TOD: Okay, so yeah, this is a Darwin Animal Doctors project, and it's a comic book starring my three-legged tripod rescue dog as a superhero. And as far as I know, there is no other comic book starring a tripod rescue dog as a superhero.

JASMIN: Not yet!

TOD: So, it's actually based on the true story of my actual dog. My cofounder, Andrea Gordon and I, went to other temporary veterinary MASH clinics around the islands down in the Caribbean and South America in order to get more of a gauge of what it takes to create a veterinary project and what the scene is like for animals in these ecosystems. And when we were doing a veterinary campaign in the Dominican Republic, we came across this poor puppy who got hit by a bus a month before our veterinary team got there. And so, he was almost dead; he had no hair, he was covered in maggots. And his hurt leg that was hit by the bus, it was still there but it was almost nothing but exposed bone and some flesh hanging from it covered in maggots. And so, our veterinary team did emergency surgery to take the leg off, and my cofounder Andrea Gordon, she stayed up all night with him pulling something like 40 something parasites out of each of his ears. He was in so much pain.

And we brought him back to the United States. And in the US, I mean, when we first brought him, he was hairless, he was limping so much because he was just learning to walk as a puppy and he only had three legs. But he had so much spirit, and he had a never-say-die attitude. And he grew strong, and every day he pushed himself harder, and he's now a dog model actually. He's a model for Fashion Pet; they put sweaters and hoodies and stuff on him and they take photos of him. And they love using him because when they want to show a logo or a pattern on a sweater or something, they photograph his side that's missing a leg so the leg doesn't get in the way of the pattern and stuff.

But Piggy also has a fantastic amazing, well, superpower that he gleaned from his journey, which is that he has the ability to sense when somebody is suffering. And often we'll be walking him, say, in Central Park, and he'll just veer off the trail, and out of all the people in Central Park, he'll single out one person, and he'll crawl up to them on his belly and look up at them with his eyes. And they'll invariably start crying and start petting him and saying, "How did you know I needed that?" And it turns out that they've just suffered some sort of personal loss or tragedy. And I've had so many dog walkers call me frantically saying like, "Do you know what your dog just did? I can't believe this just happened, it's amazing." And we'll just say, yes, this is something that he does.

And I realized the empathy and sympathy, these are real superpowers. And these allow, even a tripod dog, to do amazing things. And I just felt this story needed to be told, and everyone needed to be inspired by his story, and so I created this comic book where he's the hero. And hopefully this spreads awareness of rescue animals and causes for bringing up street animals off the streets to a wider audience that we wouldn't normally engage in this type of talk.

MARIANN: Well, I can attest to the fact that this is a terrific comic. I absolutely loved it. Can you tell people how they can get a copy?

TOD: Oh yes. So, we actually just ran a successful Kickstarter, which is great because that allowed us to go to print with the first two issues already. So, in the next couple months, we'll be printing the first and second issues, and if people go to our website, piggytale.com, we'll be posting news and keeping people updated on where we are in the publication process or where we are in the printing process and how people can order their own copy. And so, the first round will be going out to all our Kickstarter backers and then the second round will be going out to the people who order online. And we are really excited to get this out there. We are using this to advertise some of our work that we do in the Galapagos, and we're using it to really try to engage the audience in ways that we wouldn't normally be able

to engage in just through online newsletters or something like that. So, we're really hoping this touches a lot of people.

JASMIN: That's so great. And I know that you used to work with Sea Shepherd. Was that your first foray into animal rights?

TOD: Well, growing up, I was always the weird kid who loved animals. And when I was a little kid, I would be like on the playground asphalt after a rain, and I would be picking up all the worms and putting them back in the grass and stuff like that. So, I was always doing weird stuff like that. But when I grew up -- actually, at first when I was growing up and I was a little kid, and I would watch on PBS, say, like in the early '80s, I would see footage of people whaling and killing whales legally, I thought to myself, when I grow up, I'm going to do something about this, this is something that I can't personally tolerate seeing happening. And so now that I'm grown up, I said, well, now I'm grown up, I can stop whaling now if I want to. So, I joined Sea Shepherd and that was my first major direct action campaign to do something on such a massive scale, and it was probably the most rewarding thing I'd ever done. And so this past year, after I came back from the campaign, I realized Whale Wars was telling the story of what's going on in Antarctica but someone still needed to tell the story about my super dog. So, I started *A Piggy's Tale* when I came back from Antarctica this past year.

JASMIN: Wow, you're amazing, Todd. You're so great. Tell us, just lastly, what's coming up for Darwin Animal Doctors in the coming year.

TOD: So, every year in the Galapagos is our biggest year because we're growing at such a fast rate. And next year is, we're going to be growing, and next year is also going to be our biggest year ever. Starting just right in January, we're gonna have campaigns all year long. We're gonna have long-term campaigns, we're gonna have people from lots of different veterinary schools, and we're gonna be disease testing, we're going to be pushing humane education all year long. And if people want to get involved, we still have some space open over the summer, so check it out and contact us and hopefully we can work together to save the Galapagos.

JASMIN: Excellent. Well, you do such inspiring work. And do you have any other things that you're creating or that you're working on? 'Cause you're such a creative guy.

TOD: Aw, thank you. Well, we are working on the first two books of *A Piggy's Tale*, but we're also working on eventually getting a budget to start making web animated shorts out of it too. So, that might be a longer term project but that's ultimately something that we want to do to engage an even bigger audience and get people more interested and really, really interact directly with all sorts of audiences and get them interested in this and inspire them. And we're really excited about that possibility.

JASMIN: And when you're not doing all of this, you're busy being the prom king for the Veggie Prom here in New York City, so...

TOD: It's a lot of responsibility to carry.

JASMIN: Yeah. It's a lot of work, I know. It's hard to imagine that you have time to do anything else, but... And I was only in the court; I didn't actually win prom queen, so...

TOD: You're always a winner, so...

MARIANN: A little bitter, Jasmin?

JASMIN: No, not even at all.

MARIANN: Is there a bit of bitterness there?

JASMIN: The only thing I like that's bitter is chocolate. But Tod, thank you so much for all that you do to change the world for animals and for joining us today in Our Hen House. We hope that you keep us posted on your many outreach efforts so that we could continue to stay on top of what you're doing. We're just so excited about all of this work and we really admire you, so thank you for sharing your story with Our Hen House today.

TOD: Oh. Thank you, Jasmin and Mariann, and you always inspire me too.

JASMIN: That was Tod Emko. Learn more at darwinanimaldoctors.org. Thank you, Tod.