Bringing medical care where it’s never reached before, a Humane Society International vet cleans a wound that festered in an elephant’s side for 13 years while the animal gave rides to tourists. Years of overtures and trust-building have allowed HSI vets access to more than 130 elephants in Jaipur who are hired out to ferry people to the city’s famous fort or offered as rough canvases to visitors—$100 buys a day with elephants, including a chance to paint their gray hides. Starting with a street dog spay/neuter program in 2007, HSI has steadily expanded its presence in India. The organization’s arrival comes as economic growth is remaking the country and attitudes are ripe for change.
FROM its new office in the tech hub of Hyderabad, HSI has influenced policymakers to make animal-friendly changes in the world’s largest democracy: Nationally, they’ve banned shark finning, captive dolphins, and cosmetics testing on animals. Most of the 28 states have agreed to phase out the practice of confining chickens in battery cages so small the birds cannot spread their wings. Beyond public policies, HSI is changing hearts. In the city of Jamshedpur, it launched a pilot spay/neuter program that gathers street dogs for their surgeries without using nets, a novel approach that may not only be more humane but more effective (see pp. 28–29). In Jaipur, HSI hired veterinarian Sunil Chawla (opposite), who has spent years trying to improve conditions for the city’s tourist elephants. The animals used to carry their mahouts (handlers) along with four tourists up and down the hill to the Amber Fort all day. Now, they carry two tourists and only up the hill and only during morning and evening hours. Most mahouts formerly used painful iron bullhooks to prod elephants. Now 90 percent use only sticks. Chawla is trying to further improve the conditions, urging owners not to reassign mahouts and mahouts to recognize the sensitivity of their charges. “When you meet a person and through the eyes you can see kindness, the same thing happens with the elephant,” he says. “If there is not a good relationship between the elephant and the mahout, the elephant will be in distress.” At a new government-built “elephant village,” a mahout bathes his animal (below): The two spend almost 15 hours of every day together.
at rest and made to stand on hard surfaces and bear heavy wooden seats for riders, Jaipur’s elephants suffer foot and leg problems and infected sores, as well as diseases related to aging. Before Chawla, they received only ineffective traditional treatments. Early on, when Chawla gave an elephant antibiotics while an owner was away, the man became angry. Then the drugs worked and the owner welcomed him back. Soon other owners were calling him in the middle of the night. Some have stopped making their animals give rides. Recently, an old elephant who lost a tooth developed a 3-foot abscess filled with pus. She could barely open her mouth. After an HSI vet treated her, the wound began to heal. “Everybody was saying that this elephant will die,” says Chawla. “We were able to save her life.”
India, many people view the dogs who live on garbage-strewn streets as dirty and dangerous—untouchable. Rabies is endemic, and many dogs bite because they’re the target of hits, kicks, and thrown stones. In Jamshedpur, animal welfare officers under HSI’s Joy Lee are doing the unthinkable: making friends with street dogs. They give biscuits, squat down among them, and pet and cuddle animals starved for affection (left). Then they pick up dogs, most of whom have never been handled before. This gets stares, which Lee says is an intentional effect. “People are shocked. They say, ‘Do you hypnotize the dogs?’ I want people to see the dogs in a completely different way—as man’s best friend.” The technique also allows HSI to gather friendly dogs—who represent about half of the population—without nets, reducing their fear and aggression, she says. Dogs ride unrestrained with HSI staff to the clinic, where they are vaccinated and spayed or neutered (below). Then, using GPS coordinates, staff members return the dogs to their communities. Rather than running away, dogs who haven’t yet been spayed or neutered often surround HSI trucks, welcoming their returning pack members home.

Wayne Pacelle, HSUS president and CEO, cradles a backyard chicken during a visit to India. Many of the country’s laying hens still roam free. But to feed increased demand for eggs, 140 to 200 million chickens are raised on factory farms. There, they’re crowded into battery cages that give each bird less space than an 8½-by-11-inch piece of paper. This violates India’s Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, and the country’s Animal Welfare Board has advised state governments to phase out the use of battery cages. HSI is working to persuade the three states that have not yet complied and to increase enforcement of laws—difficult in a country where egg distribution takes place through small vendors rather than large store chains. The Dalai Lama joined HSI’s campaign against battery cages in 2010; in 2012, he welcomed the organization’s new India office: “Animals deserve our compassion. We must know their pain.”

ON THE iPAD: View more photos from India.