

CORNELL CHRONICLE

Samantha the sheep gets a leg up, thanks to the work of CU vets and sanctuary

By Stephanie Specchio | November 3, 2008

Several disabled goats and sheep -- rescued by the Farm Sanctuary in Watkins Glen, N.Y. -- have a new lease on life: They have been given artificial legs, thanks to the work of several Cornell veterinarians working with Ithaca's Hangar Orthotics and Prosthetics.

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Samantha, a sheep, and two goats, Zoop and Juniper, came to the Farm Sanctuary with injuries that prevented them from walking normally. Samantha's left hind leg would not extend fully; consequently, her right hind leg became severely deformed and was failing at a very fast rate due to infection and degenerative joint disease.

Juniper lost both hind legs to frostbite. For years, she walked on her front feet with support from a wooden peg prosthetic, but as she grew, it no longer served her needs. Recently, her back partial legs have become sore, causing her to attempt to walk on her two front legs, using her wrapped back legs only sparingly.

Several Cornell veterinarians and technicians who specialize in pain relief and recovery with Cornell's Comparative Pain Medicine Program made several trips to Farm Sanctuary to examine the animals and determine if the other limbs and body systems of the animals were adequate for support. They then returned to the sanctuary with Christopher Lange, a Hangar prosthetist, who measured and made a cast of each of the limbs and then designed artificial limbs to support the animals' weight and aging bodies.

"Prosthetics are not commonly developed for companion or farm animals due to economics, utility and difficult fitting arrangements," said Andrea Looney, a Cornell veterinarian with the pain management service, which includes surgeons, oncologists, neurologists and veterinary nurses and technicians. "Keeping an artificial limb attached to a human is no easy feat, let alone keeping one secured to a farm animal outside in the elements, on uneven ground and within a herd situation."

Samantha is currently fitted with her new left hind limb, and although padding, angulation and length are being fine-tuned, she is out in the pasture and able to take much weight off her severely deformed and degenerating right hind leg. Goats Zoop and Juniper have been measured and are awaiting arrival of their artificial limbs.

"It's amazing to see how animals adapt to survive," said Samantha Koba, a veterinary technician with the pain management service. "Their drive and will are incredible, but in this case, there is really no need to have them suffer. We can use technology and medicine known to assist humans with such disabilities to likewise improve the animals' quality of life."

Added Susie Coston, national shelter director for the Farm Sanctuary: "We want them to live out their lives comfortably. In all of these cases, prosthetics will improve their quality of life."

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