

Rats limber up for Olympics after cat cull

Helena Smith in Athens

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I've always hated rats. And there it was, the sound of rustling in the rubbish. At first we thought it was cats, but then we glimpsed their spindly tails.

Unperturbed, they were crashing around inside the cans. In the somnolent, late-night darkness it was scary. Plaka, the heart of historic Athens, had a rat problem, then?

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Come to think of it, I hadn't seen a cat for some time; even my favourite restaurateur, who once seemed to spend hours shooing them away, had commented on the mysterious disappearance of the feline population.

"Athens beautiful, Athens clean," he grunted. "For the Olympics."

So clean, I thought, watching the rats, that we now ran the risk of contracting the plague.

Animal welfare groups say they have lost count of the numbers involved in the pre-Olympic cull.

The local penchant for killing off unwanted cats and dogs, by lacing food with pesticides, is not new. But in the final stretch before the games, it has assumed an unpleasant vigour. If you're an early riser you'll encounter the furry carcasses dumped in rubbish bins.

Since Socrates, the practice of neutering has been opposed in this country on the grounds that it offends an animal's machismo. A puss may end up drowned or poisoned, but while alive it must be allowed to enjoy the pleasures of sex, one of my neighbours explained.

The population problem is not easy to tame. In central Athens alone, an estimated 15,000 feral dogs lope about the pavements, crossroads and the wooded limestone hills around the Acropolis. Often you'll trip over the scrawny canines as you step into a cafe or bar. Most are believed to be abandoned pets.

Given the ongoing official reluctance to enforce animal protection laws, animal rights groups are now lobbying tourists to boycott the games.