

Animal lover's losing battle

Animal-lover Tina Eglezopoulos has looked after an army of strays at the Keratsini docks in Piraeas for the past 18 months. Once there were about 150, but now the number has dwindled to 70.

"People are killing them," Tina says sadly. "They are being poisoned." She fears the remainder will be removed as the Olympics approach because the docks she patrols will be cleaned for wealthy tourists to arrive on cruise ships. "I pray it won't happen, but I fear it might too," she said.

Tina works closely with Vesna Jones, founder of Greek Animal Rescue, established 15 years ago to help find homes in Britain and around the world for the unwanted pets, particularly the stray dogs of Athens.

Vesna, who has seven rescue dogs herself, said: "We have no proof the councils are poisoning the dogs, but someone is. We know Greek people have always resorted to poison to get rid of the problem, but this is happening on a larger scale and may be planned."

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New laws demand locals councils neuter, vaccinate and microchip stray animals before putting them back on the streets.

And they are supposed to educate people on how to be responsible for their pet in a country which does not believe in putting down sick or unwanted animals, does not believe in sterilisation - animals should have sex lives - and casually dumps them on the roadside when they have tired of their company.

"We were the country that gave light to the world in terms of civilisation and now we live in the dark in so many ways," says Nikos Leventakis, who ran his own animal shelter for nearly 20 years and is a member of the London-based Greek Animal Rescue charity, which seeks to find homes for abandoned pets.

Nikos takes us on a horrifying tour of rough, unregulated refuges.

There is a shack on the side of a busy highway which is home to 50 dumped pooches, then there is the place they know as the Dog Prison at Sparta, run by an old woman who visits now and again. Dogs are chained and others protect new puppies in the steaming heat.

He shows us Amalia Karali's bizarre dog home among olive trees near the airport. The animals are barely cared for here, but when the authorities tried to shut her previous stinking pit, she set fire to it. And still the poisoning continues.

"Massacres like this have happened before in places like Saronida," says Chrysa Athanasiadou, of the Society for the Protection of Stray Animals. "We heard that some officials from the British equestrian team were to stay there and the next day the poisoning started."

Olympic organisers condemned the killings. "I find this completely unacceptable," said spokesman Thanassis Kadartzis. "If it has happened, it is downright barbaric".

A spokesman for the Mayor of Athens, Paul Anastasiou, denied any authority was conducting a poison campaign against the animals, calling such allegations malicious and groundless. Mayor Dora Bakoyanni recently launched a charm offensive and adopted two strays herself.