

## Municipal dog-catchers learn the ropes

*While the ministry funds a vanishing act for Greek strays, representatives of local authorities attend an RSPCA seminar on humane trapping techniques*

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AS THE ministry of agricultural development and foods on June 21 promised 4 million euros towards a programme of sterilisation, vaccination and temporary shelter throughout the Olympics for stray dogs in areas in which Games events will be held, municipal employees and animal welfare representatives attended a seminar to learn how the long-term plan to humanely reduce the homeless canine population can actually be put into practice.

Representatives of ten municipalities - mainly members of animal protection organisations that have been seconded by the local authorities to deal with the stray dogs of each area before the August Olympics - attended the June 21-22 workshop, which was organised, sponsored and presented by the UK-based Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and held at the Hellenic Animal Welfare Society's (HAWS) Patrikia hospital in Koropi.

David Bowles, head of the RSPCA's international programme, and Carroll Lamport, one of the society's chief inspectors, guided the participants through a crash course in dog behaviour and how to recognise the signs of what a dog is thinking before it acts, how to approach a dog in a humane way that does not put either dog or catcher at risk, how to catch it and what to do with the animal once it's been caught.

"It's a very important time in Greece for strays," Bowles told the assembled group of municipality representatives, Athens International Airport employees, HAWS dog-catchers and veterinarians, and soft toys on whom the methods of grasping and muzzling were tested before the group moved on to real canines.

"Greece has just passed a piece of legislation on stray animals [law 3170, passed in July 2003, which requires municipalities to catch, neuter and release stray dogs] that, in many ways, is better than the nearly 100-year-old legislation we have in the UK. However," Bowles noted, "this law is just a piece of paper unless it is implemented - and that's why we've got you here, to learn how it can be implemented."



Fearing that stray dogs could embarrass them during the Games, Athens 2004 organisers and the government are asking animal welfare organisations to offer temporary accommodation to homeless canines

While they participated enthusiastically in the seminar, many of the attendees were sceptical as to whether this law ever will be properly implemented by the authorities and whether the legislation is not just a ploy of the agriculture ministry to try and silence critics of Greece's poor animal welfare record. Welfare workers from Glyka Nera and Markopoulo pointed out continuing poisonings of strays in their areas, and Giorgos Papadopoulos from Corinth spoke for many when he voiced concerns that after the Olympics, the law will be forgotten and conditions for animals will be the same, or worse, than before.

Meanwhile the Athens International Airport employees, who are responsible for catching dogs dumped in the airport area and taking them to the HAWS hospital to be neutered and rehomed (re-releasing them at the airport is illegal under law 3170 for safety reasons), felt that they were fighting a losing battle against the number of people who still abandon their pets in the vicinity of the airport - many of whom seem to do so instead of paying to have their dog looked after while they are on holiday.

David Bowles tried to look on the bright side. "During the last ten years that the RSPCA has been working in Greece, there's been a big change in people's attitudes to animal welfare," he told the group.

However, he expressed doubts about the viability of the idea, suggested by the Athens 2004 Organising Committee and, now, funded by the agriculture ministry, of taking strays from areas that will be hosting Olympic events and placing them in shelters or homes for a 45-day period and then put them back on the streets. "Nobody knows the number of animals nor, therefore, how much accommodation is needed," he pointed out. "In addition, no-one knows how the dogs will react when put away and then put out on the streets again."

"I hope that they are not just sweeping the problem under the carpet for the Games," he continued. "This is a long-term problem that needs a long-term solution."

The municipalities represented at the workshop - including Paleo Faliro, Maroussi, Metamorfoosi, Peristeri, Glyka Nera, Markopoulo and Corinth - all cooperate with HAWS on humane dog control programmes. The RSPCA had hoped to organise such a seminar with the agriculture ministry that would be open to other municipalities as well, but, Bowles told the *Athens News*, the ministry showed little interest in the idea and it had to be shelved.

*\* Collections of strays for municipal neutering schemes are usually done by equipped, trained crews in marked vans. If you see animals being gathered up in a suspicious manner, ask to see some ID, contact your municipality to enquire whether this is a council-approved collection, or ring HAWS on 210-602-0202*

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