

Will a New Law End Greek Tragedy?

By Genevieve Rajewski

It might take an Olympian effort

FOR AS LONG AS ANYONE CAN REMEMBER, Greece has struggled with the issue of dog and cat overpopulation, with tragic lack of success. The number of strays—estimated to be between 30,000 and 90,000 around Athens and some 200,000 to 300,000 throughout the country—is staggering. Pet sterilization is rare, and pet abandonment is all too common. Though illegal, various methods of killing, including poisons and glass shards concealed in meat, are commonly used to eliminate strays and end up killing household pets as well.

As Athens prepares to host the 2004 Olympics, many have feared poisonings will accelerate, as the presence of strays would likely concern those wanting to make a good impression upon foreign visitors. Led by the Coalition in Defense of Animals in Greece (CIDAG), some 80 animal-welfare groups and activists have united to implore the Greek government to humanely tackle the issue of strays before others take matters into their own hands. The result is a new law that animal-welfare groups hope will translate into a long-term solution to the vicious cycle of unchecked animal reproduction and senseless killing.

Passed by the Greek Parliament on July 7, 2003, the Companion Animals and Stray Animals Law Number 3710 institutes a campaign to promote responsible pet ownership and an initiative to sterilize and then release strays. The law also contains a humane-education component and introduces new, stiffer penalties for animal cruelty, including acts of poisoning.

"No law is perfect, and this one certainly isn't. But, in general, it is a good law," says Carol McBeth, executive director of the Greek Animal Welfare Fund (GAWF), a leading member of CIDAG. "One of the most important articles is the introduction of compulsory microchipping and registration. Hopefully, this will stop many people from abandoning their animals, and the people who do will be able to be traced and found."

As for the strays, municipalities will assume responsibility for catching, sterilizing and releasing them. Greek animal-welfare groups strongly advocated for this approach



because Greece lacks an established shelter system, and people rarely adopt dogs from the few shelters that do exist. "Greece works differently from a lot of European countries in that there aren't a lot of people who wish to have [strays] as pets," says Kelly O'Meara of Humane Society International. "Culturally, they are just not interested in street animals."

Conversely, sterilization/release programs—which have been employed in scattered areas of Greece for the last 10 years—have proven effective, says McBeth. As an example, she cites Agia Paraskevi, a suburb of Athens, where the Friends of the Animals Association cares for about 100 stray dogs. All of them are neutered, receive vaccinations annually, and wear identification tags with their names and the phone number of Friends of the Animals. "It really does work," reports McBeth. "There hasn't been a poisoning for nearly three years, and there is a healthy street population."

According to Dianne Aldan of Greek Animal Rescue (another CIDAG member), a new dog-sterilization campaign is already underway in and around Athens. However, O'Meara says that because the government took so long to act and lacks the infrastructure to carry out a comprehensive program, she fears strays will still be poisoned before the Olympics, or relocated to grossly inadequate shelters where they will suffer indefinitely instead of being humanely euthanized. It is hoped that Greece will look

to sterilization-and-release programs in such places as Bali, the island of Abaco in the Bahamas, and especially Jaipur, India (a populous city with a high number of abandoned animals), and model its efforts on their successes.

McBeth regrets to say that poisonings, which occur all over Greece, will likely continue. Because the culprits operate under the cover of darkness and are rarely witnessed, she believes there is little chance of the new law's harsher fines proving effective. In hopes of spreading public awareness about the widespread crime, GA WF is working with about 70 societies to produce a nationwide anti-poisoning campaign, complete with leaflets, posters and (if funding can be found) a television ad.

Progress, although slow, "is heartening." "I think the animal groups in Greece are finally being heard, and there will be change," says Aldan. "Although it will likely take 7 to 10 years to make a real difference, it has at last begun. Right now it's in and around Athens and other 2004 Olympic venues, but there will be a ripple effect to other areas also desperate for help."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Sign CIDAG's online petition asking for enforcement of the new law, at <http://www.petitiononline.com/greece04/petition.html>.

Visit the Greek Animal Rescue Website (www.garcanada.bizland.com) to learn about their "Sponsor a Stray" program.

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