

NEW YORK POST

ONLINE EDITION

OLYMPIC SHAME

By JULIA SZABO

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August 1, 2004 -- THE global spotlight is on Athens as the city gears up to celebrate the opening of the 2004 Olympic Games Aug. 13, when the much-anticipated event returns to its ancient Greek birthplace.

But pet lovers here in the United States were horrified to learn that the city's population of homeless mutts has been deemed an embarrassing eyesore.

Greek animal activists allege that the strays, which once numbered between 30,000 and 50,000, are being deliberately poisoned.

The Greek government has denied involvement in the dogs' disappearances. But witnesses say they've seen dead and dying animals rounded up by trash collectors. Parks in the city and suburbs of Athens, once teeming with strays, are now mostly empty.

"Dogs are being left a cocktail of poison in food scattered across the city," vet assistant Angela Fleming, of the Athens group Caring for the Animals, told London's Western Daily Press. "It is barbaric."

"These animals are hungry, so they will eat the bait," added Fleming, who has had little success treating dogs brought to her by concerned citizens. "And then they froth at the mouth and convulse and die a lingering, horrific death. Whoever does this doesn't see the pain."

New Yorker Marijo Gillis does; she traveled to Athens to document it. Her graphic five-minute video, viewable on www.ua4a.org/Greece.mov, depicts terrible animal suffering and is very difficult to watch.

But Gillis, founder of the non-profit Welfare for Animals in Greece, hopes people will protest what they see. "Please join me in conveying outrage and shock over the compassionless treatment of animals in Greece," she urges. To make a tax-deductible donation, call (212) 427-0587.

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