

Greeks to poison up to 15,000 stray dogs before the Olympics

By David Harrison

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Thousands of stray dogs will be poisoned ahead of next month's Olympic Games in Athens despite a campaign by the RSPCA to prevent their slaughter.

The animal welfare charity says that the strays will be killed because the Greek authorities fear that the sight of packs of dogs roaming the streets will damage their efforts to use the Games to show the world that their country is modern and civilised.

There are an estimated 15,000 stray dogs in Athens and although the government has taken some action to remove them from the streets without killing them, the RSPCA says that local authorities will not have the resources or the commitment to round up the animals and keep them in shelters during the Games.

Officially, the Greek authorities say that there will be no mass poisoning and the Athens Olympics Committee has asked animal welfare groups to help round up the dogs.

There are however, only one or two shelters in Athens that can take dogs and they are already overcrowded, so the Greeks face a choice of leaving the dogs roaming the streets during the Olympics or poisoning them.

Greece's fledgling animal welfare groups said that the mass slaughter of strays had already begun. Eighty dogs were recently found dead in the coastal resort of Saronida, where some members of the British team are expected to stay.

One animal welfare activist said: "There has been a big increase in poisonings recently and we expect it to rise sharply as the Games get closer. We are doing what we can, with a lot of help from international organisations such as the RSPCA, but we are fighting against a culture that is deeply entrenched." The RSPCA has campaigned hard to improve animal welfare in Greece and in particular to end the practice of poisoning strays to control their numbers.

The Greek government has expressed a desire to give more protection to animals and introduced tougher laws last year. Antonia Kanellopoulou, the deputy mayor of Athens, said: "Stray animals need our love."

The legislation has, however, had little effect and the RSPCA says that many local authorities in Athens and other areas hosting Olympic events will use the traditional method of poisoning the animals to clear the streets before the Games begin on August 13.

David Bowles of RSPCA International, who recently returned from Athens where RSPCA inspectors were training Greek officials to catch and treat strays humanely, said: "We are seriously concerned that thousands of dogs will be poisoned so that Greece can show that Athens is a pristine modern city. They don't have the manpower or the shelters to round up all the dogs. A lot of the local authorities simply don't know how to deal with dogs humanely. We have put a lot of effort into helping them to change their ways, but the results have been very patchy. We would like to see them using private shelters so that all the dogs can be given homes during the Olympics but it looks like that is not going to happen."

Mr Bowles said that mass poisoning was "barbaric" and a "short-term fix" that would not solve the problem of strays. Another senior RSPCA official said: "Greece's success in the European football championships in Portugal and now hosting the Olympic Games has undoubtedly boosted its prestige.

"They are desperate to make a success of the Games coming back to where they started. But they cannot call themselves civilised if they continue to poison dogs."

Carol McBeth, the director of the London-based Greek Animal Welfare Fund, said that she was concerned about many areas outside the centre of Athens. "I think we may see poisonings in the places where the cycling, football and equestrian events are being held," she said.

"They will be very keen to make sure that those areas are clear and they don't have shelters for the dogs."

Poisoning animals is a criminal offence in Greece, but it is such a traditional method of controlling the stray population that many local authorities turn a blind eye to the practice and actively engage in it themselves.

Greece does not have the same tradition of caring for pets as Britain and many animals are dumped when owners become bored with them. It is illegal to have animals put down in Greece and there is no tradition of taking in strays.

The problem has been made worse by a "macho mentality" that finds it "unnatural" to neuter cats and dogs, although a neutering programme introduced by the government has had some success in Athens.

Anastase Scopelitis, the Greek ambassador to London, who is in Greece on holiday, was unavailable for comment. An embassy official said: "Greece takes animal welfare seriously and our government has taken measures to improve our standards."