

United against poisoning

In an unprecedented endeavour, 75 welfare societies from around Greece launch a nationwide campaign against the killing of animals with toxin-laced bait

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AT MIDDAY on March 27, animal welfare societies from all over Greece will simultaneously launch a massive anti-poisoning campaign. The effort is aimed to concentrate media and public focus on this barbaric practice which, despite being illegal under Greek law since 1981, is still rife in many areas of this country.

Charities from all corners of Greece, from Orestiada to Corfu to Crete, will be handing out leaflets to the public in busy streets and squares, putting up posters and sending press releases to the local media with the message that poisoning is not a solution to the overpopulation of stray dogs and cats. This situation, the campaign literature points out, is largely caused by irresponsible pet owners: "The majority of animals on the streets were once owned, or they are the unwanted progeny of unsterilised pets."



The campaign poster, to be put up in town halls, shop windows, veterinary clinics and public places around Greece, reads, 'Poisoning: Inhumane. Dangerous. Illegal.'

"The point of this campaign," says Carol McBeth of the Greek Animal Welfare Fund, who co-ordinated the movement, "is not only to hit at the poisoners themselves, but also to point the finger at irresponsible dog owners who abandon their dogs, because they are to blame too."

"The aim is to make people aware that it's socially unacceptable - and illegal - to poison animals," says Mary Cochran of Friends of the Cat, "but they also need to realise that dumping animals is wrong and that - although they may imagine they are setting the dog or cat 'free to enjoy a natural life' - in most cases the animal will end up dying a painful death after being poisoned."

The Friends of the Cat volunteers have particular reason to get involved in the anti-poisoning project. Since December 2002, they have seen the population of stray cats that they feed and sterilise in Zappeio and the National Gardens decimated by two poisoning sprees. The first occurred on 31 December 2002, just days before Greece took over the helm of the European Union. More than 40 cats and 18 dogs died after eating food laced with insecticides. In response, protesters took to the streets not only of Athens but also Brussels and London to demonstrate against animal poisonings in Greece. In Brussels, a 48,557-signature petition was handed over to the Greek embassy, calling for an end to poisoning. However, on February 12-13 a further 20 Zappeio cats were killed with poisoned bait.

The agriculture ministry announced that it would conduct a thorough investigation into these mass poisonings and that the perpetrators would be brought to justice, but no culprit

has ever been named and shamed. Many believe that it was an inside job, ordered by local authorities eager to present a tidy, animal-free park to the visiting European dignitaries.

In October, a pressure group accused Athens municipality and the Athens Olympics Organising Committee of poisoning some 3,000 stray dogs since December 2002 to 'clean up' the city before the Games. These accusations were categorically denied by both authorities and were also largely dismissed as groundless by most Greek animal welfare groups.

McBeth is quick to stress that the 75 charities involved in this anti-poison campaign are not implicating the government or local authorities. "Although in some areas there are suspicions that the municipalities poison animals, we have no proof," she says.

Indeed, many municipalities are supporting the campaign, McBeth tells the *Athens News*. Various town halls will be displaying the posters, and on some islands, such as Mytilene and Skopelos, the local charities have come to an agreement with the municipalities to post the anti-poison leaflets along with utilities bills.

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