

Pets decimating local wildlife in Zakynthos

As is well known, there is a big issue in Zakynthos with pets. Most pets live under conditions that do not match the legal requirements or their own needs. There are stray animals everywhere on the island, not just in densely inhabited regions. You'll find stray cats and dogs within the forests, the farmlands, the protected regions of the Marine National Park Zakynthos as well as in other protected areas (such as Natura 2000).

Cats and dogs are carnivores by nature; they hunt and catch their prey. When they are living in the wilderness or on farmland they are contributing towards the reduction or even the extinction of wildlife.

Not only are cats very effective at hunting birds, but they also climb trees in order to eat the birds' eggs. They are also decimating the population of salamanders, snakes, hedgehogs, mice and large insects. However, only rarely do they hunt for rats, as those are too large in size to be convenient prey – even though oftentimes people want to acquire a cat in order to get rid of rats. The main natural enemy of rats would be the weasel that enters the nests of rats and eats their offspring. But the weasel is progressively being replaced by cats and dogs that have populated our wild areas.

This problem reached its height as sea turtles' nests have been destroyed and their offspring hunted. The authorities in charge of this have not taken appropriate measures to solve the problem or to enforce existing laws prohibiting the presence of dogs and cats at beaches.

In summer of 2022 we found dead baby turtles on hotel lawns that cats had carried up from the beaches. We observed this problem mainly above the protected beach areas of the Marine National Park Zakynthos, that is Kalamaki and Daphne Beach.

Helped by the financial support of animal welfare organisation *Robin Hood* (<https://robinhood-tierschutz.at>) ANTA decided to take action as well as to encourage the contributions of others so that we could tackle this problem that was created through neglect and hopefully arrive at a solution. We published an article about this issue and were quickly contacted by various animal welfare organisations and local individuals who informed us about their previous campaigns and their plans for the future.

For example, the organisation *Heart 4 Cats* has conducted the sterilisation of 30 cats in Kalamaki; 24 of these sterilisations were financed by Hotel Meandros. Penny Draper, who is also a devoted animal welfare activist, systematically organises the castration of cats in the area. The township's office responsible for stray animals (under the leadership of the vice mayor of Zakynthos, Christos Pastras, and his staff members Niki Varymbati and Nelly Kolimpadi) was informed about this topic (that they weren't previously aware of) by ANTA. Since then they have organised 25 castrations that will be done in March and April at protected beaches.

The problem is difficult to solve in Kalamaki, as there is a large settlement nearby from where cats directly enter the beaches. In contrast, it is completely unacceptable that we counted 16 cats in Daphne, which is a very secluded area.

In Daphne we managed to remove and castrate 10 cats – and we found a new place in a good house for seven of them. The remaining three cats that didn't find a place were brought back to Daphne after being castrated. What remains to be done is to castrate the remaining cats and to completely remove all cats from the protected areas.

Apart from that, we also found two little dogs in Daphne. One of them is entirely a wild animal, but all the same we intend to castrate both of them and put them into a program for adoption. They have to be gone from the beaches before the sea turtles' nesting season begins in the middle of May. The institution normally responsible for preventing and dealing with this issue is the Marine National Park Zakynthos.

The township (being the institution responsible for stray animals) as well as local animal welfare organisations, businesses such as the Hotel Crystal and various local individuals have all stated their willingness to support the sterilisation of such animals and the care for them, financially or through direct actions.

The following measures ought to be carried out as soon as possible:

- A better education of the National Marine Park's rangers – who are in fact the true heroes of the NMPZ management body! – through the experts employed by the Park. They should be reminded that their responsibility lies in protecting and sustaining the wildlife and the habitats of the island, that their job is *not* to protect and care for pet animals living in the wild and that the cat is, as a species, foreign (originally imported from Northern Africa) and exclusively allowed as a domestic animal inside settlements.
- Putting up informational signs at all the entries of protected beaches, in order to inform about the ban of cats and dogs on the beaches. Existing signs are not sufficient!
- The creation and distribution of an informational leaflet to local people and business owners; in the surrounding areas as well. Publishing this leaflet on the website of the Marine National Park and carrying out an informational online campaign to reach the citizens of Zakynthos.
- Cooperation between the township and the animal welfare organisations with the goal of achieving the sterilisation and removal of all pet animals from protected areas.
- Moving feeding stations away from the beaches, so as to not attract any wild animals to come there.
- Putting trash cans at a greater distance from the beaches (as animals are drawn there) and building constructions that prevent cats and dogs from getting inside them. There should be a collaboration between the township and the experts of the Marine National Park so as to apply for government subsidies to financially support this measure.

With the good will of us all the issue of pet animals living in protected nature areas can be solved. Regarding the sea turtle beaches, we have time until the 15th of May.

Let's therefore take action – be it together or individually. This is a problem of our island that is truly possible for us to solve!

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