

## **A Sad Reality: CATastrophes in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

Since the time of ancient Egypt cats have gone through many phases of treatment from being revered during life and mourned for after death, to being smuggled out of Egypt into Rome for the purpose of rodent control, to having their flesh added to the soups and stews of hungry farming folk of Europe during famine in the Middle Ages, and to being once again favored as a domestic pet by many (The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Cats, Cat Breeds, and Cat Care 12 - 14). However, sadly in some countries, especially in the Middle East, the Arabs and Africans, whose ancestors once looked to cats as superior creatures, have gone to the opposite extreme of neglecting them. "Generally, there is a lot of misunderstanding about the cats who live with us. Some people think they are a "local breed" - different from "pet cats" - or that they naturally live in the desert areas (Dunn)." The concept of respecting life and treating non-human souls with kindness is not a very present characteristic of Arab culture. Growing up in Saudi Arabia I come face to face with animal mistreatment on a daily basis, as feral cats roam the streets, raid dumpsters, and attempt to cross highways. Literally on every corner there is a poor cat fending for itself against disease, traffic, hunger, pest control, and cruelty from locals. As a result of the many experiences I have had dealing with these heartbreaking cat situations, at a young age I became certain of one thing; I was not going to stand by on the sidelines and not take action where it was very necessary to help bring about even a small change in these innocent feline lives.

My love for animals started from when I was a child, watching children abuse the stray cats and neglect them in every way possible, often referring to them with negative comments. For example some of the mistreatments towards the feral cats of Saudi Arabia that I have dealt with are: watching cats being grabbed by the tail and flung through the air, witnessing kids attempt to drown kittens in Pepsi, and worst of all hear a cat burn alive due to the malicious act of some kids with lighters. The government of Saudi Arabia also provides no animal shelters or humane way of stabilizing the population. Instead, the methods of cat population control that are resorted to are setting poison at dumpsters so that the cats that ingest the poison will die a slow painful death or trapping the stray cats and dumping them in the desert to be eaten by wild desert dogs or die of hunger. “Although they can still hunt, like their ancestors, they cannot live in desert areas where there is not enough shelter, food, or water for them to survive (Dunn).” Also a factor that doesn’t help in controlling the population of the stray cats in Saudi is that many Arabs either don’t know of spaying and neutering or that they are against it because they think these procedures are inhumane. Therefore, their pet cats breed, there are not enough loving homes that will take in the kittens, and so the solution is putting the cats outside to endure harsh life on their own. This cyclic issue of overpopulation due to ignorant owners, lack of respect and awareness about how to help and treat the stray cats, and the government not instilling a proper humane solution is an issue that has always really bothered me as it causes more problems than solves them. As Vet Lana has stated, “Of course the

problem doesn't go away. There are thousands more cats in the city waiting to move in and take their place - and breed more cats.”

As a first step in an attempt to raise awareness about the problems in Saudi society in dealing with feral cats, I started to try to educate my classmates on humane animal treatment through presentations and pamphlets. I was often told I was being “silly” worrying about “gross animals”. These negative remarks were discouraging at times, but I still knew what people said wasn’t going to change my opinion. On some occasions, I was pleased to be told that my efforts actually did make a difference. I had some people tell me that they decided to get their cats neutered, or that they were going to try to find a better alternative to throwing their numerous cats into the streets – like maybe try to find them another home!

Later on in high school, I decided I wanted to make a more direct impact on the lives of the cats around me, so I began my first major cat rescue and relocation effort when the housing complex I had lived on for many years was scheduled to be torn down. “Saudi residential compounds provide everything cats need: shelter in gardens and under buildings, water from irrigation systems and swimming pools, food from rubbish bins or left out by residents (Dunn).” Not only was this effort something that I was so glad to initiate, but this was also a very emotional situation as all these cats had been around since I had first moved to the housing complex, and I had watched and cared for generation after generation of cats who had all become my family and friends. One of the main catalysts to starting this project was that the

complex was located in the heart of the city of Riyadh, and was surrounded by highways therefore giving the cats no place to transfer after the people and the place they had become accustomed to was gone! There was no way I was going to allow them to be left behind to die.

I arranged funding for the rescue project and coordinated volunteers to trap and catch the cats. I also enlisted the services of two local veterinarians and observed the spay/neuter operations. I then arranged for the adoption of many of the cats and relocated the remaining ones to a safe location where I currently reside and am able to watch after them. This experience really proved to me that if I can set a goal, I can achieve it. Saving so many innocent lives was not impossible!

Now for the past two years I have been volunteering at a local veterinary clinic on the weekends. I have been very fortunate to have the opportunity to pursue my ambition of becoming a veterinarian and working for the welfare of animals in the Kingdom. Through my work at the clinic, I have become even more certain of my desire to pursue helping the feral cats of Saudi, and eventually in other countries. I have both my negative and positive experiences in dealing with this issue to thank for instilling in me the compassion, motivation, and dedication that I will carry with me my whole life and put into helping mistreated animals worldwide. I strongly believe that when someone sets his or her mind to achieve something and is persistent in achieving it, he or she will succeed.

I hope to someday open a no-kill animal rescue and shelter organization while also working with international animal welfare foundations. One of my key goals is to try to get the message across to both the Arab locals and the government that there is a humane solution to cat mistreatment and overpopulation. If basic steps were taken at school to introduce kids to animals and discuss proper treatment and care of pets, and the government began implementing “trap, neuter, and return” programs in place of their alternative cruel methods which they believe are solutions, a huge difference would be made for the sake of the dear animals of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For now, one must just take one step at a time, and keep a hopeful attitude that things will change in the future!

Works Cited:

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