

Trying to put a lid on Smith Island cats ; Control: Veterinarians, rescue activists and residents are on a mission to spay and neuter at least 50 of the island's stray cats this weekend.

[FINAL Edition]

The Sun - Baltimore, Md.

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Date: Mar 29, 2003
Start Page: 1.B
Section: LOCAL
Text Word Count: 912

Document Text

TYLERTON - Out here in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay, Jean Townsend is stalking cats.

Slathering a dollop of smelly canned food in a stainless steel cage, the Lutherville veterinarian is hoping to coax a black-and-white domino beauty into temporary captivity for a visit to a makeshift animal hospital set up in the town's fire hall.

Backed with grants and donations, Townsend and two other veterinarians, along with Maryland Feline Society volunteers, animal rescue activists and island residents plan a weekend of spaying and neutering at the feline MASH unit.

The effort, Townsend hopes, will humanely put the brakes on an out-of-control population of feral cats that seem, literally, to be crawling all over Smith Island.

"Oh, no, now look at that, there's another one going in the trap instead of the pregnant one," says Townsend as she crouches behind a bush next to the United Methodist Church. "I've already caught two myself. This is like shooting fish in a barrel."

In fact, it's next to impossible not to have good hunting on Smith Island if your prey is cats.

In Tylerton and two other tiny villages, Rhodes Point and Ewell, the animals - some nearly tame, others likely to take a vicious swipe at anyone who gets too close - roam freely. As one warms itself in a patch of sunlight, another snoozes under the steps of a nearby home. A block away, five or six cats snarl and tussle over the remains of dry food put out on someone's back porch.

Down by the harbor, where watermen have docked their boats for generations, no one can remember when rough-hewn crab shacks along the docks weren't swamped with cats. They forage for scraps of crab and fish the men throw away and grab any rodent foolhardy enough to venture out in plain sight. They scamper through the town's trash pile, often burrowing into plastic bags of household rubbish.

"They're actually valuable to have around," says retired waterman Haynie Marshall, 75. "There's 25 or 30 that hang around the shanties, and I'll tell you, we never see any rats. That's for sure."

No one can explain the soft spot the islanders have for the animals or why they feed the ever-growing numbers. But even the most diehard cat lover will not deny that the critters have become a nuisance.

"There's always just been plenty of cats; we just can't stand to see them go hungry," says Margie Laird, who has lived on the isolated island for all her 53 years. "It must have started way back with a few, but all you need is a he and a she and it doesn't take long."

While the island's human population slowly dwindles with the seafood industry's decline, cats easily outnumber people here. Tylerton's volunteer fire company president Sally Tyler says that the cats could easily triple the human population of about 280 residents.

Tyler, a Baltimore County native who married a waterman and moved to the island 18 years ago, should know. She is an avowed cat lover, an emergency medical technician and the person who always gets called whenever an islander has a sick animal to deal with. And if you live 12 miles and a 45-minute boat ride from the mainland and then a 20-minute car trip from the nearest veterinarian, there are going to be those calls.

"Everybody on the island seems to like cats," Tyler says. "We even had an old dog, Ginger, who'd bring home kittens in her mouth. She'd pick up the ones the mother cat would push out, the little sickly ones."

In the past year or two, residents have made attempts to rid the island of some cats, trapping two dozen or more at a time and hauling them to the Somerset Animal Welfare Society in Crisfield. The small shelter, which has a policy against euthanasia, is overwhelmed with cats, housing as many as 200 at a time.

"I wish I knew how to deal with this," says Joan Corbin, who captured two cats in her back yard yesterday in traps provided by the feline society. "We don't want to hurt them, we don't want to see them go hungry. It's especially hard on them in winter, but this is just too much."

Townsend says that since many animals are unhealthy, the team also will worm the animals and take blood samples to help identify illnesses that might be prevalent among the inbred cat colony.

Among her first customers yesterday was a battered old tom cat with a gash along his neck. Blind and nearly toothless, the animal was still formidable enough that volunteers used a crab net to drag him hissing and scratching from under a porch.

This weekend, the group plans to spay and neuter at least 50 animals.

It will make a dent in the total population, the volunteers say, but it will take at least two visits in each of the island's three villages to finish the job.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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PHOTO(S) / MAP(S); 1. Animal Rescue Inc. volunteer Denise Batista of Baltimore captures a stray cat on a pier of Tylerton on Smith Island as waterman Willard Laird watches. Batista is among volunteers capturing and spaying or neutering the village's out-of-control cat population. 2. Stray cats investigate a trap. Some say the cats outnumber the people on the island. 3. Smith Island; Credit: 1 & 2. STEVE RUARK : PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE SUN 3. SUN STAFF

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