

101 MOUSERS
By Iphigenia Virvidaki
Translation from the Greek by Kathryn Price

In Chicago and Los Angeles they have discovered—again—the most effective way of keeping rodents at a distance: Cats

King and Prince, two plump beige cats, work for their living. For two years now they have been settled in a factory in Chicago, their duty to keep away the rats. A while ago, along with eighteen others like them, they were living at the home of an elderly man who took care of them. When he died, the cats found themselves on the streets. It was the spring of 2011, and at that time the volunteer organization Tree House Humane Society, working with a team from the city government, had formally initiated the program “Cats at Work” in order to confront the problem of the rapid increase of rodents in the city. Thus, King and Prince became the first official working cats of Chicago. Volunteers of the organization transferred them to living quarters inside the factory, quarters which they would take up until they grew accustomed to the area. “At first, they were nervous. Now they are very friendly with the staff and enjoy their walks about the area,” Jenny Schlueter, director of development and head of the program for homeless cats, told us. The program “Cats at Work” is, further, being put into practice in yards, factories, garages, stables, and warehouses in Chicago. To date formal research has not been done on the results of the 101 cats’ work, but informal observations are very positive. “One factory owner told us that he had spent thousands of dollars for many years to get rid of the rodents, but in one week, with the cats patrolling the building, the rodents disappeared and have not returned. Also, it is characteristic that at the city government of Chicago requests for help in getting rid of rodents were 30% fewer—although up to then they were increasing,” reports Ms. Schlueter.

A similar program has been in effect for twelve years now in Los Angeles. According to Melya Kaplan, the inspiration behind and founder of Voice for the Animals Foundation, with this program two problems are confronted: “First, the rats. What do we use to get rid of them? Glue-traps or poisons, which poison the air, the soil, and in the end, us. Not, however, the rats as well—which return. And second: the subject of homeless cats who have either been abandoned or were born on the streets and have never been touched by a human—and consequently, cannot be adopted. (The latter end up in shelters and soon after are euthanized.) With this program you have many benefits: you save the lives of cats, they acquire a place in the community, the rodents disappear, and the environment is not weighed down with toxins.” The “Working Cats” of Los Angeles have been tried at the LA Flower Mart, at campuses of schools, and at the Wilshire and Foothill police stations—as the police are on patrol in the streets, the cats are on patrol inside the station. “Nothing works better than nature,” police Deputy Chief Kirk Albanese comments on the results.

The First Days at Work:

To get the cats established in the area of their work requires a certain process. “How difficult is it?” I asked Ms. Schlueter. “The cats must be resettled in their new quarters in a limited area. Usually, people employ wire-netting to limit the area (beneath the veranda, in a storage building, or garage), and if they don’t have a suitable place, we furnish them with large dog crates/cages. Each cat needs a refuge—a small box, a place to chill out, but also a place for its food and water. The resettlement lasts 2-3 weeks. During this time the people who will take care of them in the future feed them at the same hour at least twice a day so that the cats will get used to their voices. It’s also good to invent a signal (a particular phrase or a tap on the food bowl with a spoon). When the cat feels comfortable with the new person, as well as with the new environment, and shows interest in coming out of its quarters, we should allow it to do so, but its familiar quarters should remain there for a few weeks more—that is if the quarters are not destined to become a permanent establishment. It is important also that cat food not be left about after the meal and that litter boxes be cleaned because no one wants to attract rodents to the area. This is the careful procedure we must follow with every cat that we resettle.”

One of the criticisms which the program has received stems from the fact that the cats are fed by people and, therefore, have no reason to chase rodents for their food. Ms. Schlueter’s answer is clear: “That’s a mistake. Cats don’t chase mice and rats merely to eat them. They chase them because their instinct tells them to. And the most important point: Right from the beginning, the very presence of a cat chases off the pests, since rodents never approach their natural predators.” So simple, so natural. And a very good idea.

[Caption accompanying the picture]

Left, King and Prince who began their profession of “rat-chaser” in Chicago

Right, a worker in the garage of a police station in Los Angeles