



## agriculture & rural development

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# Rabies fears for feral cats

## Public urged not to panic

DUNCAN GUY

**F**ERAL cat colonies can pose a rabies problem, says Kevin le Roux, project manager for the province's anti-rabies unit.

"Of the seven deaths in South Africa so far this year, three have been the result of cats," said Le Roux.

"Cats can be very aggressive. Often, they bite and do not let go," he said, adding that feral cat colonies commonly found at institutions such as hospitals, schools and companies posed a major problem.

"There are a lot of wonderful people who look after these colonies, but not for one second can you say every cat has been dealt with. Tomorrow another cat could come into the colony," said Le Roux.

One of the three fatalities resulting from cats was Ethan Hayes, 3, who was bitten at Blythedale Beach on New Year's Day when his family was on holiday at a resort near a feral colony where a feeding programme was in operation, according to a recent *Carte Blanche* television programme.

Sharon Cossey, who chairs the Ballito-based Feline Feral Fund Ballito (FFF), said the rabid cat was a once-off incident at Blythedale Beach, "where sadly the ferals have been allowed to breed with no intervention of controlling the colonies by trapping, sterilising and releasing back into their colonies".

FFF controls always involved giving anti-rabies inoculations, she said.

Cossey added that the FFF had approached a resort at Blythedale years ago to discuss managing the feral cats and met a negative response.

Neither Ethan's family nor the Palm Dune Beach Lodge could be reached for comment.

"I request the public not to panic and have a negative approach towards our feral cat colonies," Cossey said.

Moved by the *Carte Blanche* programme, Ballito architect Mark Taylor, who once survived a bite from a rabid dog, is using his 40th birthday to help fight the rabies crisis.

### Vaccination

Bearing in mind that "it's better to be safe than sorry", he wants to help get all domestic animals vaccinated – a task veterinary officials say is massive amid few resources and staff.

"The experience (of being bitten) weighed heavily on me psychologically and still today I struggle to wrap my head around the 'What If's'," he is quoted saying on the Backa-Buddy, the platform he is using to raise his target of R10 000 for anti-rabies work.

He was particularly inspired by Eshowe vet Vanessa Meyer's volunteer work, inoculating domestic animals in rural areas. His fund-raising efforts will benefit her campaign and one in Ballito called Save.

In November 2012, Taylor had been on his way from Pietermaritzburg to Durban when he noticed a dog in the middle of the highway that

appeared to have been hit by a car and severely injured.

"As I bent over to pick up the dog, it jumped up and bit me on the side of my face to form a cut about 10cm long from my ear down to my jawbone.

"The dog then ran away until I managed to catch it and take it to a nearby vet."

Taylor received a rabies prophylaxis injection despite the dog's saliva samples testing negative for the disease.

Later, more comprehensive tests revealed that the dog had rabies and Taylor was notified to seek further treatment.

In Durban, Bridget Slogrove of Cats of Durban stressed that cat colonies in urban areas played a crucial role in controlling rats and snakes.

Nikki Moore, also of Cats of Durban, warned that if a managed colony is eliminated, feral cats that would fill the vacuum would have a greater chance of having rabid individuals among them.

Meanwhile, the state's campaign, which requires a total of R20 million in funding, has acquired 22 new vehicles.

"We are aggressively busy with a massive vaccination programme across the province, both in urban and rural areas," said provincial agriculture spokesperson Khayelihle Nkwanyana.

"We have put in more resources along the coastal belt from Richards Bay, Stanger (KwaDukuza), Tongaat, Ballito and Durban, right up to Port Shepstone.

"We are also doing inland areas, such as Zululand."