

Blaming the Victims

► **By Michael Mountain**

Our work for the animals is a work of the soul.

The decision by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission to exterminate free-roaming cats across the state should, in the final analysis, surprise no one. It's business as usual, and the story – which includes how senior officials were overheard laughing and joking about the joys of shooting cats – is reported elsewhere in this magazine.

But the problem is not simply a few boorish staffers. It's that, one way or another, whenever things start going wrong for humans, animals tend to get the blame.

The decline of songbird populations and other Florida wildlife is one of the main reasons given for the planned assault on cats. It's true that cats sometimes catch songbirds, but birds have never been their natural or favorite prey. The real problem is the massive decline of wildlife at the hands of humankind.

The destruction of the Everglades by corporate interests like the sugar industry was a catastrophe for one of the world's most magnificent wetlands and the animals that made their home there. Only now that the problem is rebounding on people are billions of dollars being spent in a last-ditch stand to put it back the way it once was. Countless more species are in trouble in Florida. The beaches where turtles lay their eggs have all been taken over by humans. The Gulf of Mexico is turning into a huge dead zone. The entire cycle of life is being disrupted.

Little is being done about any of this. Instead, the state plans to launch an expensive, pointless massacre of cats that will accomplish nothing but to add insult to injury.

Cats have always been an easy scapegoat. The Florida commission's public hearing is eerily reminiscent of times in the Middle Ages when cats were put on trial for causing plagues and bad harvests, and were killed on sight for being possessed by demons. Rather



than dealing with the real cause of the problem (back then it was bad hygiene in overcrowded towns; today it's human greed and selfishness), a sacrificial victim has to be found. Today, once again, it's the cats.

Florida, of course, is not the only culprit. In China, the "cause" of the latest human plague, SARS, is being traced to innocent creatures like civets – often known as civet cats. Traditionally hunted down as food delicacies, they're now scapegoated in the public mind as dangerous plague carriers.

Dogs and cats are being rounded up, too, as transmitters of the disease. And before SARS, there was the bird flu panic. The problem, of course, was not the birds, but the appalling conditions in which they were kept. Regardless, the solution was to kill them by the millions. (Imagine the outrage if they started rounding up the *people* who cause or transmit all these sicknesses!)

Blaming the animals is as old as original sin – literally. In the bible story, the entire human drama begins with Eve blaming a snake. (Adam, true to form, blames Eve.) And the same story is told in other traditions – like among the West African Bassari people, whose creation story tells of Unumbotte coming down from the sky and discovering that people have been eating the fruit of his favorite tree. "Why did you do that?" he demands to know. "Snake told us to!" they reply.

Whether it's snakes, cats, sharks, chickens, or any other creature-du-jour, blaming the animals is not going to solve our problems. The animals are not our enemies. We are animals too, and a part of nature – but only one part of it. And if push comes to shove, nature will learn to do without us.

But if we are good to the creatures with whom we share this planet, we can be confident that nature will be good to us, too.

“Saying it's the animals' fault is as old as original sin – literally!”