

Cat hunters' island task nasty but needed

From IVAN D SCHOLTZ
(Green Point):

In REPLY to Mrs P Sievers (Letters, August 18) condemning the "jolly" photograph of the cat hunters off to Marion Island, may I assure her that they needed to be jolly to endure what awaits them in the sub-Antarctic conditions they will experience on one of the most inhospitable islands in the world.

These cat hunters are airlifted by the SA Agulhas' helicopter to the shacks on various places on the island (some 10 km or more from the base) which will be their homes (two men to a shack) for some five months or more where they will live being constantly subjected to the most atrocious, freezing and miserable weather conditions one can ever imagine, without instant hot water or electricity, and above all having to go out at nights to hunt

the cats.

To make matters more difficult for them they have to periodically walk back to the base over hills and deep depressions through thick, slimy mud and ice to fetch supplies, which they have to carry on their backs, generally in the face of a freezing wind - believe me it will not be long before many of them will wish they had never heard of Marion Island.

In regard to Mrs Siever's plea that the cats, which are now completely wild and live in holes all over the island, should have been put down to sleep the position is that the responsible authorities have already used every possible humane method of eradicating the cats: cat flu, bait and fences which, while having helped considerably in curtailing the cat population, have not been able to eliminate them.

The introduction of cat hunters and tracker dogs is thus a last resource in trying to save the bird life of the island. To give some idea of the cat menace, during 1987, when 450 cats were killed, it was reliably estimated by the authorities that if these cats had lived 94 000 birds would have been killed by them and their potential offspring over a period of time.

In fact one species of bird endemic to the island has been exterminated by the cats, which are now even burrowing into the ground to get at the petrel chicks which live below ground - so one can well realise that if nothing had been done to combat the cat menace the island would one day have been virtually devoid of bird life.

At the height of the cat population, at one stage more than 5 000, the ecology of the island was seriously threatened.