

Operation Catdrop: An Altogether More Bizarre Approach To Tackling Invasive Species

Imagine the scenario: myriad cats suddenly falling out of the sky, dropped by an airplane in an undisclosed location somewhere in Borneo in the early 1950s. Are the cats part of a new secret weapon, or do they belong to a new killer breed?

The solution to the riddle of Operation Catdrop is a bit more complicated: malaria. The disease had broken out among the Dayak people, peaceful inhabitants of the Sarawak region of Borneo. The World Health Organization heard about the malaria outbreak and decided to spray large amounts of the chemical DDT to kill the mosquitoes, known carriers of malaria. But the WHO had not accounted for the interconnectedness of the ecosystem.

At first, the mosquitoes died and the malaria cases decreased, so everyone thought the worst was over. But then people realized that the DDT had also killed useful insects, for example parasitic wasps that lived off thatch-eating caterpillars. Without the wasps, the caterpillars multiplied and ate the thatch from the roofs, causing the roofs to fall on people's heads.

However, there was a far worse consequence. The insects that died from the DDT were eaten by bigger animals – lizards, for example, that in turn were eaten by cats. The cats started to die and as a result Borneo's rat population flourished. This meant the potential outbreak of two other serious diseases carried by rats, the plague and typhus, for the Dayak people.

The solution to this new problem was to increase Borneo's cat population – and fast. It was therefore decided that cats would have to be brought in from outside and so a cargo of live cats was parachuted into Borneo.

The fact is that “Operation Cat Drop” did take place to replenish Borneo's cat population. However, the only written evidence of the matter states that only 20 cats were dropped, together with other goods, in a special container designed to withstand the parachute drop by a large Royal Air Force cargo plane, over Bario, a remote village in northern Borneo on 13th March, 1960.

Well-informed readers may have heard different versions of this story. In one, 14,000 cats are said to have been parachuted, sometimes by the Royal Air Force, sometimes with the United States involved. In any case, the story is a good example of how truth can be found in the most bizarre of stories, how cats are amazing animals, and how using DDT as a chemical agent has far-reaching ecological consequences. DDT is still used, by the way, in many developing countries for the same purpose.