Delhi's Discontented Cows
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ANIMALS

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Traffic and trash remain lethal bovine hazard

The city of Delhi employs 100 "cow catchers" to deal with the approximately 40,000 cows which freely wander the city's streets. Theirs is truly "mission impossible" as they deal with crafty or uncooperative cows on one hand and irate Hindus on the other who object to their manhandling the sacred animal. But recently, according to an article in the New York Times by Barry Bearak, "The cow catcher's mission has taken on added urgency because the urban cow has encountered a vicious new enemy: the plastic garbage bag. With little grass to graze on in the paved cityscape, cows scavenge through trash that is increasingly packed into polyethylene." "Inside the cows we find glass, iron, wire, electrical cords, shoes, shirts and razor blades, but the real killer is the plastic," Dr. Vijay Chaudry told the Times. He is a veterinarian who runs a refuge where the catchers deliver captured cows. "We lose two or three cows a day, and when we cut them open, it is terrible what we find. For an animal so sacred, they die a bad death."

Animal rights groups in Delhi have launched a campaign to ban plastic packaging, but the effort may be futile. "In modern India," says the Times, "the utility of the garbage bag may be a force beyond even the spirituality of the cow." It is common for

cows to ingest metal, and special magnets are made to be swallowed by the cow which keeps the metal all in one place. For plastic, though, there is no remedy.

Meanwhile urban cowboys go about their business. "There are many difficulties to this work," Raman Kumar Sharma, a cow catcher foreman, told the Times. "Old cows are tired and sick, and these are easy to catch. Young, healthy cows, well, this is something else. The cow is quick. The cow is intelligent. The cow has learned to recognize our truck." Sharma relies upon stealth to rope the critters, then, "If you grab the ears and put your hand in its mouth, the cow won't run," explained Aji Ram, eldest of Sharma's crew. That doesn't mean the job is over. Bearak witnessed one futile hour-long attempt to load a cow in their truck. The cow, he wrote, "used Gandhian tactics of civil disobedience and went limp." It worked. Eventually Sharma announced, "I don't think we catch this cow." That was fine with bystanders, who had shouted at the crew, "Why don't you quit torturing the poor animal!"