

By: Sachin 2008, Science Editor

## Water Cats

### *From Venice to Lake Van*

You may love or hate cats, but they gained their right of citizenship in most urban and rural human settlements. Along the millennia, cats accompanied people mostly through their will. Some civilizations adored and worshiped cats (in Egypt, there was even a cat goddess, Bastet), but in other cases cats were useful auxiliaries in the battle with the rodents. Venice, for example, is a town of canals, gondolas and ...cats. Even if the symbol of the Venice is the lion, cats are found everywhere, on the streets, squares and gardens. 12,000 cats roam the streets of the city. They were 50,000 before the WW II. A Venetian knows all the cats in its neighborhood and when one cat dies, an obituary is published in its memory, in the local newspaper "Il Gazzettino". During the carnival celebrated at the end of the February, a masked character called "gnaga" (the mask resembles a cat's face) wanders the streets, meowing and launching licentious invitations to the passengers. Cats are symbols of freedom, but also of the decadence. The presence of the cats in Venice is dated around 828 A.D., when two traders of Venice, Rustico di Torcello and Buono Tribuna de Malamocco kidnapped from Alexandria, Egypt, Saint Marcus' relics, thus the saint turned into the protector of the city. The Venice inhabitants even called kidding the cat "the lion of Chioggia", an allusion to the smaller neighboring city of Chioggia. Being a city of sailors, in the 14th century Venice had a fleet of 3,300 ships, enormous galleys that transported up to 300 tonnes of goods each. Venice traded with Greece, Syria, Armenia, Persia, Egypt, Cyprus, and the cats could have embarked the Venetian ships on their own will, reaching Venice. Cats soon became recommended and indispensable for controlling rodents on the ships. Genoa, the rival of Venice, was the first city which officially authorized the presence of 2-3 cats on each boat transporting goods. In the 15th century, Venice did the same. One member of the crew was charged with feeding and taking care of the cats on board. In the 18th century, France too institutionalized the presence of cats on board. The most appreciated for their hunting skills were the cats coming from Egypt and North Africa, while Syrian cats were priced in Venice and Rome. Cats are also common in the Greek Cyclades Archipelago of the Aegean Sea. These cats sleep 16 hours daily, but discontinuously (a behavior preserved from the wilderness, when they had to keep an eye on the predators). All these cats gather on docks at 18:00 p.m., when fishermen return from the sea. Now they feed on fish remained in the gaps of the fishing nets. In the summer, their diet is more varied, due to the large number of tourists and the leftovers from the restaurants. Lake Van, located at an altitude of 1,720 m (5,733 ft) in the Anatolian Plateau in southeastern Turkey, is surrounded by a rocky and arid landscape. In the summer, temperatures can rise to 40o C and in the winter decrease to -30o C. Local cats are known for their semi-wild life style. In the summer, they wander up to altitudes of 2,000 m (6,666 ft), hunting in couples, while in the winter they return to the protection of human houses. These cats are famous for their fishing and swimming skills. The cats fish at the mouths of the small rivers, where water is less salty. Today, the Van breed is endangered in its native area: less than 100 individuals of the white cats are left. Many of these cats have heterochromia (one eye is brown, the other one is golden).