

That ‘Unimaginable’ Smell in Cape Town? A Docked Ship With 19,000 Cows.

As the stench wafted more than a mile inland, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals found a buildup of dung in the animals’ cramped holding pens.



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Cape Town in 2021. The livestock carrier that was the source of this week’s foul odor in the city was expected to leave by Wednesday. Nardus Engelbrecht/Associated Press



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Reporting from Johannesburg

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When a smell so foul that locals called it “unimaginable” wafted over Cape Town this week, a search for the source of the stench choking the scenic South African tourist destination led to the city’s harbor.

Nearly a mile from the dock on Monday morning, Terence van der Walt, a local wine distributor, was stuck in traffic when the odor, made worse by the hot summer weather, began to drift into his car. With a smell so enveloping, rolling up his windows felt pointless.

“It was so putrid,” Mr. van der Walt said on Tuesday, describing his experience. “It would have been green if this were a cartoon.”

After the smell hovered over Cape Town for several hours, a team from the local environmental health department discovered the source: a 623-foot-long livestock carrier registered in Kuwait — with 19,000 cows onboard.

The carrier, Al Kuwait, had docked in Cape Town’s busy harbor on Sunday to replenish the feeding stocks during its journey to Iraq from the Port of Rio Grande in Brazil, according to shipping data. The animals had been onboard for more than two weeks.

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It was the ship’s first time docking in South Africa, said Jacques Peacock, a spokesman for the national Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. So the organization had obtained a court order before the vessel’s arrival that allowed inspectors from the group to board the ship and inspect its cargo.

Onboard, they found a buildup of feces and ammonia in the animals’ cramped holding pens across several decks. It had created an “unimaginable” odor, the group said on Monday in a statement.

“This smell is indicative of the awful conditions the animals endure,” it said.



The carrier Al Kuwait in 2020 in Fremantle, Australia. Credit...Richard Wainwright/EPA, via Shutterstock

The group has campaigned in South Africa against the transportation of live animals by sea, and has lobbied the country's government to ban the practice in its waters. Such vessels often have poor ventilation and unhygienic conditions, the group said, adding that the animals risk being trampled or injured in voyages over rough seas, and the ships rarely have an onboard veterinarian.

Although the South African government issued new guidelines last year regarding animals exported from the country, Mr. Peacock said that the S.P.C.A. now planned to seek stricter guidelines for ships coming from other livestock-exporting nations.

The ship is owned by the Kuwait-based Al Mawashi company, which specializes in livestock trade and transportation, with branches in Dubai, South Africa and Australia. The company did not respond to requests for comment.

The carrier remained at the port on Tuesday and was expected to leave South African waters by Wednesday.

Officials have instructed the local authority that runs the port to ensure that the ship does not pump any waste into the harbor. Mr. van der Walt, for his part, said that he had been swimming in the ocean on Tuesday and found the water to be clear.

In the meantime, although the smell was coming from outside the city, it was a worrying reminder to locals who have been dealing with another source of foul matter: the city's crumbling sanitation infrastructure.

Councilors in the mayor's office moved quickly to assure residents that the latest noxious smell was not emanating from raw sewage, as happened just weeks before when a water pump collapsed in a northeastern suburb.

Last fall, heavy rains had damaged pipes in another suburb, sending sewage into rivers and wetlands, said Caroline Marx, a director of Rethink the Stink, a water activism group in Cape Town. And since then, the area has experienced about a dozen sewage spills, she said.

Despite the city having increased its sanitation budget, Ms. Marx said, Cape Town has been struggling to keep up with rapid urbanization. Away from its luxury hotels and affluent suburbs, residents in mushrooming shack settlements without basic services often share a water pump and portable chemical toilets.

"The city is years behind where they would like to be," Ms. Marx said.

Lynsey Chutel covers South Africa and the countries that make up southern Africa from Johannesburg. [More about Lynsey Chutel](#)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/20/world/africa/south-africa-cape-town-ship-cows-smell.html>

I have read of incredible numbers of sheep being shipped by sea to Saudi Arabia for the *Hajj*, but cattle too crossing oceans? 19 000 on one ship?

Horses: how do all our horses get to Japan and those barbarians in Europe who like horsemeat? Are horses slaughtered domestically and then shipped as frozen meat? But we know *connoisseurs* love their meat fresh. No wonder horses buck and kick us, like elephants in *musth* go berserk stomping their *mahouts* and any foolish human they can get their trunks on and tusks in.

As someone who both knows how stupid we have bred cattle to be, dangerous, and cares for them anyway, I cannot conscience this. Inevitably, many will be trampled, the weak and sick will die and be left till arrival (if throwing them overboard—along with all that manure—is not feasible or just too much work).

What other horrors do we inflict on "poor dumb animals"? Well, Chinese/SE Asian "wild animal" markets come to mind. We are a shameless "subhuman" species disgraced by our ignorant or indifferent worst! Who deserves all the reckonings to come? Me, not paying enough attention to wherefrom and how and at what cost all my choice consumptions and comforts come to me? TJB