

## **Bible and the Headlines: Rat Problems**

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If you find yourself over-using the word “symbiosis,” a few of this week’s stories will provide you with an excuse to introduce a synonym. The suggested noun is “commensalism” which, as you probably already know, is where one species benefits and the other species is largely unaffected.” Used in a sentence: Biologists label the relationship between rats and humans as commensalism. The headlines show that ordinary folks do not see the human/rat relationship in the same light.

On July 16th, Canada’s CTV News published, “Alberta Celebrates 75 Years of Being Rat Free.” This state of affairs was accomplished by the province passing an agricultural protection law that made every Albertan into a mandatory rat-killer. The province’s minister of Agriculture and Irrigation made the statement. “For three quarters of a century, Alberta has proudly been one of the few jurisdictions on Earth to live without the pest.” Even pet rats are illegal.

Boston.com on July 17th featured, “Rat Problems Have Residents up in Arms, as City Council Plans Hearing.” In addition to an increase in the number of these rodents, the rats in Boston have been found to carry the tropical disease leptospirosis. Troubled by this discovery a Boston Councilor said that leptospirosis, “. . . is a serious risk for people living on the street, our sanitation workers, and families across our city.” The responsibility of eradicating rats in Boston is shared between multiple city departments, but there is now pressure for the mayor to appoint a “rat czar” to fix the problem.

The July 18th edition of Chicago’s WGN9 News carried, “Rat Birth Control Program Expanding to Chicago’s Lincoln Park.” The rodent contraception program is already operating at two other Windy City parks. The pest control company Orkin has named Chicago as “. . . ‘The rattiest city’ for the 10th straight year.” Residents of Lincoln Park will be able to purchase from the city non-toxic pellets whose, “. . . main ingredient, cottonseed oil, inhibits rats’ fertility and reduces their population over time.” Unlike poisons, these pellets do not harm the rats, other species, or people.

There were several cities in the Bible that had a rat problem like Boston or Chicago. These cities were the five cities of the Philistines (Gath, Ekron, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Gaza). The rodent infestation began when the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant. Each city that hosted the Ark became overrun with rats and tumors (1Sa 6:4). To get rid of the rodents the five city leaders were told, “Make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country, and give glory to Israel's god. Perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your land” (1Sa 6:5). The golden rats were a better solution than Chicago’s cottonseed oil, and the Bible never mentions the Philistines ever having another rat problem.

The New Testament does not see the relationship of rats and humans as “commensalism.” Acknowledging the destructive tendency of these terrestrial rodents, believers are told, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and rats destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and rats do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt 6:19-20). Heaven doesn’t need a rat czar.