

Rats ride green wave into Vancouver's downtown core

City-wide surge in rat populations linked to increased usage of composters and green bins

BY TRISTIN HOPPER, NATIONAL POST JUNE 18, 2014

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Rats coming out of a burrow near a daycare on Burrard St. on Wednesday.

As Vancouverites have been ramping up their urban composting, some doomsayers have been predicting that putting out thousands of bins of rotting food would bring a reckoning of vermin upon the city.

Last Friday, their worst fears appeared to be confirmed when children at a downtown daycare showed up to find their playground overrun by compost-eating rats.

As of Wednesday, children at Beach YMCA Child Care on Burrard St. were still being kept indoors for fear of them encountering one of several dozen rodents still darting around the area.

"It will remain closed until we are confident the pests have been dealt with," said Kelly Walker, spokeswoman for the Greater Vancouver YMCA.

The culprit was the privately operated community garden next door. For months, food and plant waste had accumulated in a bank of six large plastic composters set up only a few metres from a chain-link fence surrounding the daycare. On Thursday evening, a rat tipping point was apparently reached, prompting YMCA officials to alert the City of Vancouver.

"We're taking care of it," said Albert Shames, director of solid waste with the City of Vancouver, moments before addressing a Wednesday afternoon press conference at the compost site, which has since been surrounded by city safety barriers.

For three days, Shames's crews had trucked away the offending compost and laid out traps for the rats. Nevertheless, on Wednesday a hearty population continued to scamper around the waste.

Although Beach YMCA Child Care's plight is among the more dramatic rat invasions to strike downtown Vancouver, it is symptomatic of a city-wide surge in rat populations.

"There's been a drastic increase ... it's very noticeable," said Patrick McLaughlin, owner of Vancouver's Mantis Pest Control.

For him, the main rat attractor appears to be compost; large, backyard composters or City of Vancouver green bins.

"My customers are telling me they've never seen rats before, and now they see the rats around the composters," said McLaughlin. When night falls, he says, they report "rats all over their backyard."

As part of a push to divert all organic waste from area landfills by 2015, in May 2013 Vancouver began requiring residents to deposit all food waste in municipal green bins that are picked up weekly.

Within a few weeks, the hot summer temperatures were already generating complaints about odour, flies, maggots and rats.

"Certainly, it may turn some (residents) off. We just hope they tough it through," Shameess told Postmedia in June, 2013.

Mike Londry, owner of Westside Pest Control Ltd., is less sure that blame for the increased rat presence can be pinned solely on sloppy composters.

Vancouver had an unusually dry winter, for one. With the city's rats spending less time sheltering from the rain, they had much more time to eat, breed and "thrive," said Londry.

Further adding to the problem, his city's eco-conscious residents aren't likely to dispatch rat populations with liberal quantities of poison, and Vancouver's many housing demolitions are regularly sending long-settled rat colonies on the hunt for new territory.

For more than 20 years, Michael Levenston has run the Vancouver Compost Demonstration Garden. He suspects the Burrard Bridge composters were undone by a combination of neglect and passersby using the public bins as impromptu garbage receptacles.

"If no one's taking care of that, you're going to have problems," he said.

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A rat infestation is causing problems near Beach YMCA Child Care on Burrard St.