

On Thursday, November 14, 2002, Alley Cat Allies National Director Becky Robinson delivered a presentation to the International Companion Animal Welfare Conference, Prague, Czech Republic. The conference was attended by some 250 representatives from 30 countries. Following is the paper associated with Ms. Robinson's presentation.

TNR: How Neighborhoods and Communities Can Stop Feral Feline Overpopulation

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Let me begin by acknowledging the debt that my organization, Alley Cat Allies, owes to its forebears in Europe and to the pioneers of nonlethal feline population control in the United States. There are too many groups and people to thank individually here, but I want to mention several whose roles had a direct bearing on my and Alley Cat Allies' development: Roger Tabor, Peter Neville, Dr. Jenny Remfry, Celia Hammond, Ruth Plant, AnnaBell Washburn, and Ellen Perry Berkeley. These men and women laid the groundwork that allowed nonlethal control to take hold and grow in the U.S. I am very grateful for what they have done.

Feral cats in the 21st century

Feral cats are found in every community in every country. When unsterilized housecats are abandoned or lost, they and their offspring band together in groups called colonies. Without human contact, the colonies become feral (wild). They make homes wherever there is a source of food—in alleys, parks, military bases, farmyards, barns, college campuses, and deserted buildings. Kittens learn to avoid humans and to defend themselves. Their numbers steadily increase, even if meager scraps are all the food to be had.

Then feral feline communities are all too frequently rounded up and, because they have had little or no human contact and are thus unadoptable, they are killed.

Nonlethal feline population control

There is a better way to control feral cats: nonlethal feral feline population control, including Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR), which uses humane, ethical methods to reduce feral cat populations.

Alley Cat Allies is dedicated to changing traditional animal control practices like trap and kill, and to providing leadership and resources for thousands of caring individuals and organizations in North America who have stepped forward to feed, sterilize, and care for feral cat colonies.

Trap-Neuter-Return, as advocated by Alley Cat Allies and practiced throughout much of the U.S., is a full management plan in which stray and feral cats already living outdoors in cities, towns, and rural areas are humanely trapped, then evaluated, vaccinated, and sterilized by veterinarians. Kittens and tame cats are adopted into good homes. Healthy adult cats too wild to be adopted are returned to their familiar habitat under the lifelong care of volunteers.

It is important to note that variations of TNR exist in many places—variations involving the extent of veterinary intervention, the range of official sanction, and the level of ongoing care. The one element that does not vary is sterilization of feral cats to break the cycle of reproduction.

The only effective solution

Why go to the trouble of sterilizing, returning, and caring for feral cats? If you discount the humane and ethical reasons for not attempting to exterminate large numbers of healthy animals, you are left with one indisputable fact: attempts at extermination are rarely, if ever, successful. We have decades of documented proof, and perhaps centuries of practical knowledge, that campaigns to catch and kill all the cats in an area where they have established their homes do not work. Survivors breed exponentially; outsiders move in to take advantage of whatever food source exists. This is called the vacuum effect. It is how the cycle of population growth always begins anew.

TNR in practice

TNR schemes begin in a community whenever one or more people who are feeding unsterilized outdoor cats realize that the cats are reproducing at an alarming rate and that the kittens often sicken and die without care, and the feeders decide that something more than feeding must be done to help the cats.

Who are these people, and where does this activity occur? Do not look for strong similarities among them. TNR takes root in many environments—from cities and towns to the most rural areas—and across the socio-economic scale. In the U.S. and much of Europe, the myth of the “crazy old cat lady” still thrives. In fact, feral cat caretakers encompass all age groups and both genders, and more often than not are squeezing the feeding and management of feral cats into a daily schedule of family, employment, and community obligations.¹

TNR inspires intense commitment in people. It has been frequently observed that feral cat caretakers seem to be naturally attracted to other caretakers and soon after begin to work together. The following examples illustrate how TNR takes root and grows from the original efforts of just one or two motivated individuals.

Indian Head, Maryland

In 1996, Molly Tominack, a civilian employee of the U.S. military, fed a hungry kitten outside her office building, then went on to learn about and introduce TNR to a 3,500-acre military installation at Indian Head, Maryland. In the process, she attracted and organized a dozen other feeders who helped her trap and sterilize 90 percent of the base's feral cat population. Molly also educated base employees about the importance of sterilization of companion animals, arranged low-cost veterinary services, and managed multiple colonies into which 60 kittens were born the first year, only three the second year, and in the third year, none.

AzCATs

In Phoenix, Arizona, the group AzCATs (Arizona Cat Assistance Team) was formed in 1999 by two women, Jan Raven and Sherrie Cox, who focused on reducing the numbers of stray and feral cats living in the brutally hot, dry desert environment. At first, AzCATs offered adoption and foster programs, but discontinued them in 2001 to concentrate fully on TNR and high-volume spay/neuter clinics. They acquired operating money by soliciting donations, applying for grants, and holding local fund-raising events.

AzCATs, with more than 100 volunteers, now provides two low-cost spay/neuter programs, a 24-hour telephone help line, 12 trap depots lending out 300 humane box traps, volunteer-assisted TNR for those who cannot do it alone, food assistance, and referral to other groups for services AzCATs does not provide. They operate throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area, in close cooperation with Maricopa County Animal Care & Control, and assist as needed in other areas of Maricopa County (the fourth-largest county by population in the U.S.). In 1999, AzCATs assisted 360 cats. In 2000, that rose to 1,821, and in 2001, 3,358.

Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society

Ten years ago, an unmanaged colony of 300 stray and feral cats scavenged a living on the historic riverfront in Newburyport, Massachusetts. The cats often succumbed to the cold, harsh New England winters, and the distressing sight of sick and dying cats had begun deterring people from patronizing local businesses. Then one woman, Jan DeWitt, working through the local Chamber of Commerce, convinced area restaurants and merchants to sponsor TNR. DeWitt soon joined forces with Dorothy Fairweather, another feral cat feeder, to form the now nationally known Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society (MRFRS).

Of the 300 original cats, some 200 proved to be kittens or strays (tame) and were neutered and adopted into good homes. The remaining cats were neutered and returned. Today, 23 cats live on the waterfront. No kittens have been born there in many years. The TNR program is so effective that concerns have risen over the growing rat population.

MRFRS, with 150 volunteers, actively promotes and assists with TNR programs in Newburyport and nearby cities, and runs an adoption center to find homes for kittens and adult stray cats. They have completed and maintained TNR for at least 27 large colonies originally comprised of more than 935 cats. MRFRS operates on donations and fund-raising activities.

Neighborhood Cats

In three years, Neighborhood Cats of New York City has grown from three cat feeders to a cadre of volunteers who have sterilized more than 1,000 cats; taught TNR techniques to residents throughout the New York City area; helped others form new TNR groups; and successfully advocated spay/neuter services, made humane traps available, and ensured that New York's feral cat population is included in that city's move toward no-kill policies.

The strongest point I can make here is that TNR programs can organize, grow, and succeed with very little money and few resources, but this work cannot be done without a full and open commitment from people.

Components of a TNR program

The people who make TNR work fall into different categories.

Caretakers

TNR begins and ends with caretakers, the dedicated individuals who take the first action to help hungry cats living outdoors. Caretakers:

- organize feeding schedules that must be followed regularly in all seasons and weather;
- recruit others to help out when the job grows too large for one person;
- locate a steady supply of food and shelter, and then spay/neuter surgery;
- convince resistant neighbors that TNR is in their best interest;
- reconcile themselves to the fact that this is a long-term commitment that must be met every day.

Alley Cat Allies developed its Feral Friends Network of volunteer caretakers and veterinary professionals to provide an immediately accessible resource for caretakers who need advice or hands-on assistance. Feral Friends are currently located in 47 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, five Canadian provinces, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, St. Lucia, and the U.K. The network enrolls new members monthly.

Veterinary care

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the veterinary profession in ending feline overpopulation. In the U.S. during the last decade, we have been greatly impressed by the thousands of enlightened, compassionate, community-oriented veterinarians and veterinary technicians who have offered low- or no-cost contributions of time, expertise, and facilities.

New TNR programs will benefit from enlisting the participation, and therefore endorsement, of the most respected and sympathetic veterinarians in the area. Other veterinarians in the community often will follow that lead.

Be aware that treating feral cats involves protocols that may be unfamiliar to vets who want to help. Such protocols include:

- establishing a herd approach vs. individual treatment;
- determining criteria for prepubertal gonadectomy (early age spay and neuter) procedures²;
- matching the level of protocol to the mission and available resources;
- developing high-volume surgery and progressive clinic stations.

Alley Cat Allies and other feral cat groups in the U.S. have materials available, including factsheets and videos, to educate veterinary professionals in feral cat procedures and protocols.

Several outstanding veterinarians, among them Dr. Julie Levy of Operation Catnip (Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia) and Dr. Marvin Mackie (California), have dedicated much of their professional careers to solving feline overpopulation through high-volume spay and neuter. Without widely available, affordable veterinary services, managed feral cat colonies could not exist nor could “euthanasia” rates have dropped as a result of high-volume sterilization.

Official sanction

The third component, official sanction, includes all segments of government and/or animal control that have an interest in, responsibility for, or investment in the outcome of animal protection work, including animal control agencies and public or private shelters, public health departments, and local and/or regional elected officials. Any successful, growing TNR program will eventually have to communicate and coexist with local government entities.

The North American public has embraced TNR. Because of this, local officials are increasingly open to the concept of TNR, and advocates of nonlethal control must learn how to talk to them and negotiate with them. Advocates must learn to put themselves in the officials’ roles and communicate the benefits they will receive. These benefits include:

- TNR effectively reduces feral cat populations in the long term. Extermination campaigns do not.
- TNR saves money, as indicated in statistics from jurisdictions including Maricopa County, Arizona, and San Diego, California.³
- TNR is congruent with public health responsibilities. Sixteen healthy, managed feral cat colonies live under the Atlantic City (New Jersey) Boardwalk, which hosts 37 million visitors each year. The cat colonies are actively endorsed by the Atlantic City Health Department.
- Community and individual benefits of TNR will accrue to government and elected officials when they are seen acting on the public’s desire to stop the killing of healthy animals. Other benefits include citizens’ voluntary participation in TNR programs and increased public approval ratings, and, at the next election, elected officials get to keep their jobs.

When all these groups—caretakers, veterinary professionals, and government officials—work together and TNR programs are established throughout a community or region, the numbers of feral cats immediately decrease, and the human population coexists with a healthy, steadily diminishing feral cat population.

Alley Cat Allies exists to put an end to feral feline overpopulation. We are a small group providing leadership to organizations and people who will change the world. That change is already occurring. Every single day, more individuals who simply cannot overlook growing numbers of outdoor cats are feeding, then sterilizing, then advocating on the cats' behalf. Other people who can no longer tolerate the killing of healthy animals simply because there are too many are joining us, too. This will always be a grassroots movement, but those roots are healthy and spreading fast.

In conclusion

Let me leave you with a few more thoughts:

First, in 1990, feral cats in the U.S. had no enemies because they had very few friends. They simply were not an issue. In 2002, we sometimes judge our progress by the enemies we've made. Our opposition exists in some areas of the government, in some areas of the media (often with wide distribution), and among some advocates of other species—even though our movement has never involved pitting one species against another.

My point is that you must expect to encounter resistance at best, and active opposition at worst. Do not let this deter you.

Second, you cannot save every cat. You can work to save the cats in your community. Later, you can work to change policy, which will save more cats.

Third, do not wait for the government or anyone else to undertake this work. There is no one else. ■

Alley Cat Allies (ACA) is a national, nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC. ACA promotes non-lethal population control for feral cats through advocacy; workshops and conferences; print, video, and web-based information; and by assisting individuals, groups, agencies, and institutions who work with feral cats.

¹ Centonze, Lisa A., and Levy, Julie K. "Exploring the Bond: Characteristics of free-roaming cats and their caretakers," *JAVMA*, vol 220, No. 11, June 1, 2002.

² www.winnfelinehealth.org/early-spay-neuter-seminar96.html

³ "TNR for Animal Control," Alley Cat Allies, 2002.

Resources

Alley Cat Allies factsheets

The ABCs of TNR

TNR for Animal Control

How to Talk to Anyone about TNR

Where Does TNR Work?

Five FAQs

Alley Cat Allies Newsletters

Alley Cat Action and *Feral Cat Activist*, available on the Alley Cat Allies website.

Websites

www.alleycat.org

www.pets911.org

Videos/DVD

The Humane Solution: Reducing Feral Cat Populations with Trap-Neuter-Return

This powerful public policy tool outlines the benefits of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) and demonstrates that TNR is by far the best method for controlling feral cat populations. (10:00)

Trap-Neuter-Return: A Humane Approach to Feral Cat Control

This comprehensive TNR training video is educational and engaging, and contains valuable guidelines for novices and pros alike. (24:00)

Pamphlets

Two essential pamphlets for starting a feral cat group, by Bonney Brown, Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, Kanab, Utah

Volunteers: Getting Ready for Them, Finding Them, Keeping Them

Grassroots Organizing to Help Feral Cats

Essential information on starting a feral cat organization

Books

Berkeley, Ellen Perry. *Maverick Cats: Encounters with Feral Cats*, expanded and updated edition. New England Press, 2001.

Kreuz, Tamara. *The Stray Cat Handbook*. Howell Book House, 1999.

Slater, Margaret R. *Community Approaches to Feral Cats: Problems, Alternatives, and Recommendations*. Humane Society Press, 2002.

Tabor, Roger. *The Wild Life of the Domestic Cat*, Arrow Books Limited, 1987.

Turner, Dennis C. & Bateson, Patrick, ed. *The Domestic Cat: The Biology of its Behaviour*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.