



No More Homeless Pets Forum
September 8 2003

Ferals Everywhere

Ferals, ferals, everywhere, and not sure what to do? [Nathan Winograd](#), director of [Tompkins County SPCA](#) will answer all your questions about feral cats. Wondering how to launch a community program? What to say to people who don't like cats? Nathan will offer insights into how to create lifesaving programs where you live.

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Nathan Winograd

Addressing perceptions of feral cats living short miserable lives

Question from Katie:

There is a lot of media out there regarding how feral cats kill wildlife, are a nuisance, live poorly and carry diseases! These perceptions hurt those of us trying to help ferals in need. How do you get the community to rally behind the notion that ferals are not the "vicious predators" that others would have people believe?

Response from Nathan:

First of all, I question whether there really is "a lot" of media out there, unless you live in a place like Florida where the issue has been hot. In Tompkins County, I have only seen one anti-cat article in the two-plus years I have been here - it was generic, focused on national (not local) concerns, poorly written, and easily ignored. In San Francisco, every Spring it seemed like the local Audubon Society chapter would get an article printed on how feral cats were supposedly responsible for all kinds of evils. But, for the most part, it was no more than an annoyance while we went about the lifesaving work of TNR unabated. While it is important to change people's erroneous perceptions and to take TNR into the mainstream, my first rule of feral cat advocacy is not to make something an issue that really isn't. Unless these issues are threatening the lives of your cats, keep your eye on the nuts and bolts of TNR.

Then take a step back. Where did this notion that feral cats are a nuisance; are vicious predators; and live short, miserable lives come from? It came from our own movement. It came from humane organizations that opposed TNR on just these grounds. While I was in law school, I got involved with a young organization called the Stanford Cat Network, the first TNR program on a university campus. When the administration of the school announced plans to exterminate the campus felines, a small group of dedicated individuals turned to local and national humane organizations for help - all who uniformly suggested trapping the cats and taking them to the local humane society where what would happen was anything but humane. From the local humane society to the Humane Society of the U.S., not a single organization offered any solution but extermination. For the next five years, while the Stanford Cat Network was neutering the feline campus residents, and preaching the gospel to other universities, another young organization cropped up to advocate for saving feral cats. Back then, Alley Cat Allies was two people working part-time taking on an enormous challenge to convince humane organizations that TNR

was a humane alternative to trapping and killing. Until relatively recently, national organizations called TNR an "inhumane act," coined the phrase "subsidized abandonment" to describe it, while most shelters continue to treat "feral cats" as second class citizens with little or no holding periods, relegated to cramped rooms, while they do little to try to stem the tide. If there is negative media out there, we have no one but ourselves to blame (figuratively, of course).

Although many of these organizations have softened their stance over the last couple of years, we still have a long way to go to clean house. Look at the literature humane societies and SPCAs are still putting out. How many describe the trials and tribulations of life on the streets? How many demand that adopted cats be indoors only because life on the street is supposedly mean, nasty, brutish and short? How many have posters in their lobbies pointing out the parade of horrors that await cats who are allowed outside? How many lambaste good Samaritans for feeding stray cats because they won't do more, creating this fiction that "feeders" are irresponsible and part of the problem, setting up an "us" (caretakers) vs. "them" (feeders) paradigm that hardly helps the cats at all? How many elevate fictitious statistics (2 cats equal 470,000 in seven years) as truth - thereby giving ammunition to anti-cat zealots who use this stuff to attack TNR (remember, to them that is 470,000 predators decimating song birds)?

Article for article, story for story, statement for statement, I would argue that generally, most of the stuff in the public space that is anti-feral and anti-cat actually comes from our own side. So to begin with, stop it. Stop insisting that adopters have to confine their pets in apartments if they live in relatively safe areas, tear down those ridiculous posters of disease ridden cats who supposedly inhabit every neighborhood ready to spread their diseases to your beloved house pet, stop the scare tactics about feline diseases, reach out to anyone in your community who helps cats in some ways, and stop parroting claims and stats that have no basis in fact or logic. Promote common sense.

The notion that all cats should be indoors only, regardless of where one lives is as silly as it sounds. The notion that outdoor cats are guaranteed a life of disease is contradicted by the facts (In San Francisco, for example, ten years of feral cat TNR demonstrated that the FeLV and FIV rate in feral cats was about 1-2%, the same as the pet cat population in a crowded city where most people kept them indoors). This idea that life on the streets is hard for all defies common experience. If you work in a shelter, do what I call the "chubby" test. For every feral cat that comes in a three or six month period, mark whether they look healthy and of adequate weight, or whether they are scrawny and sickly. For most shelters, most of the ferals will be plump - having found some niche where they are eating and doing well. There will always be counter-examples. But for the most part, life on the streets ain't so bad (at any rate, are we actually going to accept the ludicrous claim that because some feral cats will suffer, all feral cats should be killed as a preventative?) So stop promoting it as incontrovertible.

Then get yourself informed. And, as necessary, address the issues with actual data and studies. For all the claims lashed out against cats - they threaten rabies, toxoplasmosis, are decimating bird populations, etc. a whole body of literature exists repudiating them. A British medical journal finds cats (even cleaning litter boxes) are not a risk factor for toxoplasmosis, but that eating undercooked meat is. The CDC reports that there hasn't been a case of a cat transmitting rabies to a human being in the U.S. in some 30 years. A local health department, in conjunction, with one of the nation's top medical schools, finds feral cats pose virtually no risk to humans living in close proximity. One rabies vaccine as part of TNR essentially eliminates any risk, so that TNR actually protects human health.

Go to the Alley Cat Allies for a bibliography - but don't stop there. Summaries are nice. But get and read the actual studies. They are filled with ammunition against the alarmist claims. Read Roger Tabor, see why the move to having cats be indoor only is not so good for even pet cats. Read why the claim of cat predation isn't soundly based. Get a copy of the Toxoplasmosis study and contact the Centers for Disease Control. It is all out there. Get it, read it, and be informed. Then, as necessary, write thoughtful responses to counter the alarmist claims. You can - and should - be your community's "expert" on feral cat issues.

Not only is the science on your side, but more people LOVE cats than hate them. So, as a general rule, you have the public. The cat is the number one pet in the country. Stray cats are being fed all over your neighborhood and community. And you have your own SPCA supporters. Give them the tools they need to support you - instead of feeding them platitudes about indoor vs. outdoor cats.

I have found that if a shelter partners with feral cat caregivers, they can be a shelter's greatest ally. In San Francisco, when the local Audubon chapter promoted legislation to remove cats from city parks, one e-mail to our feral cat supporters resulted in a flood of calls and letters to the Board of Supervisors. In fact, the room was packed. They backed down instantly. "A shot across the bow," they called it. And they knew they would get squashed if they moved forward. This may be more difficult on a state level (though not impossible, in California, we got legislation that made it illegal for shelters to kill feral cats if a 501(c)(3) animal rescue group wanted the cat) but local politics is ripe for rallying the community. Act locally, impact globally.

Doing TNR when animal control enforces pet limit laws

Question from Chris:

How can we protect cats AND their caregivers in an environment of anti-feral legislation?

For example, pet limit laws are very popular in our region because the local Animal Control Services believe this is the only tool they have to prosecute claims of abuse/neglect (ironically, which still never happens)! As a result, feral caregivers work in secret, and if ACS picks up their cats, they have little to no recourse to save these animals from being killed without risking other cats in their care.

While our spay/neuter organization has made some headway with local Humane Society leadership (who hold onto the Animal Control Services contract), the actual officers who patrol the area are blatantly anti-feral. They feel they must apply the letter of the law rather than turn a blind eye as the Executive Director (ED) of the HS asked them to do.

Since these ACS officers are so willing to follow the law, is there an example of pro-feral legislation you can recommend for us to pursue?

Response from Nathan:

Once again I would advise to read the statute to determine exactly how "ownership" is defined in your local community. Does the local pet limit law really apply to you? I have seen a lot of them and most of them have some wiggle room for ownership that may not apply to caretakers as the example in San Francisco in a prior post demonstrated. On the other hand, ownership has its privileges. Since cats are property, you have a right of due process of law, including in many cases, a hearing when property is taken away from you.

For one, get a copy of the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. constitution. Post it on your door. You have a right to privacy in your home, papers, and effects. NEVER voluntarily set yourself up. How many cats do you have in your home? It is none of the animal control agency's damn business. They want to look around? Absolutely not. Can they peek into your backyard? No. When you go redeem your cat, redeem your cat. How does that threaten the other cats in your care? I don't see it. In addition, I see no reason why caretakers cannot have friends and relatives redeem cats if they risk exposure by coming forward. On an individual level, it cannot be that hard to find a way to save the cat's life.

I worked as a prosecutor for a number of years. At the Tompkins County SPCA, we also have two peace officers who enforce local and state laws related to animal care. I have rarely met someone who carried a badge who would be willing to look the other way. Nonetheless, if the local ED has promised you that enforcement of ordinances against your group will be stopped, hold him/her to it. Call this person when his promises are contradicted by the actions of his agency. Otherwise, what kind of deal have you got?

Pet Limit laws tend only to be enforced when complaints are received. When I was a prosecutor, one of the defense attorneys I knew used to tell all her clients to keep themselves "PC free." PC or "probable cause" was the term used by officers when they were stopping people as part of an investigation. I am not trying to show people how to bend the rules, but if you do not have a driver's license, don't speed. If you have more cats than the ordinance allows, be a good neighbor, addressing concerns before the authorities are involved, so there is no reason to be exposed. That is one strategy.

In the meantime, don't give up without a fight. Like most pet limit laws, the Borough of Carnegie (just outside of Pittsburgh) passed an ordinance prohibiting the keeping of more than five dogs or cats, or combination thereof. Despite the ordinance, one resident owned cats ranging in numbers from the high teens to thirty-three. She was cited for violating the pet limit law and subsequently found guilty. She appealed. On appeal, borough attorneys argue that the woman's ownership of the cats adversely affected the health, safety and welfare of the community (all laws must at the very least be rationally related to some legitimate community aim). The appeal's court disagreed finding that seeking to control ownership based solely on numbers is invalid. The court found that the borough could not regulate keeping more than five pets absent proof why more than five pets constituted a risk to public health beyond conclusory statements. The court held that "even legitimate goals cannot be pursued by means which stifle... liberty when the goals can otherwise be more reasonably achieved." You can fight - and win, although it is certainly time consuming and in some cases, not without cost.

But be careful about legislative quick fixes. Many activists see legislation as a goal in and of itself. They get an ordinance passed, they celebrate, and then they find that implementation and results are often illusive. In addition, I wonder how often they are really necessary when you seem to have a people problem (the ED has not kept his/her end of the bargain), which is better addressed through negotiation and public advocacy if that fails (see my prior posts on earlier forums). But if it's an ordinance you want, the best are those that are aimed at shelters. Since shelters are in a best position to save lives, and since they often do not do all they can in that regard, legislation aimed at shelters can have a more lifesaving effect than laws aimed at the public that sit unenforced. California passed the 1998 Animal Shelter Law that made some fundamental changes to how shelters do business. Among

many other things, it REQUIRED shelters to make animals available for adoption. It REQUIRED shelters to have public access adoption hours (one evening a week or a weekend day, or the holding period was extended). It PROHIBITED shelters from killing dogs or cats that a rescue group was willing to take and find a home for (the shelter didn't have to give the pet to the rescue group, but it could not kill that animal if it didn't). It also found that feral cats could be OWNED, giving rescue groups the same rights to take feral cats out of death row in shelters that they could for adoptable pet cats and dogs. Although like all laws, I do not believe the 1998 Animal Shelter Law has been fully implemented, the potential is there for a No Kill State if rescue groups banded together and forced shelters to implement the law to its full potential. If its legislation you want, use the California 1998 Animal Shelter Law as a model.

Talk about it with the ED. Don't threaten. Just politely show what constraints have been placed on shelters elsewhere. When you indicate to the ED as part of friendly negotiations that you were made promises that are not being kept, and so you have no choice but to try to change the status quo, you might find him/her more forthcoming.

Cat licensing

Question from Deborah in AR:

My town has a leash law covering cats as well as dogs! This means that no one can get a feral cat spayed/neutered under our shelter's new low-income S/N program unless the cat is afterwards licensed and kept indoors. I would like some advice on how to persuade the City that it is in the public's interest to exempt cats from this requirement.

Anticipated arguments against this change would include: gardeners who don't want cats messing in their flower beds, bird enthusiasts who insist cats decimate wild bird populations, some who fear cats might spread disease, fanatic dog lovers who would resent cats getting any special treatment (a larger group than you might imagine), and officials who think the City would lose money gained through licensing fees. Thank you for providing such a wonderful service.

Response from Nathan:

I remember working for a large law firm when I was practicing law. One of my mentors was a wise old lawyer who told a great story about how his firm was representing an insurance company who did not want to pay out in a toxics pollution case worth millions of dollars. Both sides were writing briefs, citing legal precedent, asking for more and more documents, while the case dragged on for months and even years. When all was said and done, there was a statute on the books that was clear and to the point. The opposing side didn't have a case. Had any of the attorneys working for the insurance company bothered to look at the actual statute that governed the situation, the case could have been dismissed early on. So before you go on the attack, read the ordinance.

When I was working at the San Francisco SPCA, one of our feral volunteers received a citation from the Health Department for allegedly violating the city's pet limit law because she was feeding a feral colony across the street from her home. She was threatened with a fine and even jail term. But the ordinance defined cat ownership as someone who feeds a cat for 30 days on property they own or possess. Since she was feeding the cats on public property (which she did not own or possess), she was not the legal owner as defined by the city ordinance. So I called the Health Department and told them to read their own ordinance. The enforcement action stopped.

Cat confinement laws and cat licensing laws are detrimental to saving lives. If you want to get rid of them, more power to you. But if you have a more narrow focus - you are worried that they will impact your feral work, get copies and read them first to see if they even apply to you before you wage a campaign that may be unnecessary. Many local ordinances require that a person have an ownership or possessory interest not present with regards to feral cats. What this contemplates is an indeterminate time of custody, control or responsibility. In contrast, the feral cat caretaker would exercise custody only for the purpose of physically taking the animal to be sterilized, at all times presuming the animal's re-release. To me, that does not confer ownership for purposes of town licensing or leash laws.

But if the ordinance applies to you and you want to change it, always start with a well-written position paper. It should include a cost-benefit analysis of the competing claims in favor of cat licensing and leash laws. If you do your research, you will find - like the claims about feline disease and predation noted in the earlier post - that all the different claims made in favor of these ordinances do not stand up to scrutiny. You have many communities you can draw on to show what a failure it is in terms of reducing the numbers of cats entering shelters, generating revenue, or controlling feline "delinquency." From San Mateo, California to Fort Wayne, Indiana, communities that passed strict cat confinement laws generally killed more cats when their ordinance went into effect than they did before it, and continue to kill cats in numbers that are above the curve for similarly situated communities without these laws. In fact, get the facts and figures from your own community, which you have a right to do under state public records act (often called Freedom of Information laws). You'll find that compliance rates are low, generating additional compliance through canvassing costs more money than is generated by licensing revenues, nor can any

link be made between confinement laws and reductions in nuisance complaints or impounds. I would challenge any community to show otherwise.

Follow the money. It ain't there. When I lived in Marin County, just north of San Francisco, the local humane society pushed a countywide licensing scheme that failed. We put out an 11-page position paper, going over point-by-point the claims made to support it, and debunking each one with facts and figures from ours, and other jurisdictions as follows:

The labor-intensive enforcement provisions of cat licensing, including the creation of a crime, cannot be supported as a cost saving measure.

Low compliance rates, complaint driven enforcement, discouraging of privately funded and administered cat care and sterilization efforts and the experience of other jurisdictions with cat licensing demonstrate that jurisdictions that have implemented cat licensing have seen the number of cats handled and kill rates increase, or have had no effect to warrant the imposition of and drawbacks associated with cat licensing

Experience in jurisdictions with cat licensing demonstrate reduced reclaim rates due to fears of penalties and/or inability to pay impound recovery fees. In addition, since a majority of cats killed at shelters are unowned, it is unlikely that reunification rates would be increased. This is further exacerbated with low public compliance experienced in all jurisdictions with cat licensing despite aggressive programs and expensive door-to-door canvassing

Taxing those who have cats living in their homes or who undertake rescue and care efforts at their own expense will NOT represent an equitable shift in the animal control tax burden since most cats entering the shelters are unowned or owner relinquishes, and since owned cats are not contributing to animal control costs. Therefore, cat licensing amounts to a penalty tax, penalizing responsible cat owners and those that are acting to ameliorate cat overpopulation through privately funded means.

To believe that "taxing" a cat will raise the status of a cat in a caretaker's perception is as silly as it sounds. In fact, marginal caregivers and homeless cat caretakers will either be pushed underground or will be forced to abandon their efforts, forcing the cats onto the town's charge and increasing shelter deaths.

In short, we argued successfully that although cat licensing is promoted as a benign public health and safety regulation (and as a population control for cats), closer scrutiny revealed that its real effects were far from beneficial. Licensing required the county to make considerable expenditures to implement programs for controlling and licensing cats, at the same time they undermined existing efforts to reduce cat overpopulation undertaken at no cost to the county through arbitrary mandates, fines, taxes or fees - and, at the threat of impoundment and killing of the cats - which defeated the likelihood that community groups and volunteer organizations could make a lasting and significant contribution to solving the "pet overpopulation" problem. Our motto: "It's not just a cat licensing bill, it's a license to kill cats." The only thing killed was the proposal to license cats. You can do it, particularly in an era of tight budgets. If you offer it as a cost saving measure (shifting the cost from public control of cats to privately funded TNR and rescue efforts (what is called a "public-private partnership") is a good argument for exempting your efforts.

If all this sounds lawyer-like, it is meant to. When the county administration expected "crazy cat people" to show up screaming about fluffy (some did that too, the second motto was: "Better Fed than Dead!"), they were stopped cold with a crisp well-written position paper laying out the economic and political implications of a county-wide licensing scheme. When the county was looking at budget cuts, the last thing it wanted to do was to increase a costly bureaucracy that did not meet the goals proffered by animal control in surrounding communities that tried going that way.

In addition, while you advocate for change (you can form an association to put out your position paper, write press releases, attend city council meetings), have a fallback position. One compromise is getting an exemption for feral cats who are, in many cases, "unowned" and therefore properly outside the town leash law. Keeping a cat confinement or leash law off the books is generally easier than getting one that exists to be repealed. But amendments are made all the time to laws, and a well researched and well written position paper and advocacy campaign, combined with proposed exemption language for TNR, has a very good chance all things being equal.

As an aside, I am unclear without more information, what the mechanism is for checking licensing and indoor compliance under the low-income S/N program. But if it is truly a barrier, you need to find alternative sources of spaying while you work to change the ordinance. All feral cat programs should be actively fundraising and trying to work with multiple providers so as not to be impacted by changes with any single one.

Collectors trying to tame and relocate ferals

Question from Martha:

My question concerns two issues I suspect many rescue people face: a collector who masquerades as a rescuer and relocation of ferals. The collector lives in a rural area and takes ferals from caretakers who believe, rightly or wrongly, that the cats must be relocated. This leads to a problem - some rescuers find her willingness to take hundreds of cats useful, and so enable or protect her. This brings up the second problem: I believe that some rescuers believe cats are always better off if they're moved from an urban area to a rural one - the famous "farm somewhere" that so many believe would be a great place for animals. Problem is the rural settings up here have many risks for cats too - coyotes and owls, among others - and that relocation itself is confusing and risky for many cats.

So my question is what can be done?

Response from Nathan:

What can be done about what? About this particular person? or about the thinking that feral cats should be relocated to barns and farms? or to prevent collectors from destroying the lives of cats?

First of all, the term collector is thrown about too often. It is one of those bogeymen of this movement that takes up too much time and effort and often leads nowhere. That doesn't mean they are not out there. It just means we cannot let extreme circumstances, like fears of "collectors," dictate policies and procedures for either shelters or feral cat groups.

If the person is truly a collector, it should be dealt with as a crime. No one is doing the cats any favors if they are living in filth, not being fed and subject to lack of veterinary care and disease. It should be referred to the police or animal control authority for investigation and prosecution. But get your facts in order. Too often people who care for large numbers of feral cats are branded collectors, when the cats are well cared for and healthy. Innuendo and rumor is not enough.

If, in fact, the cats are living in filth, are not getting care, you need to educate feral cat caretakers about what is happening. Presumably, people are relocating ferals to this person because they care and think the cats are better off "in the country" than in the city. Part of this is, as indicated in earlier posts, to reeducate the community about feral cats in urban areas. A TNR program was highly successful in San Francisco, the second most congested place in the U.S. outside of Manhattan. When Alley Cat Allies was in its infancy, if I recall correctly, they were caring for somewhere in the neighborhood of 9 or so colonies in D.C., another urban area and despite the worst winters in recent memory, they did not lose a single cat. There are plenty of feral cat groups in urban areas, from San Diego, California to New York City. Remember, you are not alone. Draw on the experiences of these different groups and you can begin to change the perception.

Do you go public first or build your support of TNR quietly first?

Question from Dave in AZ:

We are a coalition of animal welfare groups and just formed a "TNR Committee" to begin addressing huge feral overpopulation issue locally. We have asked Mayor's office to read a Proclamation for National Feral Cat Day (October 16, as sponsored by Alley Cat Allies). Our plan is to follow up with attempts to recruit those individuals in the community already involved with TNR, approach neighborhood associations to solicit their support, as well as try to persuade local government officials that their financial support now, will decrease costs for euthanasia and "impounding" in the future (as other communities have done and shown). The question (finally) is, what is the best order to go about these steps: 1) individuals; 2) neighborhoods; and 3) City Council and County Board of Supervisors? Are other approaches worth considering even earlier?

Response from Nathan:

I like to avoid political bodies unless I have to. When weighing risks and benefits, I am not sure I see the benefit of exposing the issue to the full light of political scrutiny when you don't have to. Political bodies constrain more than they enable. They also like to please as many people as possible and what emerges when you try to placate everyone is that you sometimes lose more than you gain. If you can do TNR, you don't need an ordinance. You don't need legislation. And to begin with, you shouldn't expect public funding (which is tough to get anyway).

What you should do, in my opinion, is simply start the process of TNR. Work with other feral cat groups and rescue groups setting up local programs and getting services for feral cat caretakers in your community. Once you have some demonstrated track record of success (you have spayed XX numbers of animals, you have reduced the death rate by XX percent, XX fewer complaints are being received by animal control) you are in a better position to

address political issues if they become salient. But in the meantime, going to the City Council or Board of Supervisors carries risks that you shouldn't bring upon yourself. I have seen groups who were doing great work, having great success with TNR unopposed by anyone and then they decided to go to the City Council for one reason or another. That brought out the "mad moms" who didn't want the cats near the kids' playgrounds, and the "birders" who wanted the cats out of parks, and the health department that wanted to know where all the colonies were. All of a sudden a system that had been working without restriction was now subject to a whole host of them. I wouldn't knowingly invite that. My old boss Rich Avanzino used to call it getting half a loaf of bread. One side gets half a loaf, the other side gets half a loaf, and no one is happy. If you can do the work unconstrained, you already have the whole loaf. Don't give half of it to the other side.

The economy is also really tough right now and communities are in scale back mode, not building new sources of expenditures. I don't know any locality in the country where you will successfully get money for feral cat spay/neuter. That doesn't mean that there aren't public sources of funding. Some public funding of spay/neuter exists in New Hampshire, New York, and other places; it isn't necessarily a "feral cat program." It's generally for shelter animals or low-income people or incorporates to some degree, spay/neuter for wild cats. But keeping it broad - to focus on pet overpopulation generally - as opposed to feral cat TNR is, in my view, a better way to go, if you feel on going there. I don't. I like raising it privately, which isn't very hard and doesn't come with legislative restrictions.

One of the best arguments in favor of feral cat programs in terms of addressing political bodies is the concept of public-private partnerships. By raising your own money for spay/neuter, you can point to the cost savings to municipalities of all the rescue work you do. That makes it hard for municipalities to regulate the work you do or to limit it. By shifting the cost of care from municipal taxpayers via animal control to private individuals, you are saving the locality badly needed funds. If you keep that focus, my experience is that they will generally leave you alone, and you can fight back things like cat licensing, cat confinement and other anti-feral laws that one interest group or another may, from time to time, try to get passed.

That is no reason not to try to recruit people to your cause and I don't mean to imply that you should be working underground in secret. Far from it. All I am saying is that you should be doing the work, building the team from known supporters, encouraging volunteers to work with feral cats, recruiting individuals into your cause, have a track record of success, raise the funds, find the service providers (local shelters, private practice veterinarians, veterinary colleges), BEFORE you go to political bodies like councils, supervisors and neighborhood associations.

What proved successful for us in San Francisco was to assign team captains to different sections of the community and have them be the focal point for people who needed help or information on trapping, transporting, neutering, feeding, or interceding on behalf of caretakers when neighbors or property owners complained. I can't recall a single instance where we approached a political body if we didn't have to and the program was very successful. What started as five volunteers become 1,100 users of the program, and a decline in feral cat deaths of 74% at the city shelter, and a decline in neonatal deaths (most of whom were feral offspring) by 84%. Keep it focused on individuals and private groups until you are well established.

And then if you do go before a political body, have a well-defined and limited agenda. What is it you want from them? Can you get it privately without any sort of public regulations? And if they the city council or other political body, say no, can it hurt your efforts (i.e., threaten the lives of cats your caretakers are working with)? The ultimate question, of course, is do the benefits outweigh the risks? And only you can answer that.

Can a shelter doing TNR be liable if someone is bit?

Question from Vicki:

If the humane society assists in trapping, neutering and releasing ferals, can they in any way be held liable if anyone is subsequently bitten or hurt by the animals? How can you be assured that a caregiver will take care of a colony? What follow-up if any, should your organization do to ensure the well being of the group?

Response from Nathan:

Liability is another one of those bogeymen that shelters use to avoid getting involved in lifesaving programs like TNR. I have never heard of a single lawsuit relating to this. Most feral cats will shy away from people so the risk of getting bitten is somewhat remote. Second, it is hard for someone to link a bite from a wild cat somehow to the shelter. The San Francisco SPCA began a TNR program back in 1993 and has altered over 10,000 cats without a single lawsuit. Other groups have done more, and again, no lawsuits. In addition, if your shelter sets itself up as a service provider only for spay/neuter, you have no duty to the public any more so than a private veterinarian would be liable if they neutered someone's dog or cat and then that pet went out and bit someone. As a service provider, if caretakers are bringing ferals to you for spay/neuter, you are treating the caretaker as the owner of record for the cat and are merely providing a service, thereby absolving yourself of liability for what happens when the cat leaves your facility. So the short answer about whether you are liable is No.

But that is no reason not to be prepared especially if your shelter is actually doing the trapping and releasing either by staff or volunteers. First of all, you have insurance that covers bites.

Second of all, you should be using waivers of liability for just about everything. Your volunteers and staff members should be required to sign waivers saying you are not responsible if animals bite or scratch, outside of workers comp if an employee is injured during the scope of their duties. Your adopters should sign waivers indicating you are not responsible if the adopted pet should bite. Caretakers should sign waivers when bringing the cats for altering. The public should sign waivers when bringing you animals.

Third, you should be up front about the risks (however remote). There is a doctrine in the law called Assumption of Risk. When you are upfront about the risks and then have them waive liability, they are undertaking these efforts with full knowledge. That reduces your exposure.

Fourth, train people. That way you have acted reasonably to further limit your liability by training people in proper techniques. If someone is going to get bit by a feral cat, it is generally because they are doing something they shouldn't. So long as you provided some training, your exposure is further reduced and you teach people to act appropriately around feral cats, reducing the chance of a bite.

Fifth, if you are using staff, provide pre-exposure rabies inoculations. If you are using volunteers, recommend that they get them at their own expense, and if they choose not to, outline the risks and have them waive liability.

While I can't guarantee that your shelter won't be the exception to the rule, the reality is you are not going to get sued.

Convincing animal services to embrace TNR

Question from a member:

How can we convince our local Animal Services to embrace TNR and realize its benefits? We have presented them with numerous studies and facts showing that TNR works, but they refuse to support it due to reasons such as rabies and health issues.

Response from Nathan:

There are a couple of avenues, and I am going to make some general assumptions here because I do not know all the facts. The first is since you have shown them numerous studies that show TNR works, I assume from this you mean that it reduces intakes and deaths at local shelters. But that is often not the entire picture from the animal control point of view. If I can take a broad, general view of animal control vs. animal welfare/rights, it would be this. Animal control's primary function is protecting PEOPLE from ANIMALS. By contrast, animal welfare/rights has a primary function of protecting ANIMALS from PEOPLE. There are some in this country who have made some tremendous headway of bridging the two - folks like Mr. Ed Boks. And the move has been to find a balance toward what is now popularly called "Animal Care & Control."

And, of course, when one takes such a macro perspective, it is easy to miss the subtleties, but in the end, there is tension between the two that isn't always completely resolved. Understanding that is key to getting animal control to embrace TNR.

If you have provided studies and shown your animal control agency that TNR reduces intakes in shelters and shelter deaths, which is terrific. That is, generally speaking, the protecting ANIMALS part. The next step is to show them the protecting PEOPLE part - the part that conclusively demonstrates that TNR is also the best route in terms of public health and safety. Or, at the very least, that TNR does not negatively impact public health and safety.

Many people - even animal control directors - mistakenly take as an underlying assumption that the alternative to TNR is "trap and kill." That is not really the case, in the majority of circumstances. The most often default is to "do nothing." Most animal control directors do not have the staffing or funding (and certainly do not prioritize) sending teams of trappers to round up and kill cats, except in specific circumstances brought on by complaint. So without rescue groups doing TNR, the result is most often that unaltered and unvaccinated cats will continue to multiply and forage areas looking for food.

Unless TNR is embraced in your community, the result would be an absence of vaccination programs, intact cats mating and breeding, and a lack of coordinated feeding efforts, and therefore a greater reliance on scavenging and foraging for food (increasing chance encounters with human beings). From a public health and safety standpoint, "do nothing" does little to protect public health and safety. Surprised as many might be, many animal control directors, many rescue groups, many administrators of universities, many really, really smart people haven't considered that point of view. Even if they don't embrace TNR, allowing others to do without interference has to be

seen as a positive step in terms of public health and safety in relation to doing nothing.

The other more limited default is trapping, removal, and execution. While attractive to some from a theoretical and short-term perspective, eradication has proven to be an elusive goal (hell, we have been killing feral cats in shelters in this country for over 100 years and the end is nowhere in sight - except in those areas that have embraced TNR). This is true even on a small scale level. Because an eradication program is predicated on minimal community awareness in order to avoid negative publicity and opposition, there are no humane education efforts, and dumping of cats may remain an ongoing problem. In addition, undirected and uncoordinated feeding by good samaritans (in contrast to a TNR program where cats are fed in centralized locations, often away from population areas) compounds the difficulty, frequently attracting cats to the populated areas where random feeders are likely to leave food. As a result, trapping and killing will not be a one-time effort but must be done continuously. In addition, as food sources are often difficult to eliminate, vacated areas are soon filled by other cats who start the breeding process all over again. The result is that an eradication program, aside from being inhumane, is often ineffective.

One of the primary misconceptions involving colonies is that they perpetuate the problem. It is the ABSENCE of coordinated and managed efforts that results in continuous problems. In 1993, for example, both Sonoma State University in California and Georgetown University in Washington DC decided to trap and remove the feral cats on their campus. One year later, an influx of new unsterilized cats was seen all over the campuses. Due to uncontrolled breeding, both campuses exceeded their previous number of sterilized and managed cats within a few years. At Stanford University, by contrast, the campus' feral cat population has not only stabilized, but has been declining through natural attrition precisely because the administration embraced TNR.

Regardless of what the public health and safety concern is, TNR reduces it compared to trap and kill or do nothing:

Injury. Feral cats are naturally disposed to keep away from humans so that the risk of injury (bite) from a cat is remote. In addition, by implementing feeding guidelines that keep cats fed away from certain areas, further contact is minimized. In the absence of directed feeding efforts, the cats may forage populated areas in search of food and individuals tend to feed the cats close to where they either work or live. This is the result of ad hoc feeding by "underground" and uncoordinated good samaritans. In addition, because of fears that the cats will be trapped and killed, individuals are more apt to take matters in their own hand - freeing trapped cats, feeding them, picking them up, and trapping without experience if the cats are injured. If an organization or caretaker is in place, concerned individuals would have someone to call should they have questions or problems rather than trying to take care of it himself or herself. As a result, a designated, experienced trapper could respond if necessary.

Vector Control. Without a coordinated program, clean up of the active feeding areas is not always assured. In addition, more than one individual may be feeding the same cats, resulting in excess food, unsightly feeding stations, and food waste that attracts pests. This is a problem associated with eradication programs because the feeding of the cats is not coordinated and feeders are pushed underground (often, to avoid detection, these feeders feed the cats at night which may draw other wildlife. If TNR was embraced, caretakers could feed the cats during the day ensuring a clean feeding station before skunks and raccoons and other wildlife come out to feast too.). By contrast, colony feeding guidelines limit the number of active feeding stations. In addition, a caretaker would ensure cleanliness.

Newcomers. Actively monitored feeding stations allow cats to be clumped into mini-colonies where they can easily be monitored for spay/neuter, veterinary care, and spotting of tamed newcomers who have recently strayed in, for removal and adoption.

Chance Encounters with Humans. TNR and colony management are also effective in reducing the number of cats, and therefore, the number of chance encounters with humans. Prevention of TNR or the use of lethal methods, on the other hand, actually allows the population to continue multiplying. A survey of feral cat caregivers in San Francisco found that EVERY caregiver who implemented a TNR program saw their colony stabilize or decrease in number - in one case from 85 to two!

Rabies. The Journal of the American Veterinary Association reported 288 cat rabies cases in the U.S. (1995). Out of what is claimed to be 60 million feral cats and about 70 million house cats, that is only .0002% of the cat population. In addition, a rabies vaccination as part of TNR eliminates the risk. In NYS, there are no known cases of a cat getting rabies if the animal received at least one vaccination. And the last case of cat to human rabies transmission in the U.S. occurred in 1975 - almost 30 years ago according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Toxoplasmosis. According to a July 15, 2000 British Medical Journal article, "contact with cats, kittens, cats' feces, or cats who hunt for food was NOT a risk factor for infection." The authors found that "No significant associations were detected between infection and presence of cats (whether adults or kittens), the diet and hunting habits of the cats, or cleaning a cat's litter tray." Instead, the study concludes that eating undercooked meat is the primary risk factor in contracting the organism.

So, are feral cats a public health and safety risk? The Stanford University Department of Environmental Health and

Safety, in conjunction with the Stanford University Department of Comparative Medicine and the Santa Clara County Health Department, found that there was a general consensus that feral cats pose virtually no health and safety risk to individuals.

These are the types of things that you need to bring to the attention of your animal control agency. There is plenty more. Forage the feral cat websites for the latest studies and information. Alley Cat Allies is a great resource. There are others: Neighborhood Cats in NYC, Best Friends, the Feral Cat Coalition, Operation Catnip. The information is out there and readily available.

Now, wouldn't it be wonderful if the information could be evaluated and the best course of action taken? Maybe; maybe not. But the fact is we don't live in a world like that. That is the "Spock" character on Star Trek. We live in a world of skirt-chasing Captain Kirks, of moody Scotties, of jealous Bones, of angry Checkovs, of ego, of emotion, of irrationality, of fear, of the full range of human emotion. So it is often not enough to present the facts. It often requires a lot of diplomacy, of dancing, and of who is doing the presentation.

I am not making excuses for animal control. I am a virulent critic of how many shelters operate. Too many animal control facilities are doing too little and killing too many animals and there is no excuse. If there was a battle to be waged, I'd be right up at the front lines with you. But, your job is to protect the cats, and launching a war before diplomacy fails is bad politics, and bad strategy, and unfair to the animals. So you need to do what it takes to convince animal control to embrace TNR. That might require a public campaign. But before you go there, keep in mind that with the rising tide of No Kill, many animal control directors feel under seize. And so it may prove beneficial not only to send the right message, but also to send the right MESSENGER.

If I was still practicing law and had a case before the U.S. Supreme Court, I would send in as my advocate a Ken Starr or a Robert Bork. Not because I think those two are particularly intelligent or gifted or honorable. But because the majority on the court - Rehnquist, O'Connor, Kennedy, Thomas, and Scalia - respect, admire, and navigate in the same political arena. Alan Dershowitz and Ken Starr giving the same message to the U.S. Supreme Court may mean 5-4 in one direction vs. the other.

In short, your animal control director may need to hear from another animal control director or health department director. It is one thing for a cat lovin' rescue group to say feral cats do not pose a threat to public health and safety and, in fact, help better protect it. It is something altogether different for another animal control director from a jurisdiction that has had great success with it, or a health department that has embraced it, to say the exact same thing. It will carry more weight, be better received, and - as most bureaucrats tend to be risk averse so they don't rock the boat - if animal control sees that other jurisdictions have been there and done that, it is easier for them to jump on board as well.

Good luck!

When cats are being threatened and have to be removed

Question from Melanie in CA:

We have TNR and maintained a large colony in a city park by the river for the past 10 years. We remove any new tame cats or kittens dumped at this popular site. They are tested, vaccinated, spayed/neutered and go into foster care.

The park shares its space with a city marina. A wealthy boater, who uses the marina, has put the marina manger in an awkward position. He wants the cats out of there now! The marina manager likes cats, but has asked us to find another spot for them. The feeding of the cats has attracted some wildlife. We build high feeders, skunks can't jump, and only feed in the mornings, and take the food away when we are finished.

We have attended four meetings with the marina people, City Animal Care, and other park people to solve this problem. We were promised that there would be no killing of any animals.

As you know, cats do what they want to do. We are gradually moving them away from the marina. But in the meantime, 127 skunks were shot by a federal trapper in one night. Many of our cats have disappeared. We are also finding dead cats.

I invited a woman from southern CA to our last meeting last Friday to represent the skunks. She spent a week here teaching all of us how to feed responsibly so that no one is in harm's way. HSUS also attended the meeting along with two mediators. It was a wasted three hours. The feral cat caretakers want the killings stopped immediately. We would like financial help with the testing, vaccinating, spaying and neutering from City. We are willing to become registered feral cat caretakers of this particular colony.

The problem is two fold: one person from the marina who want the cats trapped and shipped to another city; and a

person at City Animal Care who admits to not liking feral cats.

We are at a stand still. What can we do before the next meeting in less than two weeks?

Response from Nathan:

Let's navigate through this. First of all, you state that you would like financial help with the testing, vaccinating, spaying and neutering from the City. I have addressed this issue in a prior post. It is not going to happen and it is not the most pressing issue right now, so put it on the back burner. When your cats are turning up dead and someone is massacring wildlife, you can't divert your energies into trying to get public funding. California's economy is in the toilet. Local counties and municipalities are slashing services. In an era of Arnold Schartzneggers and Gary Colemans running for Governor, you have got no chance in hell. Leave that one alone. You need to save the cats, not make demands for payment.

If you are financially strapped, cut out the testing part, cut out all vaccinations except rabies, and focus on the spay/neuter. That will cut your costs significantly. If you want to know why that makes sense, Alley Cat Allies and Operation Catnip have good articles about it on their websites. In addition, private fundraising is not that hard. And finally, if you are not a 501(c)(3), you need to become one. That way if your ferals end up at the local shelter, you have the ABSOLUTE legal right to save them under California's 1998 Animal Shelter Law (Hayden) if the facility is intent on executing them. But don't take this up as your number one issue. Find a volunteer to start that process.

Now, let's deal with the critters. I do not know how many cats are out there, but if it is significant, wholesale removal to another location is not always a viable option. But moving the feeding stations slowly over time to a less populated part of the marina is. It can be done. We did it with huge numbers of cats at a hospital in San Francisco and we did it on Treasure Island. It just takes time. So, if you can commit to that, you need to get all parties to enact a moratorium on killing anybody until you can move the feeding stations. It will take several months but there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Two, it is illegal to poison cats as they are classified as domestic animals in California. Even "wild cats" or "feral cats" are considered domestic animals under the law. If the trapper or wildlife person or anyone on the Marina is poisoning cats, they are committing felony animal cruelty and subject to a prison term of 16 months, 2 years or 3 years. Put up flyers all over the neighborhood and at the Marina asking for information leading to the arrest of the person poisoning and killing cats. Offer a reward. Put it in mailboxes in all houses telling people that cats are being killed at the Marina, to keep their pets inside, and if they suspect or see any suspicious activity to report it to the police. Put out a press release. Get the cat loving community outraged. Scare the perpetrator. Safely, try to do some surveillance. Drive by at night with a flashlight. Keep the issue hot. That alone may put it to a stop. At Stanford, we had someone smashing feeding stations and stealing food. We put flyers out asking people to come forward. We went dorm room to dorm room, office to office, indicating that such conduct was a crime. It stopped.

Bring the larger public in. Make it a news story. Get the media involved. Choose one person - ONE PERSON - from your group to act as spokesperson. They must wear a suit and tie or business dress at all times. Be reasonable; be professional. Don't avoid emotion, but be concise. Point to how long you have been there. How many cats you have removed. How many have been spayed. How effective TNR is. How you are relocating cats to less populated areas. How you were promised there would be no killing. And how those promises have been broken. Don't point fingers - you don't know who is doing the killing. But you need to bring in the cameras. Pictures of dead cats will OUTRAGE your community. If necessary, protest animal control - a shelter that won't stand up to animal cruelty! Protest in front of the wealthy boat owner's boat. Keep the issue hot.

You say it is a waste of time, but don't ever leave the negotiating table. You don't have to put a public advocacy campaign on hold while you negotiate. So long as you are at the table, you will be perceived as rational. And slowly, but surely, you need to turn the pressure up on these folks. Concessions are granted when you are strong. Right now, you are being perceived as weak. Show them a taste of what a public campaign is. When the Marina's members are handed flyers with pictures of dead cats or they have to navigate around a picket sign, the tide will turn.

Since the cats are being killed, you have nothing to lose. So fight. And fight hard.

Is there a TNR backlash? Or are we on our way to victory?

Question from a member:

I'm concerned that there is a feral backlash starting now. I am on a lot of feral cat lists and keep hearing about the Navy rethinking its policy, the Florida game Commission trying to stop TNR in Florida, the AVMA rethinking their policy on ferals in November, and feral issues coming to a head in so many other communities. Why is there a sudden backlash against ferals when we are having more and more positive successes to show?

Response from Nathan:

Take heart. There is not a feral backlash. There is less anti-cat stuff out there. You are seeing it more clearly because, as a rational humane voice for feral cats, we are - as a movement - now better organized, better connected, and better able to communicate, respond and win than just a few short years ago.

How many of you know that back in the mid-1990s, Alley Cat Allies was two women who had other jobs advocating for cats part-time? That they and yours truly went to Georgetown and tried to convince them to support TNR the way Stanford University did - and lost? Probably no one. Probably no one knew the same thing happened at Sonoma State University. or in Riverside Park in Virginia. or in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. or, in the hundreds of other places that asked two overworked people and a law student to help. I am not saying Becky Robinson or I were particularly visionary. I am sure there were hundreds of other groups and individuals fighting the same battles in their own hometowns, alone - some winning, some losing - but alone.

We are not alone anymore. When a Naval shipyard decides to exterminate cats, an army of compassion rises up across the country to help fight the battle. When a prison in California tries to do the same thing, they get pushed back until they embrace TNR.

Back in the dark old days of the late '80s to mid '90s, the largest humane organization in the country coined the phrase "subsidized abandonment" to describe feral cat programs. One of their regional directors called TNR an "inhumane act". Should feral cats be killed, they asked in their national magazine? "Yes" was the answer. When a local feral cat group turned to them for help in saving their feral colonies, their attorney wrote the local prosecutor arguing that TNR was a violation of the animal cruelty laws covering abandonment - a crime which carried a jail sentence. You don't hear that anymore.

We have, indeed, come a long way. Alley Cat Allies has gone from fledgling to national powerhouse. Many animal control agencies, including the largest one in the country, have embraced TNR. All over this great land, TNR proclamations are being endorsed by agencies, by health departments, by entire communities.

Don't get me wrong. We will still lose some individual battles, not as many as before, but some. Even big ones. Now and again, someone will publish an anti-cat article published in the Wall Street Journal or National Geographic. They are not insignificant, because cats will die because of it. But they are, ultimately, speed bumps in the road to victory. No Kill has won. TNR has won. It may take a little more time, but we have crossed the Rubicon. In terms of TNR, it is July 1863. Gettysburg is a resounding victory, but the war will drag on for a few more years. Once again, I turn to the wise words of Dr. Martin Luther King: "We are no longer marching in ones or twos but in legions of thousands. Convinced now that we cannot be stopped by any human force."

I'll see you at the finish line, and we'll toast to our victory!

Changing a city ordinance that promotes round up and kill

Question from a member:

Our city council decided to implement a complaint driven cat trap and euthanize program. When people call in, the city gives them a trap to catch any cat they find a nuisance and bring to animal control. In one year, they have killed over 1,700 cats!

The City met with a few animal groups beforehand who presented them with studies, model programs in other parts of the state, and showed them the Alley Cat Allies video. Many citizens wrote in asking them not to enact this ordinance. Council still said that TNR didn't address the immediate concerns of someone who is complaining about a nuisance cat because the cat would still be there. So they implemented this ordinance.

Do you have recommendations for overturning such an ordinance when the City council does not listen to constituents and when it is a small group trying to make the change? Some City council members were actually recorded on tape at a meeting saying that they should just give the cats to the Chinese restaurant down the street.

The biggest problem is that no established animal group is leading the way on this issue because of the politics of not wanting to go against the City so a group of citizens have banded together but it is a small group with no money or established group behind them so it is easier to blow them off. We have tried to go to the media, but they have not given much coverage other than to say that we (the local group) should be working on spay/neuter solutions instead of complaining.

Response from Nathan:

What is an "established" group? I am not being sarcastic. It seems so obvious to us as if to be beyond comment. But it isn't. The U.S. Constitution gives you the freedom to associate - so associate. In 1993-ish, five of us met in a conference room of a friend's office and dubbed ourselves "The California Humane Coalition". We were a coalition of five feral cat caretakers. We printed up stationary, we gave ourselves titles, we put on coats and ties, and we

went up to Sacramento and lobbied against two state bills - one that would have required statewide cat licensing, and another that would have criminalized feral cat care. We wrote letters to editors of newspapers, we put out press releases, we met with legislators, we leafleted, we gave interviews, and we attended meetings. We went up against some of the wealthiest and most powerful humane organizations in the state and in the country. We went up against entire municipalities. And we won - not once, but twice! How's that for an established group? I think, including gas to and from Sacramento, and the stationary, some stamps, and an ink cartridge, we probably spent about \$100.

Years later, when a local community in the San Francisco Bay Area decided it would do the same thing your city council did, offer a trap and an extermination to complaining citizens only applying it to raccoons - the five of us resurrected the "California Humane Coalition," sent out two press releases, threatened one lawsuit, met with the mayor, and, again, we won! The City Council permanently tabled the execution campaign.

In an era of desktop publishing, you are an "established" group.

A community decides to kill 1,700 cats in one year and you are not getting media? My best guess is that you are not doing something right. Have you written a position paper? Have you put out a press release? Have you proposed humane alternatives? Have you threatened legal action? Have you focused on how all cats - tame house pets and feral cats - act the same in a trap and therefore the City is killing people's pets? Have you focused on how much the city is wasting in taxpayer dollars to kill cats? Have you played the recorded Chinese restaurant tape at council meetings? to the media? Not only is suggesting that cats be slaughtered and served as food immoral and illegal, it is RACIST! Have you presented the media and others with studies showing TNR reduces the behaviors of cats (spraying, roaming, mating, marking of territory, fighting, litters) that is often the basis for "nuisance" complaints so that you can eliminate the problem without killing the cats?

No offense. But I do not know any community where the media wouldn't eat that up. Don't give up and say they don't care. The buck stops with you.

I won't repeat my prior posts on advocacy and campaigning to change the law. I made some suggestions to others in this forum and my prior forum a month or so back. But let me add one angle that may be useful to you if you live in a state with an Environmental Quality Act (In California, it was called the California Environmental Quality Act or CEQA). The Feds call it "NEPA" (National Environmental Quality Act). Other states may call it other things. But in some of them, if not all of them, there is a rigorous review process that must be undertaken before a government agency can try to engage in widespread killing of animals. Depending on your state, the statute, and the status of cats in the law, this might be good to threaten legal action and/or file a lawsuit (which will tie them up and be costly). It is how we saved the raccoons in California. Find a pro-bono lawyer, law student, or law clinic with a cat lover and you can get the ball rolling.

How do we even get started to find like-minded people?

Question from Stacey:

I am very interested in starting a feral cat trap-neuter-return program in my city but I don't know where to begin to find others who are interested. I know there is a large stray cat problem, and know of some feeders, but many of them want to stay underground for fear of having their colonies discovered and killed (animal control does remove colonies if they know where they are). How do you start finding others who want to become involved and how do you make them feel safe to start publicizing efforts? We don't want to start publicizing what we are doing only to get animal control upset and trying to stop our efforts.

Response from Nathan:

That is the primary problem with an animal control model based on trapping and killing. It pushes compassionate people underground and they can't partner to share resources, expertise, and to help one another. It also makes the community see the shelter not as an ally, but as an enemy.

I had a history professor in college, an old-timer. Notorious liberal. I liked him. He stirred the pot. He told us once that he taught a night history class, with a liberal bent, post-McCarthy to adults and passed around a sign in sheet. He noticed the older folks would never sign it. At first he thought nothing of it, but since it was consistent, he finally asked a couple people why not. The response was uniform. They didn't want their name on a list for a class taught by him. They lived through McCarthy and did not want to be stigmatized. Didn't trust the government. And he, they were sure, was on their list somewhere in some agency as, what they call, a "person of interest."

We live in a post-McCarthy era feral cat wise. People do not trust animal control, with good reason. I don't care who is running the shelter. I don't care how enlightened, supportive, progressive the shelter is. I don't care who is asking. NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER reveal your colony locations unless there is a damn good reason (and even then, be general). It is none of the shelter's business and they shouldn't ask for it. And if you run

a shelter, do NOT require that caretakers tell you where their colonies are: a lot of caretakers won't come forward, and a lot of "feeders" won't get help to become "caretakers" (spay/neuter, vax, etc.). So when you try to find like-minded folks, don't ask and don't tell.

Animal Control cannot stop you from associating with like-minded people who share your love of cats, nor do I believe they would want to. If the animal control agency is that backward in your community, then work around them for a while. When I was a district attorney, we had a secretary in our office who would talk your ear off, never did work, complained constantly, and was always behind. But, she had been there so long and was such a fixture, none dared terminate her. So what did we do? We worked around her. She was like a rock in a river. If the river can't dislodge it and send it on its way, the water goes around it, goes over it, goes under it. But what happens over time? As the water gets stronger, keeps coming, little by little the rock begins to erode until it is finally crumbled, dislodged and sent away. A tiny river became a torrent that created the Grand Canyon. That is what is happening with TNR on a local level and on a national level.

Start a group. It can be small at first. There is no correct model. Start with a couple of traps. Start trapping. Neutering. Releasing. If you come across a feeder, talk to them. Offer to trap and neuter their cats. Use the Internet; publicize your efforts, always working around animal control. You don't have to meet in secret. So long as the locations of colonies aren't made public, meet in their lobby! Who cares? There is nothing they can do.

I go back to my favorite example. Five people and three traps in San Francisco became 1,100 users of the SPCA's TNR program - over 10,000 surgeries, and a decline in feral deaths of over 70% at the city pound. It all started with one meeting.

Countering the predation issue

Question from Cathy:

I know you have addressed the wildlife predation issue before, but I was wondering if you could give your top arguments of what you would say when people bring up this discussion? The reason I ask is that our group is working on developing a TNR program but we have one guy with a wildlife degree who always quotes these studies about the decimation on the wildlife population by these non-indigenous cats and how they must be removed. Some people give him credibility because of his degree, and I'd like to have some short, well thought out responses.

Response from Nathan:

One of the golden rules of advocacy is to tailor your response to your audience. You do not want to sound like an encyclopedia, nor do you have to get overly detailed, nor do you have to know the intimates about every study. Don't lose sight of the forest for the trees. You are, in the end, an advocate. Respond succinctly, in a straightforward and thoughtful manner.

My favorite strategy is to write a detailed, scientific position paper, which is sent out to people in the community - the media, commissions, city council, friends, allies, other groups, VIPS, caretakers, whoever your target audience is. But when I make speeches, when you actually go before the commission, or council, or are interviewed by a reporter, I make a different argument - one of compassion, and lifesaving. That two-pronged approach (scientific analysis on paper to rebut the claims of Mr. Wildlife Degree in your community, and a broad message of showing kindness to cats in person) is effective.

I always start with the efficacy of TNR for all the reasons I won't repeat here, how it works, how it reduces impounds and deaths in shelters, how it protects public health. I always end with the humane argument, how the cats are out there through not fault of their own and how we can choose kindness over killing. In the middle are the nuts and bolts:

1. The starting point of any analysis in assessing wildlife predation is a two fold inquiry:

a) does the species exhibit predatory behavior?

b) how much? In other words, does the predatory behavior adversely affect the prey populations? "In biological systems it is insufficient merely to have found one animal will eat another, that is what predators do. The more important question is whether that is predation within normal limits." (Tabor, *The Wild Life of the Domestic Cat*, Arrow Books, 1983.) In short, is there evidence that cats actually negatively impact the prey populations?

Paul Errington identifies the problem: "Preying upon a species is not necessary synonymous with controlling it or even influencing its numbers to any perceptible degree. Predation which merely removed an exposed prey surplus that is naturally doomed is entirely different from predation the weight of which is instrumental in forcing down prey populations or in holding them at given approximate levels." (See Ellen Berkeley, *Maverick Cats: Encounters with*

Feral Cats, New England Press, 1992.)

2. The studies cited by Mr. Wildlife Degree not only utterly fail to address the impact of cat predation, but they are severely flawed in their methodology. (I SAY THIS WITH A FAIR DEGREE OF CONFIDENCE, BECAUSE EVERYONE ON THE ANTI-CAT CITE USES CHURCHER'S STUDY IN ENGLAND AND THEN COLEMAN'S STUDY IN WISCONSIN FOR THE PROPOSITION THAT CATS ARE DECIMATING BIRDS).

Churcher looks at what kind of prey cats were bringing home in an English Village. He then extrapolated from that to come up with how many cats were killing birds across Great Britain. So, for example, if 10 cats bring in 100 birds, then 1,000 cats kill 10,000 birds, and so on. By guessing as to how many cats were in Great Britain, Churcher concluded with an astronomical number of killed birds. But is science really that simple? For one, how did the birds die? did the cats kill them? were they road kill? were they fledglings who would have died anyway? was there any indication of disease in the prey? was the catch freshly killed or were they dead for days? Being scavengers more than predators, few cats would pass up injured or dead birds? In fact, Churcher has no qualitative information whatsoever. All of this missing information could have been supplied with little additional effort.

For example, two French researchers Moller & Ertzoe examined birds killed by cats vs. those that met accidental deaths by crashing into windows. They examined the birds for various factors, the most significant of which was the health of the bird. They found that while windows were non-discriminating and killed healthy and sickly birds equally, the birds cats killed were significantly sicker than those who crashed into windows, with 70% of them slow movers and fledglings!

But more importantly, Churcher ignores that several hundred birds in his village must die each year to maintain a stable population, that the highest number of birds brought home were at the time of the first broods (lots of already doomed fledglings), and that the village's bird density was 9 x higher than the rest of Britain?

So taken together, what does Churcher actually prove? "Taken together, these elements suggest another interpretation: cats are simply weeding out birds from an overcrowded population. Nor are they apparently catching healthy birds at their peak of winged life; wintertime is most stressful on birds that are old or sick, and fledglings tumbling down from nests could account for the high count in early summer. And with only 130 dead sparrows recorded by Churcher, the cats kill - or find - less than half the numbers that must be annually culled to sustain their populations." (J. Elliott, "Of Cats and Birds and Science: A Critique of the Churcher Study," 1994.)

Two years after that original "study," all pretensions of scientific objectivity disappear. In his second paper, he describes cats as "ruthless killers", predation as "the slaughter", while prey is a "luckless mouse", or a "very frightened baby rabbit". Is this science?

Coleman in Wisconsin is even worse. In his paper, "Cats and Wildlife: A Conservation Dilemma", Coleman states that "Recent research suggests that rural free-ranging domestic cats in Wisconsin may be killing between 8 and 217 million birds each year", citing footnote 10. And what is footnote 10? An article in Wisconsin Natural Resources written by HIMSELF. Coleman cites himself. So let's look at the article. What does it say? "Here are our best GUESSES at low, intermediate and high ESTIMATES of the number of birds killed by rural cats in Wisconsin" BASED ON THE SAME OVERSIMPLIFIED, HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL FORMULA THOROUGHLY DISCREDITED IN THE CHURCHER STUDY. For one, it is not RESEARCH. It is a GUESS. Second, there is no basis for the number of cats he GUESSES live in Wisconsin. Third, is a range from 8 to 217 million a statistically valid range? Absolutely not. It shows a shockingly low level of scientific rigor and confidence. Finally to get at his low and high estimates, he ASSUMES cats kill rate is 20% on the LOW end and 30% on the HIGH end. Is this fair? Studies in nine states had the range as "Few" on the Low end to 3% and 20% on the high end. If you eliminated the Few and the 20% which are off the curve, it would be a 3% range to 14% on the high end for percentage of total prey being birds. A New Zealand study had it pegged at 5% by scat analysis, in Australia it was 5.2%, and another study in New Zealand had it at 4.5% in only 12% of the cats! Coleman's numbers are off the charts and over inflate his "findings". But even then, he is making assumptions that aren't valid: he assumes millions of cats, he assumes they are all allowed outdoors, he assumes they are all young and agile and able to hunt equally, and he assumes each one is regularly killing birds despite the fact that as many as 50% of people do not let their cats outdoors, that American cats are getting fatter and less agile, that American cats are living longer and cannot hunt as well as they get older, and that some cats are just lazy or lousy hunters.

Coleman is a guess, not a study. It is, worse, a bad overly inflated guess. In an interview with a reporter in 1994, even Coleman admitted as much: "The media has had a field day with this since we started. Those figures were from our proposal. THEY AREN'T ACTUAL DATA; that was just our projection to show had bad it might be." But that hasn't stopped anti-cat groups from using the stuff as if it was handed down from Mt. Sinai.

3. There is a large body of scientific literature that is ignored by Mr. Wildlife Degree, precisely because it contradicts his conclusions.

Roger Tabor found that cats have low success as bird hunters and that the bulk of their diet is garbage, plants, insects, and other scavenger material. In short, cats are not impacting bird populations on continents. Fitzgerald & Karl found that "cats suppress populations of more dangerous predators such as rats and thus allow denser populations of birds than would exist without them". Robert Berg found that cats were not impacting quail population in San Francisco even though quail nest on the ground. Mead found no evidence that cats are impacting overall bird populations. Colemand & Brunner concluded that, "The common belief that feral cats are serious predators of birds is apparently without basis." A Worldwatch Institute 1994 Study found that birds are in decline due to drought, habitat loss, over trapping, and water pollution. Cats are noticeably absent as factors. A 1988 study by the University of Georgia blamed forest fragmentation across Southern U.S. for decimating songbirds. A Colorado Wildlife Dept. study in 1994 blamed drought. National Geographic lined declines to poisons in environment, particularly lawn care products.

4. TNR actually helps meet the goals of Mr. Wildlife Degree because... (Here I would note all the reasons I mentioned in past posts, which I won't repeat here, about the alternative being do nothing, meaning cats are breeding, roaming and foraging for food, I would note that neutering significantly reduces roaming which means less contact with wildlife, and I would note that even if the cats were killed, other cats would move in to fill their territorial void left by cats). Less cats, controlled feeding, means less hunting. Here, you might also note that many studies have found that upwards of 75% of birds killed by cats are non-native starlings which compete with native birds for habitat, so that the net effect of cat predation may actually be complementing the goals of native species advocates.

5. Where does it end? If we must kill cats because they kill birds, where do we draw the line? (Some think this argument is silly, but I have found it very useful, as the media tend to like it a lot.) A lot has been written about the supposed controversy surrounding feral cats, much of it of dubious value. Common sense, not statistics or hard-line arguments, could have pointed the way, as it did as early as 1949 when then-Governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois, vetoed a bill to restrain cats: "We are all interested in protecting certain varieties of birds. That cats destroy some birds, I well know, but I believe this legislation would further but little the worthy cause to which its proponents give such unselfish effort. The problem of cat versus bird is as old as time. If we attempt to resolve it by legislation who knows but what we may be called upon to take sides as well in the age old problems of dog versus cat, bird versus bird, or even bird versus worm. In my opinion, the State of Illinois and its local governing bodies already have enough to do without trying to control feline delinquency." So why, 50 years later, is Mr. Wildlife Degree still belaboring the point?

6. Indigenous vs. non-native wildlife. Mr. Wildlife Degree's proposal to round up and kill cats because they are "non-native" is based on a troubling belief: value comes from lineage, and worth as a species stems from being here first. The belief that some species of animals are worth more than others because they were here first is backward thinking and shortsighted. But it is hardly surprising. The call for extermination of animals in the name of protecting others deemed more worthy by some arbitrary standard is not new. "Cats kill birds, so we must kill cats." This is the banner under which Mr. Wildlife Degree and other native species advocates have long rallied to label cats as "pests" of our cities and "invasive non-native" intruders in our parks and countryside.

But cats aren't the only ones to be targeted for slaughter in the name of protecting other species or preserving "native" habitats. They have been joined at different times and in different places by red foxes, gulls, cowbirds, elk, sea lions, coyote, mountain lions, ravens, skunks, raccoons, wild horses... the list goes on. Referred to as "garbage animals", "alien" species, "weeds", and "vermin", these creatures have become scapegoats for the massive habitat destruction, environmental degradation, and species extinction causes by one species and one species alone: humans.

For nativists, the point is clear: the lives of these animals don't count, and therefore they can and should be eliminated to protect more important species and to preserve "natural" environments. Had we honored and preserved life, had we treated all animals - cats, birds, and every other creature who shares our planet - with the respect they each deserve, we might have spared many of the species now lost forever.

To us, there are no "garbage" animals and slaughter and death aren't the tools we need to preserve life. To do that - to preserve the life of all animals - we believe we must honor and preserve the life of each.

I hope that is a helpful starting point.

When neighbors complain about ferals and start calling animal control

Question from a member:

There are stray cats living in the woods across the street from my house. I wanted to try to catch them, spay/neuter and release them back. My neighbors are against this. One says they are urinating on her porch and the other says they are using her garden as a litter box and killing birds at her feeder. What do you do when your neighbors

won't wait to give you time to show TNR works, or find alternatives, and call animal control that euthanizes the cats? The cats are being euthanized immediately so I don't have time to do much.

Response from Nathan:

As an animal control facility, we field neighbor "nuisance" complaints on a daily basis - both sides, the neighbor doing the complaining and the person who is the subject of the complaint. My first question is ALWAYS, "Have you sat down and talked to your neighbor yet?" I am amazed at how often the answer is No. They are your neighbors. You have to live next to each other. So we need to go over, knock on the door, bring a cup of coffee, and sit down and talk. Sometimes our neighbors are nut jobs and that isn't possible. That is the extreme. Once again, we cannot let extreme scenarios dictate policies for groups.

So with neighbors, it is important to listen closely and ask questions. In one case, a neighbor demanded, without explanation, that a caregiver stop feeding cats in the neighborhood! After asking several questions, she discovered the neighbor was upset because he didn't like cat footprints on his new car. To keep the peace, the caregiver bought her neighbor a car cover and he never complained again. By asking questions and offering solutions, it becomes possible to focus on the person's specific concerns rather than their generalized objections to feral cats.

Sit down and talk. Calmly share your concerns with the goal of amicably resolving the problem. It can be a good idea to prepare a small packet of written materials in support of caring for feral cats. If relations are seriously strained, community mediation services may be beneficial.

Offer concrete solutions! Once you have determined what the person's specific complaints are, you can address them. If you haven't had the cats neutered yet, do so, and let your neighbor know how much it will improve the cats' behavior while gradually decreasing the size of the colony. Offer to keep litter boxes in your backyard for cats to use, or put a cat fence around your yard.

Explain the value of TNR. TNR is the most humane and effective way to control feral cat populations and minimize the most common concerns people raise about feral cats. Be sure to explain the ramifications of trapping the cats and taking them to an animal shelter: most will be killed since feral cats are not candidates for adoption. In addition, more cats-probably unneutered-will move back into the area starting the cycle all over again.

Here are suggestions for more specific concerns:

Wild animals: Feed cats during the day and pick up any leftover food once the cats have eaten. Other humane deterrents are described in our fact sheets on "Living with Wildlife".

Kittens: Spay/neuter will prevent more kittens from being born. In some cases, feral kittens can be socialized and adopted.

Spraying, fighting, howling: Neutering quickly reduces or eliminates these behaviors. Regular and sufficient feeding will also prevent fighting.

Cats using yard as a litter box: Caregivers can place covered, sand-filled litter boxes in their yards, and/or offer to periodically clean the neighbor's yard.

When a colony cat requires greater medical care

Question from a member:

I've been managing a feral cat colony and implemented a trap/spay/release program. Recently one of my neuters showed signs of kidney disease. His condition requires more care than I can give an outside cat, i.e., it's impossible to give SQ's, supplements, etc. to an outside cat.

I am not in the position to give him a home in my house. Do you have any recommendations? What have other caregivers done when one cat in the colony faces a chronic, incurable disease that causes some discomfort, but not yet suffering? Do they euthanize? Do they try to find a sanctuary to take the special needs cat? If so, do you have any suggestions?

Response from Nathan:

There are sanctuaries, although they are in short supply. Others bring them in to a home environment. Others treat in the colony as best they can until the cat is suffering. Some do kill, but it depends on the condition of the cat.

Webster's dictionary defines euthanasia as "the act or practice of killing or permitting the death of hopelessly sick or injured individuals in a relatively painless way for reasons of mercy." It is not "mercy" if you are doing it to

manage populations in a shelter, because you run out of cages, because it is inconvenient, because you are at YOUR wit's end, because you don't or can't "give him a home in [your] house."

It is only mercy when the condition of the cat requires it. Spend a good long night asking yourself if this cat meets that definition.

Spaying pregnant females

Question from Peter:

A young cat appeared around our house. I noticed her stomach is expanding and her teats are more pronounced. I'm fearful that she's pregnant. We believe that we've found her a home, assuming she doesn't have feline leukemia, but that will fall through if she is indeed pregnant. This brings me to my question. We've wrestled with this all day and just don't know what to do. Should we abort the pregnancy? Is it in the best interest of all? After all, she'll have a home and we don't need more homeless kittens when the shelters are full. What do you think? We just want to do right by the cat.

Response from Nathan:

First, let's get rid of the false underlying assumptions. That the home you have lined up will disappear if she is pregnant and not spayed. There are many ways around this. Weaning the kittens in a foster home and then spaying her and giving her to the new home, is the most obvious. Finding the cat a different home is another option. The second false assumption is that there are so many homeless kittens, aborting these is the most compassionate option. Whether these kittens are born or not will hardly change the calculus at the local shelter, so long as you commit to finding them homes yourself or through your rescue group network, nor does it address whether the shelter is doing enough to find homes for all the kittens it takes in. Too often, we lose sight of our morality by setting up an issue for the convenient answer we want to hear by clouding it with other assumptions.

So let's stick to the core: Is it ethical to spay a pregnant cat and abort - end the life of - the unborn kittens?

Some No Kill shelters will spay and abort until birth. Others will spay - but take out viable kittens and then bottle-feed them. Yet others take the Roe vs. Wade approach to feline abortion. They will spay during early pregnancy, but not at the point of viability - at that point, they will send the animal into foster care to give birth and wean the litter. At least one No Kill shelter I know of will not spay at any point during pregnancy. The first is the least consistent ethically, the last the most.

Lots of really smart people, who love animals, will make all kinds of great arguments for or against the proposition about whether life begins at conception, viability or birth, and thus whether spaying and aborting a pregnant cat is humane. Others will argue that, despite the gold standard, we aren't there yet as a society, so - until we save all the already born healthy and treatable homeless animals - it really is a question best posed for another day.

But, in its purest form, the No Kill gold standard is that we would NEVER end life when that life is not suffering. The gold standard is that a pregnant cat should be offered a sanctuary in the form of a foster home, where she can give birth, raise and wean her litter, before she - and they - are found loving homes. That is the right and ethical thing to do.

This hit home one day for me a couple of years ago when a gentleman brought into the shelter a pregnant cat he had found. We sent her off to get spayed the following morning. A day later he came in with his kids to check in on and see the cat. He was told the cat was not at the shelter because she went to a veterinarian to get spayed, something that seemed to be beyond comment or concern. But he was devastated. With hurt feelings, he said to me, "but I promised the kids nothing would happen to the cat or her kittens." To them, the shelter had killed kittens. To us, we had spayed a pregnant cat so as to prevent more kittens from coming in. To many in the world of sheltering, to many within the No Kill movement, feline abortion seems to be a non-issue. But it wasn't to that gentleman, or his kids - and they are right.

It may be easier to reconcile our practices with feline abortion now given we still live in a society that kills 4.5 million already born homeless animals annually, but for a movement founded on the rights of the individual animal, it is not defensible ethically.

I believe that the more successful No Kill becomes, the more we will find some real ethical dilemmas within our own practices and procedures. Dilemmas that will challenge some of our deeply held convictions, which we may find - if we address them openly and honestly - that some of them are still rooted in the traditional model - killing for space, killing to prevent possible future suffering, killing as a population management tool, the kind of stuff we thought we rejected when we challenged the status quo with our No Kill ideals.

We've certainly come a long way as a movement, but we still have a long way to go.

Effective rules for feral advocacy and feral cat myths

Last comments for the week from Nathan:

Feral cat advocacy, next to spay/neuter, is essential to save the lives of cats. It not only protects animals and defends community caregivers, but the partnership you establish between the shelter and caregivers is essential - they can be your biggest allies and supporters.

I want to offer some thoughts, my ground rules, for effective feral advocacy:

Being feral is OK. The goal is NOT "No More Feral Cats". The goal is "No More KILLING of feral cats".

Be knowledgeable. Read the studies. You cannot advocate effectively in a state of ignorance.

Be reasonable. You must present your arguments in a succinct, thoughtful and straightforward manner, always in coat and tie or business dress.

No guesses. They can bite you in the rear! For example, how many feral cats are out there? Some say 60 million, others 100 million. To you that's 60 million ferals who need TNR. To anti-cat zealots, that's 60 million feral cats eating birds. The fact is we don't know, so let's not pretend that we do. Just say what we know.

Shatter the myths!

What are these myths?

The "cat feeders" are bad and part of the problem, while "cat caregivers" (those that s/n, etc.) are good. Don't punish compassion. Each has a role in the community. Help feeders become caregivers.

That we need laws to control bad, irresponsible pet owners. It doesn't work, it kills cats, it makes us all feel good but implementation and effectiveness is elusive.

That all pet cats belong indoors. What a loony idea (my reasons are in this issue of Best Friends magazine and on their website)

That cats are decimating birds. (see prior posts)

That "two cats = 470,000 in seven years." If this were true, we would literally be scooping cats to get out of our driveway the way we upstate New Yorkers scoop snow in the winter! Exaggeration undermines credibility!

And the mother of all cat myths, that feral cats live short, miserable lives. Many animals (raccoons, foxes, deer, mice) face hardships and yet we would NEVER advocate they be killed for their own good. In addition, this is often simply not the case.

Let me close my session by saying that I cannot think of a single human endeavor that I respect and admire more when it comes to saving animals than those of you who battle the elements, battle your neighbors, battle the authorities, battle ignorance and shortsightedness and hate, all to bring some food, some comfort, some kindness, some love to throwaways - the cats who live on our streets, our alleys, next to our dumpsters.

As shelters, and organizations, and rescue groups, it is OUR job to support YOU, not the other way around. If we do that as a movement, if we champion the caretaker and the alley cat in our community as we do the most beloved of house cats, then we will be well on our way to becoming a No Kill nation, and to building a society where every animal is cherished and respected, and every individual life is protected and revered.

Bless you all.

Being a feral cat rescuer and wildlife control operator

Comment from Susan in NY:

I found the Nathan's feral cat articles excellent, but I do wish to comment on three of his summary statements. I do not necessarily disagree so much as have a different take on them:

That "No more feral cats" is not the goal and "No more killing of feral cats" is. I agree that the chances of sterilizing feral cats into total oblivion nationwide are unlikely. However, much like the "No More Homeless Pets" campaign, I feel "No More Feral Cats" or at least "No More Feral Kittens" is the ground ethic of anyone who cares about cats in general, and ferals specifically. If it is "ok to be feral" why do we sterilize them to prevent them from breeding? Simply for better quality of life of individual cats? Perhaps in individual situations we do, but nationally I think the goal is far greater. "Fewer feral cats" is the one place where we have common ground with wildlife advocates. I think it is an important rallying cry.

Nathan perhaps wants a nonlethal option for the cats that come into his shelter-and all shelters nationwide. His

emphasis is therefore on avoiding killing animals that come into his shelter. But I rescue both cats and wildlife, and to some extent worried people, and I ultimately want to know there will someday be fewer phone calls for help from single moms, elderly women, and worried restaurant staff. No more feral cats. I believe shelter programs like the ones Nathan advocates (sterilizing every tame and feral cat before adoption; providing free or low-cost s/n to feral cat advocates) make this goal far more likely.

My wildlife control business overlaps with Nathan's region, and I absolutely would not be able to help as many people who want a nonlethal option for the feral cats they are caring for, were it not for TC SPCA spay/neuter options, and the new awareness local veterinarians have of feral cats (larger discounts offered to people like myself) now that the TC SPCA addresses these cats.

That "feral cats do not live miserable lives."

Certainly ferals with shelter and food, who are sterilized, and - perhaps a luxury in many cases - wormed and defleaed, don't live miserable lives.

But I have taken over at least one colony that was being neutered and returned but left unfed, and the complaints I received about skinny shivering eartipped ferals crouched on the edges of ice-encrusted metal dumpsters waiting for the next pizza crust were heartbreaking. Now that the ferals have shelters and food, the biggest problem I'm experienced is convincing restaurant staff that the cats are still alive and I did infact return them - since they no longer beg (pizza crust when they can have cat food?) and instead they head off into the fields to wander or rest in the shade during the day. An evening in the parking lot with binoculars confirmed they are indeed all still around, because even I began to wonder when I saw so little of them.

This large a change in behavior indicates to me that unfed or poorly fed cats are probably desperate, and fed cats are able to engage in the kind of cat behavior (exploring, lounging) we normally associate with "comfortable cats."

That is silly to strongly advocate indoor homes over outdoor homes. Among most street cat rescuers who advocate indoor homes, this does NOT mean entirely ruling out outdoor homes. One can be pro- "indoor cat" and still choose TNR as the best-case option for cats that cannot come indoors. And, from an animal rights view, not a population predation view, I agree with Nathan that there are serious errors there. Birds and mice and rabbits also feel pain and terror. Releasing one cat means a few hundred other animals will die. We make that moral choice when we choose TNR, or indoor/outdoor pet cat care.

Perhaps it is a justified choice, but nonetheless, we are choosing the death of one set of animals to save another set. Wildlife rehabilitators, just like feral cat rescuers, identify with injured fledglings and cat-caught bunnies just as we identify with starving feral kittens. They have to euthanize the ones that are past help, and nurse the ones that might be saved. They pay for this rescue themselves. We can't just throw their love of wildlife out the window because we love our cats.

We need to identify that rescue is another bond we share with some wildlife advocates, and focus on that bond. To my mind, that means placing as many cats and kittens in indoor homes as possible, to reduce the pain and suffering to other sentient animals, even if the only nonlethal option for adult true ferals is sterilization and outdoor life.

While Nathan is a well-known and respected feral cat advocate, and absolutely deserves that respect, others mucking around in the field (less well-known) speak loudly to their peers. What many of them say is "I believe in TNR, but I believe in quality of life, and the highest quality life is a warm, fed, loved, and if possible, indoor home. And what I hope for most of all - perhaps a pipe dream - is the day when a feral cat is a rare cat indeed, when barn cats are cared for at least as well as the valued livestock (and livestock treated far better than they are), and when most cats are in warm loving homes, whether indoor, or indoor-outdoor."

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