“Putting the Cat Back”

Or, the evolution of Return to Field and TNR diversion programs in North American animal shelters

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Historical pathways

- Return to owner
- Adoption
- Humane euthanasia

Suffering, painful death and/or causing unacceptable problems or risks out in the community
My “aha” moment
Underlying problem
You’re doing what now?

City Animal Care and Control workers still will pick up feral cats when they receive complaints or spot roamers in neighborhoods. But instead of taking the cats to a shelter...the cats are spayed or neutered, their ears clipped for identification purposes and a microchip is inserted under their skin so they can be tracked. Once the animals recover from surgery, they are returned back to where they were found.
No surprise here
It might not seem like a logical answer at first, but Jacksonville's animal care organizations say the best way to reduce the number of feral cats is to keep them alive.
San Jose's animal shelter is among the first in the country to try a new approach to dealing with feral and stray cats. Instead of euthanizing those that aren't adoptable, the shelter spays or neuters them and releases them back to the vacant lot or back alley from which they came.

(The shelter director) said the shelter and Audubon Society ultimately have the same goal: to see fewer feral and stray cats in the world. Over time, with enough cooperation from people, the trap-and-release method will work, he said. The alternative is to continue euthanizing cats that don't have owners, a policy that's shown limited results, he said.
New pathway

Whoa!

Return to owner

Adoption

Return to Field/SNR

Humane euthanasia

Suffering and/or causing unacceptable problems or risks out in the community
It worked!

- Euthanasia **down 75%**
- Euthanasia due to URI **down 99%**
- Cats picked up dead **down 20%**
- Intake (cat and kitten) **down 29%**
Not a fluke

- 11,749 cats sterilized and returned over 3-year period
- Euthanasia down 84%
- Calls for dead cat pickup down 24%
- Intake down 38%
Removals brought about a drastic reduction in pack size and a corresponding decrease in density. However, both pack size and density rebounded to pre-removal levels within 8 months post-removal. Accounting for both changes in prey abundance and coyote density, litter size was significantly related to total prey abundance/coyote. With increasing prey and reduced coyote density, mean litter size doubled in the removal area compared to pre-removal levels.
"Contrary to expectation, the relative abundance and activity of feral cats increased in the cull-sites, even though the numbers of cats captured per unit effort during the culling period declined. Increases in minimum numbers of cats known to be alive ranged from 75% to 211% during the culling period, compared with pre- and post-cull estimates."
Benefits of RTF for feral cats

• Reduces crowding, illness and euthanasia in shelters
• Reduces feline birth and translocation with associated risks
• Addresses the source of many nuisance complaints
• Stabilizes community cat populations more effectively than other available tools
What about friendly cats?

• Originally adoption was preferred over RTF where capacity existed
• Adoptive homes saved for cats that can’t go back
• Provide “Fates better than death” only for those that exceed adoption capacity
But remember this?

- Return to owner
- Adoption
- Humane euthanasia
  - Suffering, painful death and/or causing unacceptable problems or risks out in the community
One difference between cats and dogs
Another difference between cats and dogs

Fewer than 1 in 10 cats recovered by a call or visit to a shelter

This was in 2007

Can have surprise shots as the most popular pets in the United States, with American households owning an estimated 71 million dogs in 2015. Even more surprising, less than 20% of all dogs are owned by women, and the average age of a dog is over 10 years. This was in 2007.

Materials and Methods

Location of study—The study was conducted in Montgomery County, Ohio, in 2005. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the local animal shelter in Montgomery County, Ohio, in the recovery of lost cats. The study was conducted in 2005.

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2012 survey

• Random digit dialed national survey of > 1,000 households

• 15% of households had lost a cat

• Of those, 75% were found
  • 1/54 by visit to shelter
  • 48/54 by returning on their own or searching neighborhood
Consistent results

“Of the cats that were found alive, the vast majority were found outside (83%). This was followed by the option offered as ‘cat being found inside someone else’s house’ (11%), inside the house where they lived (4%), and inside a public building (2%), therefore less than 2% of found cats were in a shelter or municipal animal facility.”
Uneven impact

Return to Field Owner

- Return to field for friendly healthy lost cats can bypass the mismatch in timing, search methods, transport barriers and cultural expectations that prevent lost cats from getting reclaimed from shelters.

- Spay/neuter/vaccination improves cat health and decreases roaming for cats whose owners might not have the wherewithal to bring them in for those services.
Another difference between cats and dogs

“There was one cat that kept coming back smelling of ladies’ perfume and they used our device to track it down to a neighbour’s house.”

Not all who wander are lost
Uneven impact

• 1 in 6 people in America live in poverty
• 1 in 5 people in America speak a language other than English at home
• Cultural norms and expectations as well as access to services can vary
• > 90% of people in underserved communities have never been to a shelter at all
Theory

- Most pets in disadvantaged communities adopted from a source other than a shelter
- Return to field for friendly, healthy pet cats can close the loop on sterilization and vaccination for cats already “adopted” from another source
- Open doors for further education and risk mitigation

HSUS Pets for Life Report 2014
“Star is the light of Mayra’s life. The snowy-white cat has lived more than 10 years in her Texas home, but one day someone in the neighborhood saw Star outside, scooped her up and brought her to the nearest shelter.”

“Prior to the CCP, Star would have joined hundreds of other cats sitting in cages at the shelter, waiting for her family to find her. If she wasn’t picked up, she’d be put up for adoption...”
“Instead, thanks to the community cat program, Star was examined by veterinary staff, vaccinated and spayed. After recovering from surgery overnight and the next day, Sarah and Marla loaded Star into the CCP van and returned her back to the address where she was originally found.

“That’s when Mayra found out that Star wasn’t gone for good, but she was right there and happy to be home. Bursting into tears when Star was handed to her, Mayra was not only overjoyed to have her 11-year-old cat back safe at home, but she wanted to help other cats.”
New understanding

- Return to owner
- Adoption
- Return to Field/SNR
- Humane euthanasia
- Suffering and/or causing unacceptable problems or risks out in the community
Bonus result of robust RTF/TNR diversion

- No statewide requirement for healthy cat intake
- California cat stray holding law states “no cat shall be killed before 72 hours”
- RTF/TNR diversion can minimize time in shelter
- Lower density = less staffing needs, better housing for all, lower disease risks, lower costs, better odds for those that do come in
Now more than ever

• Cases reported in cats, lions and tigers from asymptomatic/unknown exposure
• Viral shedding and cat to cat transmission documented in high dose/close contact context
• Crowded conditions and high levels of respiratory symptoms will tend to amplify potential for any pathogen to spread
• Let’s not give this badly behaving virus another opportunity to behave badly!
Two main lanes of the cat superhighway

- TNR diversion or RTF for most healthy unowned cats\(^1\)
  - Healthy feral cats to stabilize populations in the community and limit euthanasia at the shelter
  - Healthy friendly stray/free roaming cats to maximize spayed/neutered/vaccinated cats reunited with their families
  - As an avenue to open doors with community members who would not otherwise go to the shelter

- Shelter pathway for pet cats and social kittens needing new homes\(^1\) and:
  - Unhealthy stray/free roaming cats (sick/injured/poor body condition)
  - Cruelty, abuse and neglect cases
  - Interventions for significant nuisance situations/public health or wildlife risk
  - As an avenue to open doors with community members and encourage engagement with the shelter

\(^1\) Ideally bypassing the shelter or with minimal length of stay

\(^1\) When pet safety net/home to home options are not appropriate
I wonder what’s next that I will learn to think differently about?

Community service vs enforcement

There’s been an increase in civilian anti-violence work, "whether it’s violence interrupters, or street interventions, or gang outreach workers," says Janetta. "There is this increasing field of people and they’re out doing public safety work. They’re preventing escalation. They’re intervening in conflicts to tamp them down. Sometimes they’re actually engaging with people that they know are at risk of shooting and being shot, building rapport, and then trying to perhaps get them involved in services or get them on a different trajectory.

It’s difficult to increase funding for these programs, as cities are still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic and budget shortfalls. There’s a chance, instead, that some of the programs may be cut, while police departments remain largely intact. But the pandemic had also started to provide some evidence of what less police could mean.

Not just a cat thing

The Role of Dog Population Management in Rabies Elimination—A Review of Current Approaches and Future Opportunities

Mass dog culling is not an effective DPM tool. Mass dog culling is still used as a misguided emergency response to rabies outbreaks, based on the mistaken belief that reducing the size of dog populations will reduce rabies transmission (36). In fact, mass dog culling has been shown to have no long-term impact on the control of rabies within cities (36, 39, 40) or across countries such as Ecuador, Indonesia and Bangladesh (39, 41–43). When modeled in realistic scenarios, culling is not as effective as sterilization programs at reducing population size in the long term (44). This is because culling does not address the source of new or replacement animals, and has only a temporary effect on population size. Furthermore, rapid dog replacement rates have been documented in some areas following culling, leading to a younger population of generally rabies-susceptible dogs (45, 46).
Yes, BUT...