

Indoor Cats, Scratching, and the Debate over Declawing: When Normal Pet Behavior Becomes a Problem

3 CHAPTER

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When pet animals share our living spaces, their needs and natural behaviors sometimes are at odds with the varying standards for household appearance, sanitation, and polite social life that Americans have established over time. How pet owners have resolved these issues provides insight into their changing ideas about the role of animals in their households and suggests how much, or how little, people may actually know about the biological behaviors and psychological needs of the creatures they care for. This essay examines one particular issue associated with the problem of sharing spaces: declawing pet cats as a common solution to avoid destructive scratching. This is a volatile issue and has generated much emotional debate. It pits loving cat owners who see such surgery as an act that breaches the trust of responsible pet care for their feline companions against loving cat owners who see the surgery as an act that strengthens their bond with their feline companions. It divides those in the animal welfare and veterinary community as well, where many opinions are believed to be the *right* opinion. The authors wish

to stress that they enjoy the companionship of pet animals in their homes; pointing out the complexities and contradictions in living with pet cats is intended to acknowledge the historical, socially constructed, and changeable character of pet keeping and to encourage people involved in companion animal welfare work to consider why some practices can be promoted or simply tolerated, while others are problematic.

The History of the Cat as a Pet in America

The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) arrived in America with the first permanent European settlers in the seventeenth century. Ships carrying immigrants and supplies almost always carried at least one cat to kill the rats that plagued ships' food supplies. On shore, cats soon played an essential role as predators in the ecology of human-animal communities. Small businesses and government offices relied on resident cats to protect their contents from rats and mice, and, by the mid-1800s, it was even possible for city folk to rent good

mousers. The U.S. Post Office owned what one observer called "quite an army of cats" to protect the mail; postmasters in large cities even had budgets for "cat meat" (this being food *for* cats, not food *from* cats). Around markets and stables and anywhere grain was stored to service livestock, cats were present (Grier, in press).

Although the majority of American cats still worked for a living as late as the 1940s (Jones 2003), some families enjoyed the company of what memoirist Samuel Canby Rumford of Wilmington, Delaware, recalling his childhood in the 1880s, called "just plain cats." While cities were home to many thousands of feral and unowned cats, and even cats with owners were sometimes purely animal workers, ample documentation survives of well-cherished pet cats and of cats who were both workers and well-loved companions. The Quaker diarist Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker cherished her old cat, Puss, so much that, when the cat died from a "disorder among the cats" of Philadelphia in 1800, she arranged a funeral for the animal. The Rumfords had a family pet cemetery with wooden monuments for both cats and dogs

dating back to the 1830s. Despite efforts to establish a pet-cat “fancy” with a show circuit beginning in the 1870s, most cat lovers would have scoffed at the idea of buying a “purebred” cat. Pet cats were acquired from friends or neighbors or adopted as strays. At the same time that these lucky cats enjoyed life in the laps of fond owners, in places like the Rumfords’ barn, cats who lived on their own ingenuity “multiplied in great numbers” (Grier, in press).

Because cats were expected to hunt, their owners often assumed that they could fend somewhat for themselves. Thus cats occupied an ambiguous position in the household as somehow less tame than dogs, and their quest for prey sometimes put them in conflict with humans. For example, where households kept poultry, cats were a nuisance because they found chicks such easy pickings. In May 1872 cat lover Alice Stone Blackwell, who cared for a small flock at her family’s suburban house, found herself marching over to her next-door neighbor to “tell him if he did not keep the cat shut up we should have to kill it” (Grier, in press).

Eventually the problems caused by such ambiguities came to the attention of the animal welfare community. By the early twentieth century, advocates complained about an apparently common practice among city folk of turning out cats for the summer when the family went on vacation, or of keeping cats during the summer at the seaside or country house and leaving them behind when the family returned to the city for the winter.

Also during this time, urban public health professionals in the largest cities turned their attention to remaking cities into orderly, healthier environments with safe water, clean streets, and regular municipal trash pickup. In this context, the ubiquitous urban tramp cat was no longer a joke or even an unpleasant yet acceptable fact of

life. Cities had needed them, but now the misery of half-starved feral and unowned cats, and increasing, if misguided, public concern about cats as carriers of diseases, including poliomyelitis, led to new efforts to control their numbers. Whether stray cat populations had increased dramatically in those years, as advocates of control claimed, it is true that hundreds of thousands of cats were captured and killed between 1890 and 1910.

In 1911 the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) killed upwards of three hundred thousand cats, mostly kittens. Philadelphia disposed of fifty thousand and Boston another twenty-five thousand that same year. The author of the *McClure’s* magazine article that startled readers with those figures excoriated pet owners who abandoned their cats for the summers or refused to euthanize unwanted kittens:

It does not fit in with the decencies of civilization that so much living and dying should go on casually, in lofts and cellars and drains and coal-pockets and vacant houses. Neither does it accord with a decent humanity that so many sentient and dependent creatures should be left so completely at the mercy of circumstances. (in Grier, in press)

Throughout the nineteenth century, as now, some people were serious cat lovers. Lydia Jackson Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s second wife, was one of these. Her stepdaughter Ellen complained in an 1859 letter to her sister that the family not only tolerated a black kitten, the barn cat, two others named Violet and Kitty Minot, a large black cat, and “Aunty’s cat and all mother’s pensioners,” but that they recently had been “*much* afflicted by the arrival of another cat.” Emerson himself joked that the cat came from a nearby town, where she had “met a cat who said ‘Why, haven’t you heard? There’s a Mis’ Emerson

down Concord-way what’s kind to cats.’” While conventional wisdom considered cats to be pets for women and little girls, there were in fact both male and female cat lovers. Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, was a passionate cat lover (which may surprise readers of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; where Clemens discussed at some length the trading and play value of a dead cat among small boys). This was a trait he shared with his mother, who, he recalled, succored scores of strays in the 1830s and 1840s. Once his own family was established, Clemens indulged his passion for cats freely; one daughter recalled Clemens walking around with a cat named Lazy draped around his neck like a stole (Grier, in press).

In sum, pet cats were more common in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America than has been suggested previously. Some pet cats had real devotees who loved them and valued them as more than mouse catchers. Even the most beloved pet cats, however, lived lives that were much different from those of their modern counterparts.

For one thing, all cats lived at least part of their lives outdoors. This was a sensible solution given the blunt realities of cat ownership: even pet cats were sexually intact, expressing a range of behaviors (unpleasant to humans) that feline sex lives necessarily engendered. Further, cat owners who confined their animals had to improvise litterboxes with sand, wood shavings, or torn newspaper. Thus, even in big cities, most pet cats were routinely allowed out to wander, and owners expected them to have adventures, including fights with other wanderers. In the early 1890s, teenager John W. Gould of Orange, New Jersey, was pleased when his cat Mike matured enough to have “his experience fighting outside. He has licked all the Tramps but one and I think he will whip that one next time” (Grier, in

press). Leaving the house meant that pet cats were exposed to infectious diseases, injury, or death. However, the fact that many cats lived at least part of their lives out of doors also meant that they could express their range of behaviors more fully. Thus, owners were less likely to confront certain behaviors like scratching, and, when they did, they had a handy and inexpensive solution: put the cat outside.

The Changing Experience of Keeping a Cat

Several important changes in the routines of pet keeping made it easier for owners to keep cats as indoor pets. The first was the invention of new products specifically for cat owners. The most important of these was commercial cat litterbox fillers. Kitty Litter™ was bagged and sold in 1947 by Edward Lowe, a Florida salesman who dealt in granulated clay products intended to soak up grease spills. The granulated-clay cat litter business took off rapidly because Lowe and his competitors were actually responding to latent demand in the marketplace; manufacturers of pet supplies had been offering cat “toilets” containing paper pads for some years. There is other circumstantial evidence that increasing numbers of cat owners were interested in considering, or were forced by their living conditions in high-rise apartments or near the busy streets of America’s cities, to consider keeping their cats indoors. By the 1930s, commercial scratching posts became available for sale in pet stores; in 1936, the first U.S. patent for a scratching post appeared, and numerous variations followed. By the 1950s, pet stores even offered spray repellants intended to keep cats away from furniture (Grier, in press).

The second important change that made it easier for cat owners

to keep their cats as indoor pets was the growing popularity of spaying and neutering. According to the 2003–2004 National Pet Owners’ Survey by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMA), 84 percent of cats were spayed or neutered in 2002. Surgically removing the sexual organs of cats eliminates some undesirable behaviors (wandering to find a mate, fighting, noisy heat cycles) and often decreases others (urine spraying to mark territory). Sterilization has become synonymous with responsible pet ownership, thanks to the work of animal welfare organizations, animal shelters, and veterinarians (see appendix A). It signals a dramatic change in human behavior over a relatively short span of time since the 1960s.

Cats seemed to fit well into changing patterns of living in America. They could live comfortably in apartments and small houses and were reputed to make fewer demands on their owners for atten-

(APPMA 2003–2004). In 2002 there were 77.6 million owned cats and 65 million owned dogs in the United States (APPMA 2003–2004). In an informal survey of declawing across the United States, one author (N.P. 2004) found that costs at twenty-five veterinary facilities for the declawing of forefeet range from \$50 to \$476, or an average of \$158 per declaw. Given Patronek’s estimate that as many as 25 percent of the owned cat population is declawed (2001), this would represent 19.4 million declawed cats and revenue to veterinarians of more than \$3 billion. Any significant lowering of the declawing rate would be a large financial loss to the veterinary community. Declawing opponents argue, however, that addressing behavior problems can enhance the value of a veterinary practice and make up for that loss. By offering pet behavior services and/or recommending outside resources, veterinary practices can maintain

Table 1
Percentage of APPMA Owners with Scratching Posts

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002
Own a Scratching Post:	28	30	33	37	35

Source: 2003–2004 APPMA National Pet Owners Survey.

tion and care than did dogs. In its first survey of American pet owners in 1978, the APPMA reported that 31.7 million households had dogs and 16.2 million had cats. According to APPMA statistics, the number of cats (62 million) exceeded the number of dogs (53 million) in American households for the first time in 1992. Cats have continued to outpace dogs since then, and the number of households that have a cat increased faster (8 percent) than the number of households with any pet (3 percent)

client loyalty, strengthen their client services, and generate additional revenue from services, products, and referrals (Peterson 2002).

Since 1978, the APPMA has provided a profile of dog owners, but it took another twenty years before the association established a similar profile for cat owners. According to the 1998 cat profile: 68 percent of owners were female; the average age of a cat owner (male or female) was forty-five; and more cat owners were single (36 percent) than were dog owners (27 percent).

Table 2
Demographic Profile of Cat Owners

Female:	68 percent
Age:	40–49 (25 percent)
	50–64 (20 percent)
Marital Status:	married (59 percent)
	single (19 percent) (second largest)

Over the course of their lifetime, 67 percent of cat owners have been pet owners for more than twenty years.

Source: Ralston Purina 2000.

Table 3
Reasons for Removing a Cat from the Household

Eliminating Outside the Litterbox:	33 percent
Biting People:	14 percent
Intolerant of Children:	11 percent
Scratching People:	11 percent
Destroying Household or Personal Items:	8 percent

Source: Ralston Purina 2000.

For the 2002 survey, collected information indicated that 11 percent of cat owners were females living alone and 7 percent were males living alone (Armstrong, Tomasello, and Hunter 2001).

Increasing interest in cats as pets has led to more intensive patterns of care. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the growth of the pet-cat population and the demands of cat owners stimulated several veterinary schools to add more information on cats to their curricula, publishers to include cats in their veterinary texts, and pharmaceutical companies to increase the range of products available for cats (Jones 2003). *Cats Magazine* was founded in 1945, a number of popular advice manuals came out after World War II, and many other publications followed.

Commercial cat food had been available since the 1890s, but it was rarely used until the 1930s, and it began to outsell dog food in 1958 (Jones 2003).

Unacceptable Cat Behavior

Pet cats live longer lives thanks to improved health care and nutrition and an indoor lifestyle. From 1987 to 2000, the life span of the average cat increased by more than one-third, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) (2002). This increased life expectancy means that owners are more likely to experience behaviors that they cannot tolerate, such as urination outside the litterbox, which is associated with deteriorating health (conditions such as

arthritis), cats' physical and mental needs being unmet by their caregivers, or the stress caused when cats are expected to adapt to changing human routines.

In 1950 one-person households accounted for 9.5 percent of all households; by 2000, they accounted for 26 percent, an all-time high. Even in multiperson families, however, pets are often left home alone for many hours every day. This situation has prompted the creation of new pet services such as "doggy daycare" and professional dog walkers, but nothing comparable is available for cats in most communities. Because cats are presumed—not without some justification—to be able to occupy themselves indoors just as they used to fend for themselves outdoors, they have become the exemplary urban pet. Yet, reasons given for why cats are surrendered to shelters reveal that behavior problems account for many such relinquishments. Most cats who enter shelters are between six months and three years of age and have lost their homes due to unacceptable behavior (Miller et al. 1996; Patronek et al. 1996; Salman et al. 1998, 2000; Kass et al. 2001). Behavior problems accounted for 14 percent of the reasons owners reported for surrendering a cat; the most commonly reported behavior problem in cats was fearfulness, followed by scratching the furniture, not using the litterbox, and objecting to being held (Miller et al. 1996; Line 1998). Other studies show that destroying household or personal items is among the top five reasons for removing a cat from the household (but not necessarily bringing the pet to a shelter) (Table 3).

It has been estimated that behavior problems are identified in 5 percent of all veterinary visits, account for 20 percent of a veterinarian's time, are the main reason for euthanasia of pets, and cause practitioners to lose 15 percent of their

client base annually (Landsberg 1991a). Approximately 97,000 cats are euthanized annually in small animal veterinary practices in the United States because of behavior problems (Patronek and Dodman 1999). Although veterinarians seemed unwilling to euthanize animals for behavior problems solely on the basis of a client's request, many did not inquire routinely about animal behavior and often were not confident enough in their clinical skills to treat behavior problems (Patronek and Dodman 1999).

Keeping Cats Indoors

The human population demographics mentioned previously and the risks of diseases, poisons, attacks by other animals, abuse by humans, or speeding vehicles make the great outdoors a dangerous place for free-roaming animals. When cats are left outside unsupervised, their chance of being injured, becoming ill, or even dying is increased. The estimated average life span of a free-roaming cat, even one who ventures outdoors unsupervised only occasionally, is less than three years, compared to fifteen to eighteen years for the average indoor-only cat (HSUS 2003).

It is important to remember that cats have always lived their lives outdoors; what is different today is that the risks most cat owners were once willing to assume as simply part of the reality of keeping a cat have become less acceptable to many. Two out of three veterinarians now recommend keeping cats indoors, most often citing dangers from vehicles and disease (Jacobs, Jenner, and Kent 2001). Because fewer than 5 percent of "found" cats taken in by animal shelters are reunited with their families, many animal shelters now require potential adopters to promise to keep their cats safely confined. Some com-

munities, such as Aurora, Colorado; Overland Park, Kansas; and Muscle Shoals, Alabama, are adopting ordinances that mandate confinement for cats, a common requirement for dogs (Aurora: Sec. 14-101. Running at large. [a] Prohibited. It shall be unlawful for the owner of any cat to fail to keep the cat from running at large within the city. Code 1979, §7-30; Ord. No. 97-51, §8, 10-13-97).

Animal welfare groups, including The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), have played an important role in the emphasis on keeping cats indoors. To prevent destruction by indoor cats, the late Phyllis Wright, HSUS director of Companion Animals, recommended that cats' claws be trimmed regularly and carefully with a special nail clipper and that cats be taught to use a scratching post in the first of several articles in The HSUS's

membership magazine urging owners to keep their cats indoors. "Most cats," she added, "will soon get the idea that the scratching post is the perfect outlet for their need to use their claws" (in Dasch 1984, 15). (This was also mentioned in Fox 1987.)

Cats continued to figure prominently in the *HSUS News*, but, while the articles encouraged keeping cats indoors, the majority of cover photographs and internal editorial photographs depicted cats outdoors and without collars (Summer 1985, Spring 1987, Spring 1988, Fall 1991, and Spring 1993 issues) and indoors without collars (Winter 1988 and Winter 1990 issues). According to D.J. Salem, editor of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' *Animals* magazine (1976-1979) and of the *HSUS News* (1981-1999), animal protec-

Table 4
Cat Owner Routine, by Percentage

Cat Indoors During the Day		Cat Outdoors During the Day	
1998	56		18
2000	54		11
2002	57		14
Cat Both Indoors and Outdoors During the Day		Cat Outdoors Only During the Night	
1998	34		68
2000	35		63
2002	29		68
Cat Outdoors Only During the Night		Cat Both Indoors and Outdoors During the Night	
1998	16		23
2000	12		25
2002	14		16

Source: APPMA 2003-2004.

tion magazines struggled for decades with the dearth of collared animals in agency-purchased—as well as in unsolicited—photographs (personal communication with N.P., November 2004). Salem believes that the evolution in photographic images came not as a result of increased sensitivity to the issue on the part of magazine staffs but rather with the advent of computer software that allowed the digital “addition” of collars to stock photographs. Commissioned photography, although rarely used by The HSUS because of its cost, depicted both cats and dogs wearing collars, beginning in the mid-1980s (The HSUS’s “Until There is None, Adopt One” poster is an example). Salem notes that agency-provided stock photos depict collarless animals to the same extent they always have, but photo retouching can “cure” the problem. She notes that internal discussion on both of these subjects (outdoor cats and collars) and attempts to reconcile policy with available images began soon after her arrival at The HSUS in 1981. By 1996 the cover of the Spring *HSUS News* depicted an indoor cat with collar and ID tag.

Shelter Sense, the HSUS publication for the animal-sheltering community, addressed the issue of indoor cats early in April 1989, August 1990, and March 1994. In 2002 The HSUS launched its Safe Cats campaign to educate owners about the consequences of and solutions to letting owned cats roam unsupervised outdoors.

An unpublished HSUS survey (R. Lockwood, personal communication with N.P., July 22, 2004) indicated that 74 percent of respondents somewhat or strongly favor keeping a cat indoors all the time or under supervision when outdoors.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) began its transition to a preference for keeping cats indoors about 1989 or 1990 (S.

Zawistowski, personal communication with N.P., August 18, 2004). Zawistowski recalls that the most heated arguments in the education department at that time involved the issue and focused on the impact that cats could have on wildlife populations and the potential dangers to cats. *The ASPCA Complete Cat Care Manual* (Edney 1992) included information on how to build a cat run as a safe outdoor venue. The promotion of indoor cats continued in the more recent *ASPCA Complete Guide to Cats* (Richards 1999).

Indoor-Cat Behavior Problems and the Debate over Declawing

One behavior that figures prominently as distressing to cat owners is scratching. It is second only to climbing in controllable behavior (Table 5).

The top four behavioral problems owners of kittens cited during veterinary office visits were (from most frequent to least frequent) inappropriate elimination, property destruction, aggression toward other animals of the same species,

and aggression toward humans; for adult cats the problems were inappropriate elimination, aggression toward other animals of the same species, aggression toward humans, and property destruction (Patronek and Dodman 1999).

Kittens begin to retract their claws at about twenty-eight days of age and begin to scratch by day thirty-five (Beaver 1992). Thus, eight-week-old kittens are just beginning to scratch when they are adopted into new homes and can be introduced immediately to scratching posts and other acceptable objects to satisfy their need to scratch. Cats scratch to (1) condition their claws by removing old nail sheaths, (2) display dominance in front of subordinate cats, (3) scent mark with the glands on their paws, (4) visually mark by leaving shredded matter as evidence, (5) stretch and exercise their forelegs, and 6) enjoy a pleasant sensation.

A History of Declawing

In the last forty years, an increasing number of indoor cat owners have chosen to deal with clawing at furniture and household textiles through

Table 5
The Pros and Cons of Pet Ownership, by Percentage of Respondents

Benefits		Drawbacks	
Companionship, Love, Company:	88	Sadness When They Die:	49
Fun to Watch/ Have in Household:	75		
Convenience, Easy to Maintain:	67	Shedding:	38
Relaxation, Relieves Stress:	65	Climbs on Countertops/ Tabletops:	34
Like Child/Family Member:	62	Damage to Furniture or Carpet:	30

Source: APPMA 2003–2004.

a surgical solution, declawing (feline onychectomy). The last bone of each toe is amputated, with a guillotine-type nail clipper, scalpel blade, or laser, to prevent regrowth of the claw, which is adhered to the bone.

The early history of the procedure remains unclear. A search (by N.P.) of thirty antiquarian veterinary books published between the 1900s to the 1950s uncovered no references to declawing. A search of more recent veterinary medical literature for declawing and onychectomy in cats yielded forty-eight studies from 1973–2002 on the effects of different techniques, anesthesia and pain medications, attitudes of owners, assessment of complications, measurement of pain, and other topics. The earliest citation for declawing was Nagle's *A Technique for Feline Onychectomy* (1976), which describes a technique for declawing cats that Nagle had used for the previous twenty years.

The technique of declawing seems to have entered some small-animal surgical curricula in the 1950s. Class notes on feline surgery from the College of Veterinary Medicine at Iowa State University turned up the first discussion there of declawing in 1955 (George Beran, D.V.M., personal communication with N.P., March 25, 2003). An informal survey (by N.P.) of thirty veterinarians in practice, retired from practice, or in school conducted at the HSUS exhibit booth at the 2004 annual American Veterinary Medical Association conference in Philadelphia indicated that declawing was not taught to those who graduated from Auburn (in 1943); Guelph (1947); Pennsylvania (1951, 1952, 1957); Georgia (1955); Cornell (1961); Ohio (1999); Oklahoma (2003); UC Davis (1970); or Wisconsin (2002). Other veterinarians indicated that declawing was taught when they graduated from Iowa (1949, 1981, 2005); Auburn (1951, 1969, 1984); Cornell (1956, 1965); Georgia (1975); Ohio (1959, 1971); Purdue

(1964); Kansas (1964, 1976, 1984); Pennsylvania (1971, 1994); UC Davis (1977, 1989); and Texas (1972). R. McClure, D.V.M., (personal communication with N.P., February 26, 2003) indicated that he was doing an occasional declawing procedure as early as 1951 in private practice. In 1953 the Merriam-Webster Dictionary first offered a definition of declaw: "to remove the claws of (as a cat) surgically."

One feline veterinarian reports that even early (circa 1968) published discussions of declawing in veterinary journals primarily discussed refinements of technique. She hypothesizes that the first declawings were done on captive lions and tigers and other wild felines (J. Hofve, D.V.M., personal communication with N.P., March 19, 2003). J. Peddie, a 1965 graduate of Cornell in private practice from 1969 to 1991, started to declaw exotic cats in 1969 in Thousand Oaks, California, because of that location's proximity to the movie industry (personal communication with N.P., March 21, 2003). Declawing was standard procedure to satisfy the industry's liability insurance carriers. At the time, a pioneer of exotic animal care, M. Fowler, D.V.M., had developed an exotic declawing technique that involved a total disarticulation of the third phalanx. This technique severed the main tendon that pulls the toes into the paws. The resulting "floppy" toes caused ulceration of the animals' central foot pads, which supported their full weight. Peddie modified Fowler's technique, which he found in Fowler's books on exotic medicine and surgery on cats weighing more than one hundred pounds. Peddie's technique left the extensor process (which enables extension of the claws) intact, thus giving cats toes with which they could grip and on which they could balance.

Many popular books (Simmons 1935; Harman 1948; Schrody 1957; Deutsch and McCoy 1961)

urged owners of indoor cats to provide a suitable object on which to scratch, but none offered declawing as a solution. Then, as now, other, more laissez-faire, attitudes existed: "A special post is not necessary if other suitable provision has been made; the substitute must be something he likes to use, such as a chair a cat has chosen which may be given to him" (Bryant 1969, 44–45). However, Whitney (1953, 262) does include one reference to surgical intervention: "As a last resort, your veterinarian can operate on two toes in each foot and cut a little tendon to prevent a cat from clawing furniture, wallpaper, etc." By the early 1960s, declawing was presented as an option for owners who used veterinary care:

A comparatively new cat custom, de-clawing an indoor cat, saves endless wear and tear, without making any appreciable difference to the cat. When you take your cat to the hospital for the altering operation, consult with the veterinary surgeon who can de-claw the cat's front paws at the same time and under the same anesthesia. (Schulberg 1961, 128–129)

Although more research remains to be done on the spread of the practice, by the 1970s declawing seems to have become a normal part of feline medical care.

The Financial Component

There are currently 77.6 million owned cats in the United States (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association 2003–2004). In an informal survey undertaken at the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) conference in Philadelphia in 2004, one author (N.P.) found costs for declawing the forefeet at twenty-five U.S. veterinary facilities ranged from \$50 to \$476, averaging \$158 per declaw. (Declawing is commonly combined with spay/neuter surgery, which allows the cat to undergo only one

period of anesthesia.) Accepting Patronek's estimate that as much as 25 percent of the owned cat population is declawed (2001) translates into 19.4 million declawed cats, representing more than \$3 billion in revenue to veterinarians. Such an amount represents a significant source of income.

The Case Against Declawing

Declawing became controversial soon after it appeared as an elective surgery in small-animal practices. Carr (1963, 113) called it a "drastic remedy" to be confined to "a few problem cats." He reported anecdotally that "occasionally a cat will be taken to a vet to be put to sleep because it has been guilty of so much damage with its claws." Carr added that the practice was already so hotly disputed that

[T]wo very respected leaders in the cat fancy have offered a reward for the "arrest and conviction" of anyone who has been responsible for declawing a cat. Declawing is not against the law, of course. These people believe sincerely that it should be outlawed. (Carr 1963, 113)

Opponents argued against the surgery because of psychological trauma to cats. Beaver (1992, 81) pointed out

[C]ats that depend on their claws as weapons or for climbing can become psychologically and physically traumatized if they suddenly discover their lack of claws. Even though there is no evidence of long-term problems as a result of this procedure, there remains a moral controversy about the surgery, and a perception exists that other problems, such as biting and jumping on counters or tables, will develop.

Yet Hetts (1999, 78) argued that, "although it has long been believed that declawing causes cats to become aggressive (to bite), to have litterbox problems, and to

undergo other less defined 'personality changes,' the results of several studies do not support these beliefs." The problem was and remains a lack of hard data. Hetts pointed out that "no prospective studies, in which the frequency of problem behaviors are (sic) measured before as well as after declawing, have been done" (personal communication with N.P., February 11, 2003). Thus, "the most that can be said about adverse behavioral sequelae to onychectomy is that they remain as hard to dismiss as they are to quantify" (Patronek 2001, 936).

In recent years declawing has become a controversial subject outside the veterinary and research communities as well. Cat owners have been urged by some behaviorists, veterinarians, animal welfare groups, cat writers, and others to accept scratching behavior as normal and to seek alternatives to surgical remedies. In 1998 the ASPCA issued a policy statement condemning

[D]eclawing of cats as a matter of supposed convenience to cat owners. It is a form of mutilation and it does cause pain. The only time the surgery should be considered is when the health and safety of other animals, human beings or the individual cat is involved, and euthanasia or abandonment the only realistic alternative.

Declawing has even become a matter for municipal legislation. In 2003 West Hollywood, California, became the first city in North America to prohibit declawing. The AVMA opposed the bill on the grounds that veterinarians are better suited than are politicians to make medical decisions. The initial attempt to include domestic cats in the state bill was defeated, but a revised bill, A.B. 1857, was introduced in February 2004; signed into law on September 24, 2004; and took effect January 1, 2005. The law added a section to the animal

cruelty statutes in the California Penal Code to make it a misdemeanor for any person to perform, procure, or arrange for surgical claw removal, declawing, onychectomy, or tendonectomy on an exotic or native wild cat species. The AVMA officially opposed declawing of exotic cats in January 2004.

In response to this legislative action, the Cat Fanciers Association (CFA) announced its opposition to any legislative attempts to target veterinary elective surgical procedures. According to the CFA, few declawing procedures are executed on exotic/wild cats in California, and the option to declaw needed to remain available to experienced individuals based on their veterinarian's professional judgment and advice. However, three other California cities—Berkeley, Malibu, and San Francisco—passed resolutions condemning declawing.

There is no consensus on the effects of declawing on the personality or behavior of cats. Some argue that declawing can cause postoperative discomfort or pain (Davis 1993; Estep and Hetts 1994; Pollari and Bonnett 1996; Overall 1997; Jankowski et al. 1998). Others point out that when it is done properly, declawing causes minimal pain, improves the pet-owner relationship (Haupt 1991; Yeon et al. 2001), and is a better alternative to relinquishment or euthanasia (Ames 1968; Landsberg 1991b; Estep and Hetts 1994); Phillips and Phillips 1994).

Small-animal practitioners see all kinds of owner behavior, some of which is less than ideal, and they recognize that even conscientious pet owners have different levels of tolerance for destructive pet behavior. Indeed, one study suggests that furniture clawing is often ignored unless it is performed on some object of high economic value (R. Lockwood, personal communication with N.P., July 22, 2004). In the most extreme cases, owners deciding between

euthanasia and declawing will not tolerate the infrequent furniture scratching that might occur (Houpt, Honig, and Reisner 1996). Thus veterinarians tend to frame their observations on the topic in terms of two choices, declawing or relinquishment. They resent the suggestion that they cause unnecessary pain when performing the surgery, arguing that the cats they declaw behave normally soon after the surgery. Many veterinarians point out that the improvement in surgical techniques and analgesics and the more frequent use of analgesics during and following declaw surgery has made what was a potentially traumatic surgery much less so nowadays.¹

Opponents of declawing cite a study by Kass et al. (2001) that showed that, although 18 percent of the cats specifically presented to shelters for euthanasia were relinquished for behavioral reasons, destructiveness inside or outside the home was, at 14 percent, not even in the top ten objectionable behaviors. Loewenthal (2002) found that relatively few declaws were performed as last-ditch efforts to save a cat from going back to the shelter.

Alternatives to Declawing

Cat owners are now presented with two nonsurgical options for dealing with clawing: nail trimming and the use of plastic nail caps coupled with diversion, through training, the latter using both aversive and positive reinforcement. Nail trimming is much easier for owners to perform when cats have become accustomed to the procedure from kittenhood. Cat behavior experts believe that undesirable scratching can be prevented or eliminated with appropriate behavior modification techniques and urge owners to consider surgical intervention only as a last resort (Lewis 1984; Lands-

berg 1991b; Beaver 1992; Donald 1992; *Shelter Sense* 1994; Houpt, Honig, and Reisner 1996; Lamb 1996; Overall 1997; Lachman and Mickdeit 2000; Christensen and HSUS staff 2002; Horwitz 2003; Thornton 2004). Public education on normal cat behavior seems to be a powerful tool: one study found that the incidence of relinquishment decreased if cat owners had read a book or other educational materials about feline behavior (Salman et al. 1998).

Still, little is known about the success or failure of cat training. In one study on pet keeping (Ralston Purina 2000), the top four cat-behavior problems mentioned by owners were clawing the furniture (20 percent), climbing on furniture or counters (16 percent), eliminating in the house outside the litterbox (10 percent), and bringing birds and/or mice into the house (8 percent), all natural behaviors for a small, agile, predatory animal. Dog owners are encouraged to seek obedience and other forms of training, yet many cat owners seem unwilling to make this same kind of effort with their cats and consider their cats to be untrainable. Cat owners do not seem to be highly successful disciplinarians. Disciplining or scolding their pet is the top method used by cat owners (35 percent) to handle behavior problems; 24 percent of cat owners say they do nothing when their cat misbehaves. Only 30 percent of cat owners have solved their pet's behavior problems completely, although 42 percent of cat owners say they have made some progress (Ralston Purina 2000). Complicating the picture further is evidence that scolding and discipline to discourage cats from scratching without providing an acceptable substitute can actually backfire (Beaver 1992). It can lower the scratching threshold, so that the cat attempts it even more frequently, and the animal's frustration increases (Beaver

1992). It also teaches the cat to run from the owner (Beaver 1992). Failure at training may also reflect self-selection on the part of owners unable/unwilling to invest the amount of time dog owners must to end up with a comparably obedient animal.

Another approach is to enhance public understanding and tolerance of normal cat behaviors such as scratching. Understanding cats and their behavior was addressed only relatively recently in HSUS publications. Although the *HSUS News* was a report to the members on the activities of The HSUS, the Spring 1995 issue did feature "More than a Meow" and the Winter 1996 issue included "When the Litterbox is a Letterbox," both behavior-oriented articles. The Summer 2001 issue of The HSUS's new members' magazine, *All Animals*, introduced a veterinary column by Debra Horwitz, D.V.M., DACVB, veterinary behaviorist, and subsequent issues featured cats and their behavior (Horowitz 2002, 2003, 2004). Veterinarians who visited HSUS exhibit booths at the AVMA and North American Veterinary Conferences in 2003 and 2004 received a free HSUS *Pets for Life* behavior CD-ROM with behavior tip sheets they could distribute to their clients. Until recently, veterinarians frequently relied on myriad copied journal articles, which were not directed to pet owners, for this purpose.

An Ethical Question with Practical Consequences

Opponents of declawing have strong feelings on the subject. "Declaw? Never. How would you like to have your nails pulled out one by one and be forced to walk around on stumps for the rest of your life?" announce Janik and Rejniss (1996, 95). Declawing is "the worst sort of

cosmetic surgery—done entirely for the convenience and benefit of the cat’s owners, and almost always to the detriment of the cat. “It’s the equivalent of having your fingers cut off at the top joint,” according to Christensen (2002, 157). This is a far stronger position than one espoused twenty years previously by Fox:

With a persistent clawer, it is a simple procedure to trim the claws with a nail trimmer. Some cats will fight being restrained for this, and for some owners the only alternative is euthanasia. A third alternative is declawing, and although it is a controversial subject, I think it is better than getting rid of the pet because it persists in clawing furniture or people. (1974, 147)

Clients and practitioners are beginning to express ethical concerns about onychectomy. These concerns are developing at the same time that attitudes are changing in the United States toward the practices of tail docking and ear cropping in dogs. The AVMA’s policy on declawing indicates that the procedure is justifiable, with adherence to appropriate surgical and medical principles, when the cat cannot be trained not to use his or her claws destructively, but it should not be performed solely for cosmetic purposes (Overall 1997).

Internationally, declawing is considered mutilation and is either illegal or considered extremely inhumane and to be performed only under extreme circumstances in Australia, Austria, France, Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Montenegro, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden, and Switzerland (The Paw Project, <http://www.pawproject.com/html/faqs.asp>).

Ironically, the debate over declawing is inadvertently at odds with the campaign to keep cats

indoors in the United States. (The indoors phenomenon seems to be United States-based. Although 42.73 million cats live in Western Europe, and data on the percentage living indoors have not been published, the proportion of pet cats who are housed indoors is lower in Britain than it is in the United States). The prevalence of declawing in the United States may be due to the fact that many more cats are confined indoors than are confined in Europe (Turner and Bateson 1998).

An unpublished survey indicates that 55.4 percent of the American general public strongly favored or favored declawing. Support for declawing was significantly associated with income, with 42.6 percent of those with incomes under \$20,000 and 62 percent of those with incomes over \$50,000 favoring the procedure (R. Lockwood, personal communication with N.P., July 22, 2004). Those who favored keeping cats inside were also more likely to support declawing (48 percent) than were those who were opposed to declawing but supported keeping cats inside (31 percent) (R. Lockwood, personal communication with N.P., July 22, 2004). More than 39 percent of those who opposed allowing a cat outside unsupervised still favored declawing, with 23 percent opposing both declawing and allowing cats outside without supervision. This suggests that declawing was not seen as a welfare issue in the same way as were other issues in the survey, which included dogfighting, chaining a dog for extended periods, puppy mills, chimps in research, and canned hunts, but excluded tail and ear docking. Many respondents who opposed other practices did not oppose declawing. Those who reported that they thought protecting animals from cruelty and abuse was “very important” were significantly less likely to favor declawing than were those who said such protec-

tion was not important (51.4 percent vs. 64.4 percent), but more than half of those ranking protecting animals as a high priority still favored declawing, a level of support not seen for any of the other practices surveyed (e.g., 10 percent opposed increased penalties for dogfighting or cockfighting; 10 percent opposed restrictions on sow confinement).

G. Patronek, former director of Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy, says that animal welfare workers err in basing their opinions on the effects of declawing solely on the animals seen in shelters and without comparison to the general population. He suggests that, when judgments are made without a proper comparison group, a common trait (such as having a full-time job) may appear to be associated with relinquishment just because there are so many owners with that trait (personal communication with N.P., February 2, 2003). The question, he says, is whether it occurs more frequently with animals brought into shelters than with those remaining in their homes. Lack of appreciation of this logic has led to draconian adoption policies (no one who works full time can have a puppy, for example) that are only now becoming recognized as counterproductive (personal communication with N.P., February 2, 2003).

Patronek points out that if declawing procedures using good surgical technique and analgesia caused the large number of neurotic behavior problems alleged by some advocates, shelters would be deluged with spraying, biting cats (2001). This doesn’t mean that some cats may not be affected adversely by declawing, but the evidence isn’t there yet to support a broad-based problem or to identify which cats are likely to be harmed seriously by the procedure (personal communication with N.P., January 30, 2003).

Patronek offers a possible expla-

nation for shelter workers' perception that inappropriate elimination may be linked to declawing. He sees it as a statistical artifact associated with these observations: owners who declaw their cats are likely to be much more concerned about their furniture and households than owners who don't; therefore, when declawed cats in these households have an inappropriate elimination problem, those owners have a low tolerance for damage and turn the cats in rather than working to resolve or tolerating the problem (Patronek 2001). In contrast, owners of cats with claws are less concerned about furniture, and so forth, so when their cats develop an inappropriate elimination problem, they are much less likely to turn them in and more likely to tolerate or attempt to resolve the problem (Patronek 2001). From the shelter workers' perspective, they encounter the former group, and the latter are invisible to them. Therefore, the logical conclusion is that inappropriate elimination is associated with declawing. Patronek also cautions that, unless one knows how many non-declawed cats in homes exhibit inappropriate elimination behavior, one can't draw that conclusion. Patronek suggests that one reason that declawing looks "protective" against relinquishment in retrospective studies is because it is a marker for other factors (like socioeconomic status and providing veterinary care) that are highly correlated with pet retention. "That doesn't mean," he says, "that if you declaw cats it will reduce their relinquishment across the board" (personal communication with N.P., January 31, 2003).

Further, the success of campaigns for spaying and neutering may have inadvertently normalized the idea of routine surgical intervention to reshape cat behavior. This idea is reinforced by the linkage between the two practices in small-animal veterinary practices,

where declaw/neuter packages are routine. While both the animal welfare community and the majority of pet owners now agree that spaying and neutering should be routine, the fact remains that in both groups, declawing is usually preemptive, anticipating future behavior of pet cats.

What can and should be done about the difference in perception between the animal welfare community and average cat owners? One important first step may be decoupling declawing and neutering in veterinary practice and returning declawing to its former status of last-resort surgery. As Christensen and the staff of The HSUS (2002) note, onychectomy "is almost never medically or behaviorally necessary, and should never be considered routine or done preemptively." Enhancing owner and small-animal veterinary education about cat behavior is an important step. It is also clear that more research on socializing cats and retraining cats with behavior problems is very much needed. This research needs to generate practical options for cat owners, not simply identification of long-term behavioral trauma in declawed cats. Finally, the animal welfare community may need to acknowledge that there are occasions when declawing is appropriate, as in cases where accidental clawing may affect the health of an owner or when the occasional adult cat absolutely resists other kinds of training interventions and the owner wishes to continue keeping the animal indoors. Making otherwise good-enough owners defensive about their care for their animals does not benefit anyone. Should the best position that ordinary cat owners may be expected to take on declawing be much like the position expressed by the author of one recent book on cat care?

Ethically, it's difficult to justify this kind of mutilation simply for an owner's convenience,

especially when it's not difficult to teach a cat to use a scratching post. Instead of declawing your new cat, get her a great scratching post (or two) and teach her how to use it. That said, if the choice is between getting rid of the cat, keeping him outdoors, or declawing, then declawing is the best option. (Thornton 2004, 200)

The question then becomes, is the animal welfare community willing to live with this kind of practical ethics on the part of pet owners?

Since the "last resort" argument is the premise behind so many national recommendations and local policies, it seems there would be data on the likelihood of owners to relinquish cats with claws and on the propensity of potential adopters to reject a shelter that prohibits declawing. But while studies have shown that many owners relinquish cats for scratching furniture and other household items, it's unclear whether a declawing surgery would have prevented those surrenders or whether those cat owners were aware of effective options in the first place. (Lawson 2004, 20)

It behooves all involved in promoting the welfare of cats to educate, educate, educate so that declawing is no longer viewed as a routine preventive surgery but truly becomes a "last resort."

The Future of Declawing

Pet owners turn to veterinarians more often than other sources for pet care advice. Patronek (personal communication with N.P., February 1, 2003) notes that "veterinarians are still the most accepted source of information about pet issues, and when they treat [declawing] as a perfunctory part of owning a cat, then it's no surprise that a lot of

owners do not think twice about it.”

Patronek suggested that one reason attitudes about declawing are slow to change is that, when the arguments focus on the brutality of the surgery, there are plenty of practices where, when the procedure is performed with good technique and analgesics, the kitten pops up and is running around after surgery with little or no apparent discomfort. It flies in the face of the everyday experience in these practices to suggest that it should not be done because of the pain. When one author (N.P.) contrasted people’s reaction to debarking—another surgical intervention designed to solve a behavior problem—with declawing, Patronek agreed that most people look at a debarked dog making hoarse attempts to express normal behavior as obviously grotesque, but they do not feel the same about declawing.

Patronek believes the challenge is to engender the same feeling about creating a disability through declawing, and unless owners report problems or veterinarians actually see something that makes them uncomfortable, or there are well-controlled longitudinal studies to demonstrate some adverse effects, it will be an uphill battle. He acknowledges the possibility that studies would not reveal anything substantial that was not associated with a surgical botch.

He believes that people who want to declaw their cat won’t pay any more attention to studies than they do to licensing requirements when they exist. He points out that people do what they please when they take an animal out of a shelter, and, as a 2003 PETSMART study showed, a great percentage of adopters will be unavailable for contact three to six months after the adoption. Patronek asks: does the animal shelter policy on declawing turn away people who refuse to be dishonest on principle? He suggests that a thoughtful

discussion might actually get people thinking about whether they really do need to declaw.

Patronek believes that, short of that, falling back on the ethical issue of animal integrity may be fruitful in convincing cat owners not to declaw. That appeal has worked to some degree with ear cropping, but ears are visible, claws less so.

Declawing cats because they scratch destructively is like debarking dogs. It’s a quick fix, but it only treats the symptoms and not the cause. If only cats (and dogs) were provided with more stimulation, perhaps these convenience surgeries wouldn’t be necessary. (Personal communication with N.P., January 30, 2003)

Pet keeping inevitably involves human efforts to control natural animal behaviors. Pet owners’ desire to preserve their property is valid, and our ideas about what are acceptable behaviors and methods of control change over time. We should be conscious of the historical character of our ideas about acceptable practice on the part of owners, veterinarians, and the animal welfare community and about behaviors on the part of pets.

Note

¹ Any significant decrease in the number of declawing procedures performed would translate into a large financial loss to the veterinary profession. Declawing opponents argue, however, that addressing behavior problems can enhance the value of a veterinary practice and make up for that loss. By offering pet behavior services and/or recommending outside resources, practices can maintain client loyalty, strengthen their client services, and generate additional revenue from services, products, and referrals (Peterson 2002).

Appendix

Organizations’ Positions on Declawing

The Humane Society of the United States

In 1978 The HSUS issued its policy *Cosmetic Surgery on Animals*: “The Humane Society of the United States opposes declawing of cats when it is done solely for the convenience of the owner and without benefit to the animal.” In the online article (<http://www.hsus.org/ace/11789>) “Declawing Cats: More Than Just a Manicure,” The HSUS says that, “Although new techniques for declawing cats, such as laser surgery and tenectomy, may lessen the pain that typically follows declawing, the surgery is still considered an unnecessary procedure.”

The American Veterinary Medical Association

The AVMA believes that authority for decisions regarding the appropriateness of performing declawing should rest within the bounds of a valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship. According to G. Golab, D.V.M., assistant director of the AVMA’s Professional Public Affairs Communications Division, the AVMA has always encouraged veterinarians to educate owners concerning any surgical or medical procedure, including declawing (personal communication with N.P., March 17, 2003). The only difference, she says, is that

[I]t has now been formally written into the position statement. The change is related not as much to veterinary education as it is to public education since it’s only recently that the public has taken an interest in the AVMA’s official positions on issues such as this and, consequently, the AVMA Animal Welfare Committee

believes it is prudent to now include information in the position what formerly would have been assumed to be understood.

AVMA Position Statement on Declawing Prior to March 2003:

Declawing of domestic cats is justifiable when the cat cannot be trained to refrain from using its claws destructively.

AVMA Position Statement as of March 2003:

Declawing of domestic cats should be considered only after attempts have been made to prevent the cat from using its claws destructively or when its clawing presents a zoonotic risk for its owner(s).

The AVMA believes it is the obligation of veterinarians to provide cat owners with complete education with regard to feline onychectomy. The following points are the foundation for full understanding and disclosure regarding declawing:

Scratching is a normal feline behavior, is a means for cats to mark their territory both visually and with scent, and is used for claw conditioning (“husk” removal) and stretching activity.

Owners must provide suitable implements for normal scratching behavior. Examples are scratching posts, cardboard boxes, lumber or logs, and carpet or fabric remnants affixed to stationary objects. Implements should be tall or long enough to allow full stretching, and be firmly anchored to provide necessary resistance to scratching. Cats should be positively reinforced in the use of these implements.

Appropriate claw care (consisting of trimming the claws every one to two weeks) should be provided to prevent injury or damage to household items.

Surgical declawing is not a medically necessary procedure for the cat in most cases. While rare in occurrence, there are inherent risks and complications with any surgical procedure including, but not limited to, anesthetic compli-

cations, hemorrhage, infection, and pain. If onychectomy is performed, appropriate use of safe and effective anesthetic agents and the use of safe peri-operative analgesics for an appropriate length of time are imperative. The surgical alternative of tendonectomy is not recommended.

Declawed cats should be housed indoors.

Scientific data do indicate that cats that have destructive clawing behavior are more likely to be euthanatized, or more readily relinquished, released, or abandoned, thereby contributing to the homeless cat population. Where scratching behavior is an issue as to whether or not a particular cat can remain as an acceptable household pet in a particular home, surgical onychectomy may be considered.

There is no scientific evidence that declawing leads to behavioral abnormalities when the behavior of declawed cats is compared with that of cats in control groups.

The American Association of Feline Practitioners

The American Association of Feline Practitioners Position Statement on Declawing was passed in September 2002. It maintains that:

Surgical declawing is not a medically necessary procedure for the cat in most cases.

While rare in occurrence, there are inherent risks with any surgical procedure including, but not limited to:

- anesthetic complications
- hemorrhage
- infection
- pain
- side effects of pain medication

The Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA)

The Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA) recently revised its official show rule regarding declawing. Before 1959, the rules required the cat to

have all “physical properties” and identified these—“e.g., eyes, ears, legs, tail, etc.” Section 10 was changed in 1959 to say, “Cats not having all their physical properties, e.g. eyes, ears, legs, tail, claws, etc., or having any congenital or acquired defects, may not receive any awards.” This rule has been in effect ever since. The current show rules (May 1, 2004, to April 30, 2005) cover the claws in section 2.09 (Eligibility for Entry): “A cat or kitten not having all its physical properties—eyes, ears, legs, tail, claws, both descended testicles (adult cat only)—or has had surgery which changes a cat’s natural functions (e.g., tendonectomy), is not eligible for entry.” And show rule 28.18d says: “A judge will disqualify any entry entered contrary to these rules, including declawed cats or kittens and adult, whole males that do not have two descended testicles....”

The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA)

The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) counts more than 32,000 veterinarians as members. AAHA's newest standards, published in Spring 2003, break ground in six areas of companion animal practice: client services, continuing education, pain management, patient care and compliance, practice leadership, and surgery. The practice leadership area asked, “Is there a moral framework, an ethical definition, for daily practice?” The task force recommended that a practice use written guidelines to outline ethical philosophy regarding commonly encountered ethical issues such as healthy pet euthanasia, cosmetic surgery, devocalization, declawing, client communications regarding errors made within the practice or another practice, and limitation of care for financial reasons.

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