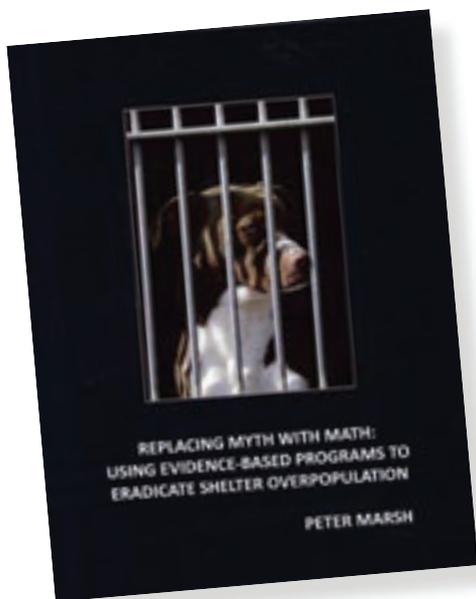


Battling Shelter Overpopulation—by the Numbers

Author Peter Marsh advocates a data-driven approach to reducing euthanasia



Peter Marsh says it's time for animal shelters to work smarter in the battle against overpopulation and unnecessary euthanasia.

A New Hampshire-based lawyer and longtime animal welfare advocate focused on ending shelter overpopulation, Marsh last year published *Replacing Myth with Math: Using Evidence-Based Programs to Eradicate Shelter Overpopulation*. The book, designed for shelter medicine classes, is chock full of data that tell a sobering tale: While the number of cats and dogs euthanized in animal shelters has dropped dramatically in the past four decades, that rate of progress has slowed in recent years.

Fewer animals are being euthanized nationwide because fewer animals are entering shelters, Marsh writes. Research shows that certain communities—such as those with high poverty rates—relinquish more animals to shelters. But Marsh says shelters aren't taking full advantage of such information by targeting their overpopulation programs to the people who need them most. "For the most part, researchers and people who put together

shelter overpopulation programs have lived in separate worlds, isolated from each other," Marsh writes. "As a result, program designers have rarely made use of research findings to effectively target their programs."

Marsh hopes to bridge that gap and promote a more data-driven approach to program development with *Replacing Myth with Math*. He plans to publish a companion volume—*Getting to Zero: Using Lessons from Successful Programs to End Shelter Euthanasia in the United States*—within the next year.

Marsh, who works with animal welfare organizations around the country, is a founder of Solutions to Overpopulation of Pets, which helped establish publicly funded pet sterilization programs that dropped euthanasia rates in New Hampshire. In this edited interview, he discusses his work with *Animal Sheltering* associate editor James Hettinger.

Animal Sheltering: What was your intent in writing *Replacing Myth with Math*?

Peter Marsh: One of them is to get people to recognize that information can be used to design much more effective programs than trial-and-error-, seat-of-the-pants-based programs. I've worked now in all 50 states over the last 20 years on shelter overpopulation issues. The most effective programs have been data-driven programs, where people pay attention to not only local shelter data, but research studies, plus information from other programs.

To be effective—especially if the mission is to end shelter overpopulation and end the putting down of animals just to make space in shelters for other animals—you need to use better information. Because it gets tougher and tougher as the euthanasia rate drops, and just working harder at some point isn't enough. You need to work smarter, too.



Peter Marsh, a lawyer and longtime animal welfare advocate, encourages shelters to look beyond conventional wisdom and develop targeted, data-driven programs to eliminate shelter overpopulation.

The book describes how shelters have traditionally operated in a "data-poor environment." Why do you think that is, and do you see that tide turning now?

There's been a lot of research over the last 15 years. But the real problem is that there hasn't been, in my mind, a real connection between the people that have done the research and implementation of the research into effective programs. I have sort of a shorthand equation in my mind, [where] I say, "Information minus application equals zero." If you have information, and it's not applied to develop effective programs, then it's of no value to you.

How would you say the failure to use data has hampered the efforts to curb overpopulation?

Oh, it's been huge. A core assumption of traditional shelters has been—really, going back to the '50s—that an open-door policy where no animal is turned away is essential. Because if shelters don't accept every animal that's presented to them—no matter what

[q&a]

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the situation, and no matter if they're at capacity and had to put down another animal to make room—that enough animals would suffer “a fate worse than death” so that it would be intolerable.

Well, a number of shelters have questioned that assumption, because, really, there's no data to back that up—there never

was. And the shelters that have questioned that assumption have found that in many cases there are alternatives that are better for the animals, and better for the shelter.

For instance, a shelter worker from southwest New Hampshire made a presentation at [Animal Care] Expo in 2000 about a program they had developed called the Rehoming Service for Valued Pets—RSVP. When people contacted them about giving up an animal, they would counsel the person and do an individualized assessment. If you step back and think about it, we have adoption decisions that are individualized, depending on the specific situation of the animal. Euthanasia decisions are individualized. But the admission decisions—which really, in many cases, drive and control the later decisions about adoption and euthanasia—are not individualized at all.

This woman presented the data from their first year, and basically somewhere less than half the animals were admitted to the shelter. As I recall, about 25 percent of the people were able to place their animal with a

friend. Another substantial percentage were able to keep the animal with help, because in many cases it isn't the animal that needs help, it's the owner—whether it's a housing issue, or an education issue, or other issues. That's why the individualized assessment is really critical. And they look at urgency and decide, “Is this urgent for this animal to be admitted?” And another thing they look at is, “Would this animal do well in a shelter? Would it have any prospect of getting adopted?” Those are really key things.

The book presents data from both Jacksonville and Richmond, which have used this individualized approach, to suggest that hey, relook at this conventional wisdom—the fates-worse-than-death assumption—and look at information and develop data.

A second issue where data is really important is [this]: You've probably seen the traditional kitten-and-puppy pyramid, spay-neuter pyramid, that has a cat or a dog and then a mountain of offspring. The underlying assumption is that pets that remain intact their whole lives drive cat and dog reproductive rates, and that's not true. We now know that cats and dogs that remain intact their whole lives account for a small fraction of the animals that are born—less than 20 percent.

So why is that important? It's important because that 80 percent-plus of litters are born to people that sterilize their pets at some point, after they've had a litter or two. [They] typically do that with their own money—that's the low-hanging fruit. These are people who don't have to be persuaded. In many cases, they've just delayed, and that delay has been tragic. One of the things that they don't know is that pet mammary cancer kills more than 100,000 cats and dogs in the United States every year. That type of cancer is almost entirely preventable by timely sterilization. It's just a knowledge deficit that's really important to correct—and that's a lot easier, frankly, than convincing people that are resistant to sterilize their pets, or coming up with funding for spay/neuter clinics, or subsidies, or whatever.

There was a [national] study that Alley Cat Allies did in 2007 [of] household cats. And they found the most common reason people that have an intact cat gave for keep-

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ing the cat intact wasn't cost. It wasn't because they had any objection to sterilizing the pet. It's because they affirmatively believed that it would be better for the cat to have a litter before being sterilized. That's a mistaken idea that needs to be corrected.

If we don't deal with presterilization litters, we can never halt population growth of cats and dogs in this country. The bottom line is that [for] cats and dogs that are sterilized, the data we have shows that each of them, on average, has more than two kittens or puppies before being sterilized, which means that you could sterilize 100 percent of all household cats and dogs, and still not reach replacement rate [where population growth is zero] if you haven't reduced presterilization litters. It's a really important thing for us, for allocation of resources.

As somebody once said, if you keep on doing what you've been doing, you'll keep on getting what you've got.

One of the impressions I got from your book is that shelter overpopulation is an

education problem, and to some degree an economic problem, with lower-income families having lower sterilization rates for their pets.

Sure. Poverty is critical. Providing subsidies to poverty-stricken caretakers is really critical. The Alley Cat Allies study showed that in households with an income less than \$35,000, 51.4 percent of the cats are sterilized. Between \$35,000 and \$75,000, it was above 90 percent. In households above \$75,000, it was over 96 percent. So that's one of the things that tells us that it's absolutely critical to provide subsidies. When the subsidies are provided, they have enormous impact, like they have in Jacksonville and Tampa and New Hampshire and other places.

Did anything surprise you as you were writing and researching?

I guess one of the things that surprised me was the enormous importance of a lot of this data that had never been applied—that there were some really significant research findings. The finding about presterilization

litters? The first study was 20 years ago, by Dr. [Andrew] Rowan, who's now at [The Humane Society of the United States]. And nobody's done anything with it 20 years later. He basically said in his study that almost 90 percent of all the litters born in these four towns in Massachusetts that he studied were presterilization litters—a very significant finding that just has not been followed up on 20 years later.

Are you optimistic about the future?

I'm optimistic that we're gonna end shelter euthanasia in this country, and shelter overpopulation. Frankly, we've reduced it by 75 percent over the last 35 years with underfunded, unfocused programs, and I'm convinced that data-driven programs will play a significant role in the ultimate eradication of shelter euthanasia. [AS](#)

Visit shelteroverpopulation.org to download a free copy of Peter Marsh's *Replacing Myth with Math: Using Evidence-Based Programs to Eradicate Shelter Overpopulation*.

"Thank you so much for

making this program available to the New Orleans community. I am convinced that had this been in place prior to Katrina, many more reunions would have happened.

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