



Kate Hurley makes a new friend at a California animal shelter.

CLOSING THE CAT GAP

A FORMER ANIMAL CONTROL OFFICER TURNED SHELTER VETERINARIAN DESCRIBES THE EVOLUTION OF NEW APPROACHES FOR HELPING FREE-ROAMING FELINES // BY KATE HURLEY

BACK IN THE EARLY '90S, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* did a profile of my shelter jauntily titled “From Canines to Constrictors With the SPCA.” The picture (p. 35) of me toting a free-roaming cat in a trap through the shelter parking lot ran with it. Whenever I happen across the story, I remember the pride I felt in that uniform (today I’d know to throw a towel over the trap to make the experience less scary for the cat). I also remember what I told the reporter that day: “I work with people. I like people. But the reason I do this job is because I love animals.”

For all my enthusiasm, I also talked to the reporter about the dark side of the job. The shelter took in many more cats than it was able to find homes for, and the cat I was carrying had only about a 25 percent chance of leaving alive. Had she been unsocialized, her chance would have been zero. Since feral cats typically can’t be placed in traditional homes, our policy was to eutha-

nize them immediately. It would have been my job to march back to the euthanasia room and perform that sad task myself.

And that’s something I did too many times to count. It wasn’t for lack of caring. I loved cats. My nickname as a kid was “Little Kat” Hurley, and my best friend growing up was an immense tortoiseshell cat named Pussywillow.

Indeed, shelters exist because people care. But the common wisdom at the time was that any cat without an owner was better off being euthanized and that euthanasia was the only way to address the gap between numbers of cats and adopters.

Today, decades of studies and data are challenging these long-held assumptions. And a growing number of advocates and shelter staff are evaluating and implementing new ways of dealing with “community cats”—those free-roaming felines, including ferals and strays, who lack traditional homes.

THE COMMUNITY CAT GAP

Thanks to owner education and expanded spay/neuter services, euthanasia numbers have dropped dramatically since the 1970s. But the news isn’t all good. In my home state of California, the odds of a cat leaving a shelter alive are still only about one in four. Outcomes for cats may be improving in some areas, but not nearly as quickly as they are for dogs—and not universally; in some communities, feline intake and euthanasia continue to rise.

Why is that? For the answer, we need only look at unowned animals: the cats sauntering through the alley behind the gym, loitering by the dumpster at the local fast food joint or hanging around our backyards. While the number of free-roaming, unowned dogs in the U.S. is fairly small, researchers estimate that the population of community cats is in the tens of millions. *Gulp*.

Until recently, most sheltering and spay/neuter programs simply didn’t focus on unowned animals: To educate owners on the benefits of sterilization, there has to be an owner getting the message. And in order for adoptions to reduce shelter numbers, the animals concerned have to be suitable for a home environment. Feral and unsocialized cats defy these requirements.

But now, some cities—including San Jose, California; Albuquerque, New Mexico; San Antonio, Texas; and Jacksonville, Florida—are taking a different approach to the healthy stray and feral cats the public brings through their doors. If the shelter lacks space for new arrivals or the animals are unsocialized, staff are neutering them and returning them back to the locations where they were found, a practice known as shelter-neuter-return or return-to-field. (In traditional trap-neuter-return programs, feral cats aren’t admitted to a shelter; they’re trapped in their community habitat, brought to a spay/neuter clinic and later released at the trap site.)

You might be wondering, “If shelters release cats back into the community, won’t the cats suffer and starve? Won’t communities soon be overwhelmed by a feline population boom? Won’t birds and wildlife be decimated by a sudden superabundance of cats?”

// PERSPECTIVE

To the contrary, the vast majority of outdoor-living cats are thriving and in good health, and several studies have documented survival rates far higher than those of other small carnivores. As for the other questions, the answers lie in recognizing the limits of what we are currently accomplishing through shelter intake and euthanasia.

The strongest evidence, interestingly, comes from the same science often used to decry trap-neuter-return programs. Statistical models tell us that 75 percent or more of a cat population needs to be sterilized to have any overall impact. TNR detractors argue that this level of sterilization is rarely attained, and they argue for euthanasia as the logical alternative. However, the same statistical models predict that at least 50 percent of cats need to be euthanized to have any impact. So overall, *neither* approach will be effective unless a sufficient proportion of cats is reached.

The gap in most communities between reality and the level of euthanasia required for population control is staggering. In California, for example, euthanizing 50 percent of the estimated community cat population would require a seven- to 17-fold increase in euthanasia. Would communities stand for—much less pay for—such a dramatic increase in cat killings?

We are clearly not euthanizing enough community cats to make even a negligible impact on their numbers. *If it's not helping, it won't hurt to stop.* And in stopping, we can redirect our efforts at programs more likely to benefit cats, wildlife and communities.

COME TOGETHER

With their focus on spay/neuter, return-to-field programs coupled with aggressive TNR efforts can dramatically reduce community cat populations over time. And while smaller scale programs may not impact overall numbers, sterilization and vaccination of cats is clearly preferable to allowing those same cats to continue breeding unchecked.

Return-to-field programs also free up time and space for other cats awaiting homes. And by neutering those cats who are most likely to cause concern or annoyance to people, such programs are reducing problem behaviors and have led to surprisingly large declines in shelter intake. Plus, because the cats aren't wandering to find mates, fewer are being found dead on the roadways.

I started this article with a reminder of what got me into this field—my love for animals. I remember myself as a 24-year-old field officer. I think of how my heart ached for the cats we couldn't save and whose lives I ended with as much compassion as I knew how. I think of people still in the trenches. I picture the river of time, energy, space, money and heartache the sheltering profession has poured into the seemingly unending task of caring for and euthanizing healthy cats.



Since the early '90s, when she worked as an animal control officer, Kate Hurley has witnessed the evolution of new approaches to community cat management.

Then I imagine we just stop. And I imagine that enormous river of resources and compassion diverted to finding other solutions, to spay/neuter services, to informing the public, to caring for domestic and wild animals, to finding ways to protect all the species we treasure.

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+ LEARN MORE about community cats at humanesociety.org/outdoorcats.

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