Return to Field: expanding our tools for free roaming cat management

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This webinar

direct the rider
motivate the elephant
shape the path
Limitations of directing the rider

- Relevant facts do not influence identity beliefs
- Contradictory information tends to strengthen identity beliefs
- However, when beliefs become widely accepted, individuals tend to become more accepting of "corrective information"

Where I came from
How I got here

The Cliff Notes Version

- There are a LOT of cats in the United States
- Most owned cats are sterilized, vaccinated, and many are kept indoors
- Most concerns and harm arise from unowned and semi-owned cats (community cats)
- Shelters are the primary agency tasked with managing community cats in the U.S.
- Historically, shelters have had one active tool (intake/removal) to manage community cats
- The main legal alternative to removal has been non-intervention
- Removal to a shelter is not an effective tool for community cat management in all circumstances
- Return to Field (RTF) has emerged as a second active tool for community cat management
- In some circumstances, RTF is more effective than removal to serve the goals of a community cat management program
- Shelters should be able to thoughtfully choose which tool is appropriate for management depending on the specific circumstances
Million Cat Challenge Return to Field
webcast

Cat numbers in the U.S.

75-95 million pet cats (85% sterilized)
30-80 million community cats (~ 2% sterilized)
< 5% are in colonies

Education, low cost spay/neuter, licensing, laws
Colony cats: Traditional TNR, shelter intake
Semi-owned and un-owned: Most cats, most concerns, most shelter intake

Management tools should be thoughtfully chosen

Structured decisions about actions to reduce wildlife mortality require a quantitative evidence base…Future specific management decisions, both in the United States and globally, must be further informed by fine scale research that allows analysis of population responses to cats and assessment of the success of particular management actions.
Not a unique struggle

Invited Synthesis Paper:
Coyote depredation control: An interface between biology and management

We believe there is a need to address the controversy surrounding coyote depredation management, to enlighten resource managers and the general public, and to stimulate discussion and research regarding new avenues of approaching the persistent problem of coyote depredation management.

The resilience of coyote populations dictates that the size of the area involved, the intensity and persistence of effort, timing of removal with respect to vulnerability of prey, as well as normal demographic processes of coyotes, must be considered. Effecting removals as close as practical to the anticipated risks, both in time and proximity, is important.

Ineffective management can cause harm

“As long as private livestock producers can externalize the costs of predator losses via government-subsidized predator control, they will have little incentive for responsible animal husbandry techniques, i.e., reduce stocking levels, clear carcasses and after-births quickly, confine herds at night or during calving/lambing, install fencing…or adopt numerous other non-lethal preventive methods to avoid depredation (Shivik et al. 2003).”
Goals of cat management

• Resolve complaints
• Return lost cats to their owners
• Find new homes for cats that need them
• Protect the welfare of cats
• Reduce harm caused by cats
  – To wildlife
  – To public health
• Reduce the number of free roaming cats overall

Historical U.S. cat management model

• Ad hoc admission based on community member perception and preference
• Outcomes are adoption (or transfer/rescue for adoption), return to owner, relocation, euthanasia

“the size of the area involved, the intensity and persistence of effort, timing of removal with respect to vulnerability of prey, as well as normal demographic processes”
Return to field/TNR diversion

- Healthy, free-roaming, unidentified cats
  - Adults and older kittens
  - Regardless of finder’s intent
  - Known feeder not required
- Sterilize, vaccinate, ear tip, return to location found
- Operated through shelter (RTF) or diversion to dedicated program (TNR)

Public preference

For all respondents, 73% strongly or mostly supported trapping and impounding stray pets and 76% strongly or mostly supported TNR programs for stray animals.

Ineffective management can cause harm

Please re-think this whole approach. Stop normalizing it. It is in many instances not humane and an excuse for devoting the actual resources needed to stop the population of friendly cats on the streets in the first place.

Equally applicable standard

Please re-think this whole approach. Stop normalizing it. It is in many instances not humane and an excuse for devoting the actual resources needed to stop the population of friendly cats on the streets in the first place.
Harm reduction

- Recognizes that imperfect but effective strategies can have greater benefit than hypothetically preferred but realistically unattainable outcomes
- E.g. clean needle exchange for IV drug users, access to birth control for teens

Resolve complaints
Resolve complaints?

“What would you do about un-owned cats in the street?”

- Leave the cats alone: 14%
- Trap & kill the cats: 81%
- Other: 5%

Harm reduction

- Recognize that caring for cats is a common behavior
- Prevent a few cats from turning into a nuisance/colony by RTF and making TNR easy and accessible
- Use non-lethal programs to open doors to conversation with caretakers about nuisance reduction
- Educate on responsible feeding and management practices
Effective nuisance mitigation

What will solve this problem?

- Kill the raccoon!
- Put a lid on the trash can!

Incentive for effective mitigation

“People no longer could use the shelter as the “Easy Button” – a place to drop off cats without trying to find their own solutions to the problem, sometimes of their own making...The old answer would have been: set traps and animal control will go out and pick up the cats. This option has been eliminated. Now we have a conversation...our job is to help facilitate the public to engage in the desired behavior which could be TNR or helping a neighbor with TNR, not feeding their pets outside which could be attracting cats, making their yard unattractive to cats in various ways, having a stray cat scanned for a microchip, advertising a found cat on Craigslist, etc.”

- Tracy Mohr, Chico City Animal Services
Tools for mitigation

- Provide complainants with resources to reduce nuisance impact
- Follow up on RTF with focused TNR to reduce remaining issues in the environment
- Address serious nuisance concerns/cat hoarding with a multi-faceted approach that includes removal as well as RTF/TNR

Linking RTF to TNR and follow-up

- Often cat brought to shelter is one of several (or many)
- Feeder is not the same as trapper
- Flyers in area of return will alert feeders to TNR options
- Active follow-up on RTF hotspots by partner TNR groups magnifies benefit
- Public, private or partnership to resolve ongoing issues related to either nuisance or welfare
TNR impact on complaint calls

ICMA/HSUS Community Cat Management Guide, page 31

Re-unite lost cats with owners
Reunite cats with owners?

“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.”
Lost versus free roaming cats

- Most feral cats brought to shelters aren’t pets
  - Unowned or semi-owned free roaming cats
- Many friendly cats brought to shelters weren’t lost
  - Indoor/outdoor pet cats going on their neighborhood rounds
- Most lost pet cats will not be found at a shelter

A better tool

Search Methods Used to Locate Missing Cats and Locations Where Missing Cats Are Found

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1 Gatton Campus, The University of Queensland, Queensland 4343, Australia
2 Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, Kenmore, Queensland 4069, Australia
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4 Missing Pet Partnership, Cloverdale, CA 91015, USA
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The finding that owned cats are often found not far from where they go missing provides evidence to support shelter-neuter and return (SNR) strategies, also known as return to field and cat diversion.

Return to field home

- **Friendly** free roaming cats in good condition are likely to have someone who cares
- RTF bypasses language, transportation and cost barriers
- Resolves mismatch of timing in when cats are lost and when people look for them
- Educates community members directly about spay/neuter
When is the shelter the right tool for RTO?

- Efforts already made to reunite the cat in the neighborhood of origin
  - Post, scan, social media, talk to neighbors
- Evidence that the cat is lost or abandoned versus indoor/outdoor pet
  - Length of time/consistency of sighting
  - Body condition and health
- In conjunction with robust, cat-specific RTO shelter programs

Find new homes for cats that need them
Find new homes for cats?

- Prioritize adoption pathway for kittens, owner surrendered cats, cruelty/hoarding cases, and targeted intervention
  - Serious nuisance/public health issues
  - Environmentally sensitive areas
- Prioritize working homes for above categories of adult cats that aren’t appropriate for adoption

Sources of Pet Acquisition (APPA)

Close the loop on homes that cats already have

- Most pets in disadvantaged communities adopted from a source other than a shelter
- Return to field for friendly, healthy 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
Reserve homes for the cats that need them

Protect the welfare of cats

https://www.animalsfeltering.org/magazine/articles/change-better-chico
Highly adaptable

- Less than 1% of >100,000 cats at TNR clinics euthanized for humane reasons
- Median survival in a managed colony 6.8 years
- Annual survival of semi-owned cats up to 90% (un-owned ~50%)

Increase fitness through RTF

- Fourteen cats, reevaluated 1 year after neutering, increased 260% ± 90% in falciform fat pad depth, 420% ± 390% in fat pad area, 40% ± 4% in BW, and 1 level in BCS ranking (1 to 9 scale; all differences p < .001).
- Similar to confined socialized cats, feral cats gained significant weight and body fat after neutering.
Increase fitness through RTF

Highest risk
Impact of *removal* on age structure

“Unexploited coyote populations typically have older age structures, high adult survival rates, low reproductive rates (especially among yearlings), and low recruitment into the adult population.”

Choose your tools

- RTF or TNR instead of removal to reduce kitten births and stabilize age structure
- Return to field with education and mitigation for cats in good body condition at the time of presentation
- Adoption for cats not doing well in the outdoors and for social kittens
Reduce cat numbers to reduce risk to wildlife, public health and cats

Requirement for population management

- At least 50% removal required for eradication
- ~30-80 million un-owned cats in the U.S.
- 1 for every 3-12 people in a community – you can do the math
- Removal short of eradication has no benefit
Removal short of eradication

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.”
WORSE THAN NOTHING

“This study provides evidence that *ad hoc* culling of feral cats may be not only ineffective, but has the potential to increase the impact of feral cats in open populations.”

So what can we do instead?
Million Cat Challenge Return to Field webcast

1 in 7

54

55
- Euthanasia **down 75%**
- Euthanasia due to URI **down 99%**
- Cats picked up dead **down 20%**
- Intake (cat and kitten) **down 29%**

- 11,749 cats sterilized and returned over 3-year period
- Euthanasia **down 84%**
- Calls for dead cat pickup **down 24%**
- Intake **down 38%**
Managed is *better* than unmanaged

Infection prevalence differed among sympatric felids, with a significantly lower prevalence for managed feral cats (17%) than mountain lions, bobcats, or unmanaged feral cats subsisting on wild prey (73–81%).

Lowering risk for the most vulnerable
The right tool for the job

- RTF for most healthy unowned cats brought to the shelter
  - Healthy feral cats to stabilize populations in the community and limit euthanasia at the shelter
  - Healthy friendly stray/free roaming cats to maximize return to owner and spayed/neutered/vaccinated cats in homes
  - As an avenue to open doors with the majority of community members who support non-lethal control for education and harm reduction

- Traditional shelter pathway for owned cats
  - 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
  - Social kittens on a pathway to adoption
  - As an avenue to open doors with the majority of community members who look to the shelter for stray dog and cat solutions

\(^1\)When pet safety net/home to home options are not appropriate

The bottom line

- Providing public and private partners with the full range of options for response to unowned cats allows for more effective interventions – whether that is sterilization and return of healthy free roaming cats, responsible feeding and colony management, or removal for adoption, relocation or as a last resort, euthanasia. **No intervention realistically available is sufficient to completely eliminate cats** from U.S. communities, but a thoughtful approach tailored to the needs of the situation will permit solutions that balance the needs of wildlife, public health, pets and community members to the greatest possible extent.
Yes, but…

- Sounds great but we don’t have the funds - what can we do?
- How can we best control feline retroviruses (FeLV, FIV) through TNR?
- How long should we hold cats before return to field?
- Why can’t we help but worry. Are you sure they’ll be ok?
- Won’t it be too cold here in the winter for the cats?
- Do we really have to have people bring them in to the shelter? What about just sending cats to TNR?
- What about rabies or other public health concerns?
- What if people really don’t want the cats back?
- What about cat abandonment, licensing or leash laws?
- Should we still RTF friendlies when we know we could find them a home?

More questions?

- www.sheltermedicine.com
- sheltermedicine@ucdavis.edu
- www.millioncatchallenge.org
What about a friendly, healthy, altered cat without identification that is brought in by a person who saw it in their neighborhood, put it in a crate and brought it to a shelter? No "trap" involved, and no risk of euthanasia – we have plenty of adopters these days.

What to do about friendly cats?

- Develop pre-intake screening and intake process that helps identify truly abandoned from indoor/outdoor pet or community cats
- Social behavior increases probability that cat is owned/semi-owned
- Kittens: err on side of adoption if adoption is not a limiting factor at shelter
- Adult cats: err on side of return if no exigent risk
“Burrell had eight cats at home. And he would wander the streets and alleyways, sometimes after midnight, looking for others to help. He gave them names like Smoke-a-Dope, Ooka Nooka, Sparkle Treadwell, Bubbles, False Face, Short Body, Squirrel and Weasel. In a spiral-bound notebook, he meticulously documented each cat's history and medical issues.”

Arthur Burrell

http://www.animalsheltering.org/resources/magazine/mar-apr-2015/were-thankful-for-arthur.html
Local TNR and rescue allies are afraid that it is too cold for the cats around here. Any advice?

Survivors


Table 2. Feral cat estimates in Canada from media reports, in relation to 2006 human population, latitude, and January temperature. [Table image]

There is no apparent relationship between estimates of feral cats and latitude or January temperature in southern Canada (Table 2), and feral cat numbers may be significant in parts of Alaska.
How can we protect cats from the cold?

- Open lines of communication to advise on food and shelter
- Access to sterilization most of the year
- Cats that are trapped and not freezing have something worked out
- Special precautions when unusually cold for your area

Cold weather RTF

- Discourage trapping when weather is unusually cold for your region
- Keep surgical shave small
- Recover cats in climate-controlled environment immediately post surgery
- Return promptly unless unusually severe weather (24-48 hours male, 24-72 hours female)
- Ok to keep up to 2-6 weeks if you absolutely must
We do return to field and have saved close to 1,000 cat lives over the past three years. The shelter we work with requires that the cats are combo tested. Would you recommend continuing this practice?
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No sterilization</td>
<td>Sterilize 1,000</td>
<td>Sterilize 2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No testing</td>
<td>Remove FeLV+</td>
<td>No testing</td>
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<td>Percent FeLV+</td>
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<tr>
<td>FeLV+ euthanized</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults left FeLV+</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kittens born</td>
<td>6000</td>
<td>2880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FeLV+ kittens (75%)</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total FeLV+ cats</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mass sterilization controls both kitten births and spread of FeLV/FIV*

If rabies vaccines are only licensed for one year, how can we allay our Health Department’s concern about return to field?
Rabies protection

Experimental rabies in cats: immune response and persistence of immunity.

Abstract
Experimental rabies was studied in cats under defined conditions. A correlation between the virus dosage and the incubation period was established and results were compared with those published previously by others. The susceptibility of cats to rabies virus appears to be paradoxical. The persistence of the immunity induced by an inactivated rabies vaccine prepared from cell culture propagated virus used in combination with feline panleukopenia vaccine, with or without adjuvant, was studied through severe virus challenge. Complete protection was observed after more than 3 years following a single vaccination. A proposed vaccine...

“Complete protection was observed after more than 3 years following a single vaccination.”

Rabies protection

- Intervet rabies USDA licensing trial
- 25 12-week-old kittens received single vaccine
- Titers maintained and resisted challenge after 4 years
- 14/15 control kittens developed rabies after challenge
Rabies protection

- Use 3 year labeled vaccine for all cats
- Offer free boosters
- Invest in community immunity

(Also remember removal does not eliminate risk)
How long can and should cats be held prior to return to field?

Holding time for RTF

- Ideally, admit day 1, surgery day 2, release day 3
- Longer holds if extra recovery time required, inclement weather
- Balance recovery time with stress of confinement
- If you **must**, release after 2-6 weeks confinement has been documented
Sure, return to field is better than euthanasia, but even a short stay in the shelter is stressful and the cats take up space we could really use for the ones that need to be here. Is there any way to bypass the shelter entirely?

Diversion to TNR

- Encourage diversion to TNR program for healthy free roaming cats
- Minimizes time cats spend in confinement
- Finder typically returns to collect cat
- Bypasses legal/policy constraints and holding periods
- Reserves shelter space for sick, injured, neglected and owner surrendered cats

Healthy cats ‘found’ outside should not be admitted to the shelter but rather taken to a spay/neuter program and returned to their home location where they were found. This goes for cats who are unsocialized to humans as well as for cats who seem social and/or friendly.

Double check messaging

- Consider what’s on your website, front door, front desk
- Train frontline staff to deliver message with conviction
- Make TNR at least as easy and cheap as shelter admission
- Always allow exceptions for high risk/high nuisance situations

Shaping the path…

“Local governments...changed their local ordinances to eliminate leash and confinement laws for cats and to update language to support community cat programs. This change caused a major shift in how animal control responds to calls for cat situation. They will no longer pick up healthy stray cats and patrons are instructed to put them back or bring them to the shelter themselves (they are also told about the community cat program and that the cat will likely be returned). This has caused a huge reduction in cat intakes at our shelter which has helped contribute to our substantial reduction in cat euthanasia.” (Carly Scholten, The Animal Foundation, Las Vegas)
…with huge results

How do you handle the situations when people bring cats to the shelter and are emphatic that they don't want the cats back?
Remember the racoon

- Identify and solve the actual problem
  - Educate about deterrents
  - Offer help with solutions
  - Give it time
- Not appropriate for every situation
  - Save barn and working cat homes for those that really need it

Communicate with confidence and calm

During the first several months of the program, animal control officers and intake desk staff told people dropping off nuisance cats that the cats would be sterilized and returned. This resulted in many heated discussions and complaints from citizens. So, JACPS decided to take cats in and gather the needed information without getting into the specifics about what would happen next. This policy has resulted in far fewer complaints and less stress for the staff involved.
I know you say Return to Field actually reduces the number that are roaming around and at risk, but I can’t get past the worry that we’re just putting them back out to be hit by cars or eaten by coyotes. Do you have any data on what actually happens to the cats once they are returned?

Will they be ok?

Study of the effect on shelter cat intakes and euthanasia from a shelter neuter return project of 10,080 cats from March 2010 to June 2014

Karen L. Johnson¹ and Jon Cicci<br>¹ National Pet Alliance, San Jose, CA, United States<br>² San Jose Animal Care Services, San Jose, CA, United States

- The shelter received again 185 (1.8%) dead on arrival, of the 10,080 SNR cats, identified by microchip, who had previously been through the SNR program.
- The number of dead cats picked up on the street declined 20% from 1,629 in CY 2009 to 1,308 in FY 2014
Open doors for conversations about risk mitigation

Putting things into perspective

• Total cats out and about = 50-100 million
• Cats admitted to shelters = ~ 3 million
• ~ 9,000/day = < .02% or < 1 in 5000
• Reduce risk by focusing on cats in the community
Ok, we’re sold. But we don’t have the funds for this and we’ve struck out on grant opportunities. Do you have other ideas for how we can fund this sustainably?

Paying for return to field

- Evaluate your contracts – should cover cost of live outcome
- Consider what services are currently free that could have fee added or be dis-continued to reallocate resources/reduce intake
- Be efficient – short LOS and focus on key services only
- Work into surgery schedule before kitten season hits
Payoff over time

Our cost to care for a cat is about $200, and our cost to s/n is $67. We also take in 3,000 fewer cats per year since the program began. **We never added extra money for this, we just shifted costs by moving the qualifying cats through the shelter and back out as fast as possible.** One of the more compelling arguments I've seen for governments is future cost control. If you don't invest now, costs will continue to rise at a greater rate in the future. If you do invest now, you can reduce cat intake and costs over time...and the bonus is, they won't have to do it using lethal control. win win!

- Jon Cicirelli, San Jose City Animal Services

Is RTF against the law?

We’d love to do return to field, but our local ordinance prohibits abandonment. Have you heard of any ways to work around that?
RTF and the law

- Legal definition of ownership can’t apply to community cats
- Leash and license laws intend to reduce nuisance, harm and costs
- Abandonment laws intend to protect welfare and prevent suffering
- Both intents better served by RTF than relocation or euthanasia
- Extensive precedent for RTF in presence of leash, license, abandonment laws

Ideal legislation

- **Community Cat** means any free-roaming cat that may be cared for by one or more residents of the immediate area who is/are known or unknown; a community cat may or may not be feral.
- Community cats shall be distinguished from other cats by being sterilized and ear tipped; qualified community cats are exempt from licensing, stray and at-large provisions of this ordinance and may be exempt from other provisions directed toward owned animals.
- Feeding not required but may be regulated:
  - On private property or with consent of owner
  - In appropriate amounts for daily consumption in appropriate feeding containers
  - Dumping of excess food or placing excess quantities on the ground is prohibited
- If shelter is provided, it shall be unobtrusive, safe and of proper size
- Efforts should be made to sterilize, vaccinate and ear-tip cats that are fed...