

Local

When trap-neuter-release programs for feral cats do more harm than good

By Michael W. Fox February 19, 2014

Dear Dr. Fox:

My name is Grant Sizemore, and I run the Cats Indoors program at the American Bird Conservancy.

I read your recent article on the frustrations regarding the release of feral cats back into the environment. I believe the Cats Indoors program will be of interest to concerned readers and all involved in this tragic issue affecting the health and welfare of cats, wildlife and people.

We can prevent the unnecessary suffering by keeping cats indoors or otherwise restricted from roaming. For details, please visit our Web site, www.abcbirds.org/cats.

G.S., the District

Dear Dr. Fox:

Thank you for your letters and opinions denouncing trap-neuter-release programs. I am an animal activist in Albuquerque, and I have filed a lawsuit against our municipal animal control and shelter for their dumping of at least 6,000 cats in landfills, shopping centers, active construction sites and residential neighborhoods in close proximity to schools.

I live in one of these “colonies,” and I see firsthand the suffering that these cats and wildlife endure.

M.B., Albuquerque

Dear Dr. Fox:

A couple of years ago, the executive director of a Virginia Humane Society near me had a contract to operate the city's animal shelter. This director came up with a plan to have staff members sign adoption contracts for feral cats, have them spayed/neutered and then release them.

Staff members released 300 to 400 cats, even under the direction of a subsequent director. Almost 100 were released in the woods behind the shelter. Shelter workers would throw out food every few days.

Other cats were put into crates, taken to nearby localities and released at truck stops.

A few staff members who refused to do it were fired. They contacted the state veterinarian's office and reported the practice. The municipality had to pay a fine, and the shelter director was fired. (She had recently been featured in a training video from Alley Cat Allies on how to do trap-neuter-release without getting caught.)

There are four other municipal shelters in Virginia with which I am familiar that have gone "no-kill." They are all operated by humane organizations. One touts its TNR program as being very successful, resulting in fewer feral cats being brought in.

No wonder: It refuses to accept feral cats between June and October. The Tidewater area has a lot of groups doing TNR. Recently, there have been several incidents of cats being decapitated. In the greater Richmond area, cats are being shot. Some people do not want them around.

A couple of years ago, we had to fight a legislative battle against changing the Code of Virginia to allow TNR. In fact, property owners wouldn't have had a choice about cats being released back onto their property. Feral cats would have been treated like wildlife, with no standards of adequate care and very few protections.

We are of the opinion that the streets are not safe for cats, that public animal shelters should not be allowed to turn away any animal and that TNR leads to cruelty for animals — cats and wildlife.

Hopefully, if enough like-minded people begin to speak out, the tide will turn against trap-neuter-release, and it will be exposed for what it is: the abandonment of cats.

P.D., Danville, Va.

Dear G.S., M.B. and P.D.:

I appreciate your input on this nationwide issue. Here in Minnesota, feral cats are often caught by trappers in the forests where they are competing with wild carnivores for prey.

My wife, Deanna Krantz, humanely trapped two on our suburban property, and they are now fully socialized. How many TNR cats are severely mutilated and die slowly or are killed and eaten by coyotes, dogs and other predators, I wonder? Many must have frozen to death this winter.

I asked Mr. Sizemore about the role of the larger animal welfare organizations, such as the Humane Society of the United States, in this controversial issue, and appreciate his thought:

“They seem to not recognize the impacts of TNR on both cats and wildlife. I hope that, as public sentiment moves away from the continued abandonment of cats through TNR, [the Humane Society] may change its position.”

Only in very rare instances, in which the locale has no wildlife, no extremes of climate and expert daily attention, shelter, food, water and veterinary care as needed, would I consider trap-neuter-release ethically acceptable.

HYPERTHYROIDISM

Dear Dr. Fox:

My 16-year-old cat is refusing to eat her Hill's Prescription a/d or y/d food for hyperthyroidism. She eats very little of anything.

What are the symptoms to watch for as her health deteriorates? My vet hasn't given me much information.

D.K., Winston-Salem, N.C.

DF: I am sorry to hear about your elderly cat. Hyperthyroidism is all too common today, and there are various treatments that you can read about on my Web site, www.drfoxvet.com.

So many of the special prescription diets are very unpalatable for cats and dogs, and that is extremely counterproductive when animals who are ill need appropriate nutrition.

Your poor cat might also have high blood pressure, heart disease and, worse, chronic kidney disease, which is often seen in conjunction with hyperthyroidism and calls for a different dietary regimen.

Above all, you must avoid causing your cat to feel stress. I trust the attending veterinarian warned you of this concern. A trip to the veterinary hospital could trigger a “thyroid storm” because of your cat’s hypersensitive endocrine state and lead to a heart attack.

If your veterinarian did not suggest a treatment other than this special diet, you should ask why. Also ask whether the health of her kidneys was evaluated. You might want to seek a second opinion if you feel unsatisfied with the answers you are given. You should ideally make an appointment with a veterinarian who specializes in cats and makes stress-minimizing home visits.

Your disease-weakened and declining cat might do best with TLC, a quiet environment and whatever she likes to eat — meat and fish or high-protein human baby foods, which many cats on their last legs will rally and enjoy. Her comfort and your mutual peace of mind are probably the best course of medicine for you to take, because her condition is a terminal disease.

HARD TO SWALLOW

Dear Dr. Fox:

My 4-year-old Pekinese and Shih Tzu mix had surgery for the removal of bladder stones two years ago. Since then, the veterinarian has had her on Hill’s Prescription c/d to prevent recurrence of the stones.

Is there a recipe for homemade dog food that would work as well? My dog doesn’t care for the prescription food, and it’s a lot of money to spend on something she doesn’t like.

J.P., Desoto, Mo.

DF: Although some of the prescription diets certainly help prevent bladder stones or calculi in dogs, they are notoriously unpalatable.

Depending on the kind of calculi your dog developed, a course of treatment with antibiotics is called for if bacterial cystitis is at the root of the problem. Supplements such as glucosamine, glutathione and probiotics might also be of benefit, along with low- or no-salt chicken bullion in the dog’s drinking water to encourage plenty of fluid intake.

There are more palatable recipes for home preparation that you or your veterinarian can obtain at a nominal cost, once the kind of calculi has been determined, at www.secure.balanceit.com.

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