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Trap-Neuter-Return: The Best Approach to Feral Cat Management



By Becky Robinson

Trap-neuter-return (TNR) is a program through which feral cats are humanely trapped, neutered at a clinic and then returned to their outdoor homes to live out their lives. TNR is fast becoming the predominant approach to feral cat management in the United States because it is proven to stabilize feral cat colony growth and gradually reduce the population of outdoor cats compassionately and effectively.

More than 300 local governments across the country have laws or policies supporting the practice of TNR. This does not include the thousands of community groups and the hundreds of thousands of individual caregivers conducting TNR privately and armed with best practices that the organization I co-founded — Alley Cat Allies — developed as feral cat and TNR experts.

Major cities — including New York, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and dozens more — have embraced TNR. Enlightened animal control and public health officials have endorsed it, calling it common sense and effective. Since Alley Cat Allies first helped to bring TNR to the U.S. from the UK and Western Europe, where it is accepted and common practice, every mainstream animal protection organization in the nation has embraced the program.

Why is TNR gaining acceptance so widely? Because it works. Scientific studies show that TNR reduces colony size. With TNR, once longstanding feral cat colonies have faded away over time after the breeding cycle was ended. TNR helps cats be less visible in their communities by ending behaviors common to mating cats, such as yowling, roaming and fighting, thus reducing calls to animal control or other municipal agencies.

Trap-neuter-return also keeps cats out of shelters, where they are otherwise killed at an alarming rate. More than 70 percent of all cats entering animal shelters are killed there, and for feral cats, which are unsocialized to humans and can't be adopted, that number rises to virtually 100 percent. Millions of cats are killed in shelters, year after year.

Trap-neuter-return also encourages spay/neuter practices for all cats. In many communities where TNR has been adopted, thriving nonprofit spay/neuter clinics provide low-cost or free sterilization to feral, stray and pet cats. Two such clinics in Hillsborough County, Fla., operated by the [Animal Coalition of Tampa](#) and the Humane Society of Tampa, have neutered more than 95,000 cats since they were established in the mid-2000s. Thanks to their work, Tampa animal services report a 47-percent decline in cats entering shelters, or 9,000 fewer cats each year.

Unfortunately, TNR is often hindered by misunderstandings about the nature of feral cats, which scientific studies [show](#) are healthy and can enjoy the same lifespan as pet cats. Feral cats are members of the domestic cat species that live and thrive in virtually any landscape and have been living outdoors among people for more than 10,000 years.

Trap-neuter-return is not “abandonment” (as some detractors suggest), because cats in TNR colonies are not bonded to people but to other cats and are not adoptable into homes. Feral cat caregivers — who often reach into their own wallets to provide spay/neuter, veterinary and other care for the cats — are not “owners” of the cats but volunteers and good Samaritans providing a valuable community service.

Any remaining controversy over feral cats is further fueled by fringe conservation biologists who claim that the easiest and best way to save birds is to round up and kill outdoor cats. But they base these claims on “studies” that are actually wild extrapolations, not field research, and their premise is undermined by the fact that we *already* kill cats in shelters and pounds, at staggering expense, and without any positive effects on wildlife.

The unfortunate result of this headline-grabbing junk science is to divert attention from the [true threats to wildlife](#) — habitat destruction, pollution and climate change — in favor of scapegoating cats. As an animal-loving society, we should continue to reject false accusations and instead celebrate the spread of TNR as a compassionate and common-sense approach for cats and communities.



Becky Robinson

President and Founder, Alley Cat Allies

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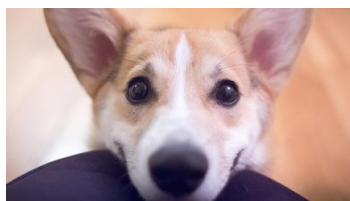
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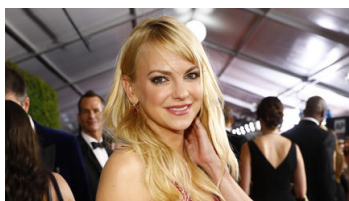
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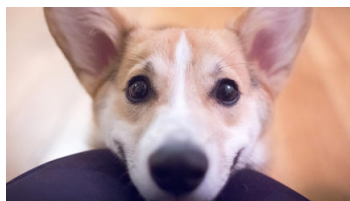


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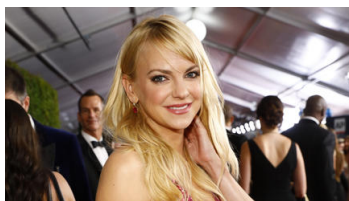
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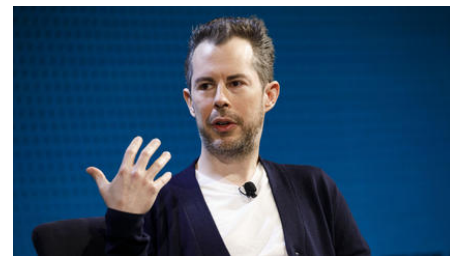
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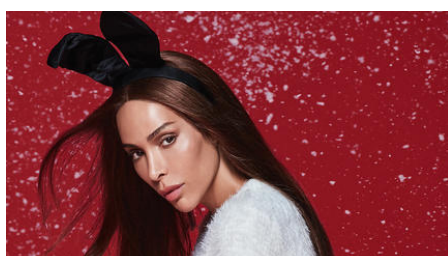
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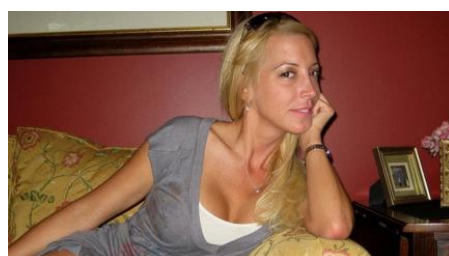
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