

NACA NEWS

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Bridging the Gap Between Animal Control and Humane Societies

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Paradigm Shift: Return to Field

By Lynne Achterberg, NACA Member

Animal welfare continues to evolve across the United States. While twenty years ago, it was accepted that open admission animal shelters euthanized massive numbers of animals in their care, times and expectations have shifted so that many communities now strive for the highest live release rate possible, especially from publicly funded shelters. The public has come to expect more transparency and accountability.

A big challenge in many communities is learning how to increase the live relation rate for cats. Shelter programs and shelter care of cats is getting an infusion of new information from innovative programs across the country, and also from shelter medicine, a rapidly growing and newly recognized specialty area of veterinary medicine.

The cornerstone for communities with high live release rates is providing access to free or low-cost spay/neuter programs.

As part of a comprehensive spay/neuter program, trap-neuter-return (TNR) and inclusion of feral cats is key. The Humane Society of the United States estimates that 80 percent of kittens are born from feral cats. Across the country, healthy friendly adult cats often languish, awaiting adoption, while waves of kittens are brought into the shelter.

In Santa Cruz County, Project Purr, a feral cat advocate organization, and the Santa Cruz County Animal Shelter have partnered for many years in supporting TNR programs. Even so, unfortunately, free-roaming feral community cats and kittens still remain the categories with the highest numbers of euthanized animals. Our work is apparently far from finished.

In an economy still in recovery from recession, home foreclosures, evictions, and abandonment, the number of animals needing shelter continues to increase. Both the shelter, with budget and staff cuts, and our

feral cat organization find it increasingly difficult to care for the waves of animals coming into the shelter. Shelter employees and rescue organizations are all pedaling as fast as we can, but at an unsustainable pace.

Communities finally have the opportunity to stop the vicious cycle and even reverse it! One solution is to lower the number of animals in the shelter in order to stay within operating capacity and have healthier adoptable animals. Some communities across the country who were willing to take a chance on changing the paradigm have developed a proactive non-lethal solution for feral cats which is labeled "Return to Field (RTF)." Studies from the Koret Shelter Medicine program at the University of California-Davis, indicate these new programs are effective and humane solutions that have the ability to sharply raise the live release rate for all shelter cats.


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to San Jose Animal Care and Services' inspirational program, the numbers provide strong evidence! Return to Field for feral cats is gaining ground and it's easy to see why. Trap-neuter-return has long been accepted as an effective and humane solution to reducing the free-roaming cat population, lowering the number of complaint calls, and stopping the endless exhaustion and suffering of uncontrolled breeding.

Nature abhors a vacuum, so returning the ear-tipped cat to its colony only days after its departure refills the niche that other unsterilized cats would otherwise have usurped, and stabilizes the population of the colony. The cats are vaccinated against disease and the risk for rabies reduced. TNR makes neighborhoods safer, healthier, and happier. By educating the public and dispelling myths about feral cats while practicing TNR, we help teach our children a kinder and more inclusive way to treat animals. By simply taking feral cats home again to the communities from which they came, we allow them to live out their lives – healthier.

As we solve one problem, we peel back another layer. The surprising result of “return to field” programs was that shelters found they could also save more lives of

friendly and adoptable cats.

The shelter system can lead the way in connecting peace, tolerance and compassion with how we treat animals, including feral cats. Repeated national surveys show that our animal-loving communities support TNR as the most compassionate and humane way to reduce overpopulation. They overwhelmingly and unconditionally believe in feral/community cats' right to life.

Building on the success of these innovative programs, Utah recently passed a law that allows cats brought to the shelter participating in TNR programs to bypass the normal hold time, go directly to vetting, and be returned to field in the shortest amount of time possible, thereby saving shelters even more money and more lives.

Thankfully, shelters, rescue groups, and communities working together can now begin to embrace TNR to Field to reach our life-affirming mutual goals.

Lynne Achterberg is a founding board member of Project Purr, an all-volunteer nonprofit feral cat advocate organization in Santa Cruz, California for over 20 years and can be reached at 823-423-MEOW or info@projectpurr.org.

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reach this goal by working and partnering with our local SPCAs and humane societies.

My agency has also recently started a newsletter that highlights the work we do. This newsletter is showing the public how hard their government tax dollars are working for the animals. This is a simple way to further shift our image away from that of the dog catcher toward more professional and caring animal care and control. To view this newsletter and get ideas for your own agency, go to the following link: http://www.scanimalshelter.org/sites/default/files/Newsletter_SUM11_V3.pdf.

As always, your NACA Board is here to help you in anyway we can. Feel free to contact any of us directly for tips on how your agency can become less governmental and more animal friendly, or how you can reach out and coordinate with your local SPCA or humane society. I can always be reached at asa235@co.santa-cruz.ca.us and am happy to share any tips I have learned over the years. I am also interested in learning tips and tricks you have learned over the years. By sharing our stories and experiences together, we can continue to progress in our field and our knowledge, as well as save lives.

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