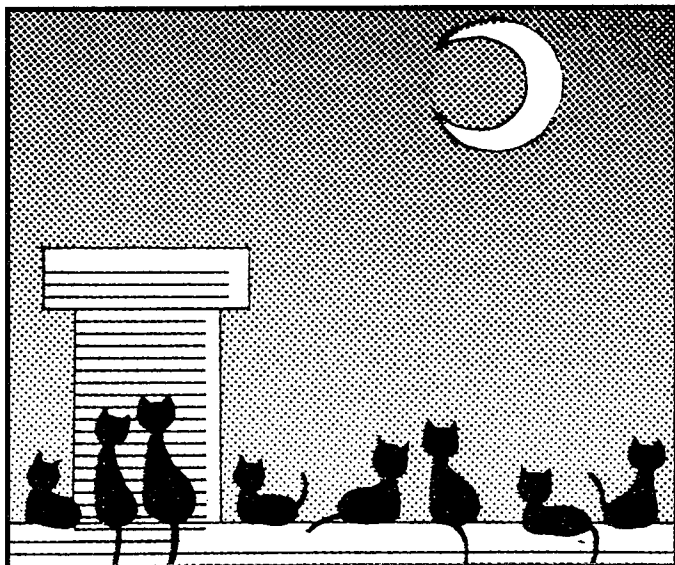


Setting up a Neutering project for Feral Cats Part 2



Difficult decisions

Management of seriously ill cats and euthanasia

Feral cats must be healthy in order to survive the rigours of their free-living lifestyle, but there is a great polarity of opinion concerning euthanasia. Some individuals and organisations find the concept of euthanasia totally abhorrent and will not consider its use in any circumstances, believing that every cat has a right to life, no matter how poor the quality of that life might be. Others believe that one of the greatest acts of kindness that a human can offer to an animal is relief from incurable illness or intractable suffering and, in these circumstances, euthanasia becomes an obligation.

Failure to take positive action to relieve the suffering of an animal renders a human liable for its suffering. There are many conditions which are treatable in the tame domestic cat but which will place enormous practical and financial burdens on a welfare organisation. For example, cat 'flu is often endemic in colonies of feral cats. For a feral cat, confinement and treatment will be very stressful. Because of the difficulties in providing suitable veterinary and nursing care as well as the need to protect other cats from infection, euthanasia is therefore often the only kind option.

Testing for disease

As feral cats may carry disease that could be a threat to other ferals and to domestic cats, testing for disease is advisable if funds allow. The major feline viral diseases to consider are Feline Leukaemia (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV). Since these diseases are fatal to cats, it is logical that should infection enter a colony, mortality will be high and subsequently, the viability of the colony will be jeopardised. If finance is available, both FeLV and FIV can be tested easily with a combined test kit while the cat is anaesthetised, thus assuring a negative status for every cat neutered and released. Any cats testing positive for either FeLV or FIV should be euthanased to prevent a slow lingering death for a cat and to avoid spread of these diseases to the rest of the colony and to domestic cats. It is usually only necessary to test the first half dozen or so cats in a colony for FeLV/FIV. If these are found to be negative, there is no need to pursue further testing. Bear in mind that unneutered male cats are in a high risk category for these diseases because of their tendency to fight.

Management of pregnant cats

Finding homes for tame kittens is often difficult. Homing wild kittens is impossible, so the decision must be taken whether to allow yet another litter of feral kittens to be born. It is very stressful for a feral cat to be confined in a cage for several weeks while her kittens are reared. A confined feral will not allow a human to handle her kittens and they will grow up wild, timid and fearful of humans. Although it can be a painful decision, termination of the pregnancy must be considered as a sensible and humane option. This is infinitely preferable to keeping a highly stressed cat confined in a cage for many weeks or leaving a debilitated cat to give birth to yet another litter that she will probably not manage to rear or that will be unhomable.

Early-age neutering

Neutering feral kittens at a young age provides a humane alternative to euthanasia or keeping them confined in cages for weeks on end when there is no prospect of a new home. Feral kittens that are left on

site until the traditional age of neutering at six months often prove very difficult to catch and many females will be already pregnant or will even have given birth themselves before they reach the age of six months. Experiences have demonstrated that provided the kittens are healthy and there is good anaesthetic and surgical technique, earlier neutering is unlikely to cause any problems. Almost without exception, these kittens make a rapid recovery, much faster than older feral cats, allowing them to be returned to site within hours.

Handling feral cats

The best way to handle a feral cat is never! As a precaution, all volunteers should be protected against tetanus, rabies and hepatitis. Anyone sustaining a bite or severe scratch should wash the wound immediately and seek urgent medical attention. Cats may appear more docile than they really are, especially when they are stressed or following anaesthesia and it is better to avoid handling in any circumstances. The golden rules are never to trust a cat's apparent docility and never to underestimate the risk of injury. By using the correct equipment, personal injury will be avoided and the trauma experienced by the cat will be much reduced. The importance of a crush cage, also known as a trap transfer restrainer, which allows for safe handling of cats without risk of injury cannot be over emphasised.

Resist the temptation to grab a feral cat by hand because of the risk of bites - even very small kittens can inflict a very nasty bite. It is possible to purchase shoulder length handling gloves which will protect against scratches but these tend to be on the large size and are cumbersome for those with smaller hands. Gloves can also give a false sense of security with regard to the risk of bites and their use is best restricted to preventing scratches when carrying traps and cages.

When transferring a cat from a trap into a crush cage, two pairs of hands are useful - a frightened cat will bolt against the cage and displace it, so a crush cage needs to be held firmly in place. In the absence of assistance, place one end of the cage against a solid object or wall. It is safer to transfer cats indoors rather than out in the open to minimise risk of escape. After transferring the cat, always secure the end door of a crush cage with string or a clip - determined cats will jiggle the door open and be off before you can blink - and you rarely get a second chance to catch them! If you cannot get a cat out of the trap and into a crush cage, a short sharp burst of water from a small hand held spray is usually all that is required to persuade the cat to move! Never put your face close to the cat as you may be badly scratched. Goggles or a visor will protect your eyes-you might look ridiculous but they may save your sight.

Trapping

Trapping is very time-consuming and requires quiet and a lot of patience. The size and general health of the colony should be assessed before trapping commences. If the cats have a regular feeder, enlist their co-operation to establish numbers of adults, nursing mothers, pregnant cats, kittens, etc. Aim to complete trapping as speedily and systematically as possible, preferably outside the breeding season to minimise the risk of lactating females losing their kittens and also to minimise the need to abort heavily pregnant females which can be very distressing to some volunteers and local residents.

If possible, get the cats used to being fed at the same place and time of day. Cats are creatures of habit and the best time to trap is at their regular feeding time. It is better not to feed the cats the day or night before they are going to be trapped so they will be hungry. Be sure to notify anyone who may feed the cats not to leave food out either. Feeders who have become emotionally attached to 'their' cats are often reluctant to accept that they will cope with being left without food for a few extra hours and you may need to use considerable tact and diplomacy to persuade them that it is for the cats' long-term benefit.

If time is not at a premium, traps can be left unset for a few days during routine feeding so that the cats will get used to them in the area. Cats are nocturnal so it may be necessary to trap late at night. Dawn and dusk are also good times to trap, particularly in hot climates. Cats detest wet weather so it is usually a waste of time trying to trap in heavy rain. Plan timing of trapping so that you don't have to keep the cat for too long before surgery. Trapping the night before or very early on the day of surgery is usually the best approach. Cats should not be fed for several hours prior to surgery but young kittens that are to be neutered should not be starved for too long, otherwise they may become hypoglycaemic following anaesthesia. If in doubt, seek veterinary advice. Water should be available if it is hot or if the cat is held in the trap for more than four hours.