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Trap, neuter, return: does this nonlethal method of coping with feral cats work? - Report Card - Cover Story

[Animals, Spring, 2002](#) by [Pamela H. Sacks](#)

Newburyport, a picturesque community on the Atlantic coast north of Boston, is a magnet for summertime tourists. Visitors sip drinks and enjoy meals on the decks of waterfront restaurants as they relax in the sun, cooled by an ocean breeze. A dozen years ago, the tourists were not the only ones soaking up the atmosphere: some 300 cats roamed the city, and for most visitors they did not exactly contribute to the ambiance.

The animals that hung around would hungrily eye diners' plates, and the bolder among them would jump up on the tables to snatch a bite. In the winter, the cats, often sick or injured, would sit and stare at diners through the eateries' sliding glass doors. At the back of one establishment, 35 cats congregated around a dumpster, and the owner finally decided enough was enough. He urged the chamber of commerce to take action, so the animals were trapped, removed, and euthanized.

Soon about three dozen new cats were calling the dumpster home. The food source was still there, and if you feed them, they will come. The restauranteur again called for their removal, but this time the answer was no. The "trap and kill" approach had failed.

By then it was 1992, and a grassroots movement with a fresh idea was coming into its own. Two Newburyport women, concerned about the plight of homeless cats, approached the chamber and offered to use a method known as "trap, neuter, vaccinate, and return" (TNVR) to bring the feline population under control and give the animals a better quality of life. The chamber agreed, and six people got together to form the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society. Newburyport's free-roaming cats were trapped, vaccinated, and spayed or neutered before being returned to the streets. Volunteers set up eight feeding stations and became care takers of cat colonies that survive to this day, according to Stacy LeBaron, the group's president.

Newburyport's trouble in the 1990s was representative of a nationwide problem that has anything but disappeared in the intervening years. Surveys indicate that today there are 65 million owned cats in the United States and an equal number that roam free and have no owners. Of the unowned animals, an estimated 40 million are socialized, or comfortable around people; more than 20 million have had no human contact and are wild, or feral. Although 90 percent of the owned cats are sterilized, the vast majority of homeless cats are not, and they reproduce rapidly.

Experts such as Carter Luke, vice president of humane services at the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA), say that one underlying factor is that cats continue to lag behind dogs in status. Studies show, for example, that cats outnumber dogs but are taken to a veterinarian about half as often. Also, cat owners are more willing to abandon their pets, figuring they can somehow fend for themselves. Moreover, many people feed neighborhood cats, put flea collars on them, and even occasionally take them to the clinic. Yet when asked whether they own a cat, the response is no.

Such ambivalence speaks to the animals' enigmatic nature, authorities say. How do we define a cat? Can it live on its own and have a decent quality of life, or does it need to be in a home and under human protection? These questions are at the heart of a 20-year debate over how to deal with the feral population. On one side are those who see catching and euthanizing the unadoptable animals as the preferred solution. On the other are those calling for the cats to be neutered, let go, cared for, and monitored. It is a controversy that has consumed animal-welfare groups, veterinarians, wildlife and public-health officials, and the public. "Whenever I hear the words 'feral cat,' I cringe," says Luke. "It's a very emotional issue. Some say sterilize-and-release is organized abandonment, while others argue that the quality of life is, if not ideal, often not bad for a cat."

The trend toward TNVR has paralleled a growing sentiment against euthanasia as a way to prevent suffering and reduce the number of homeless pets, notes Gary J. Patronek, director of the Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy in North Grafton, Massachusetts. "Now the thought is, 'Maybe we'll take a chance for this cat. Let's not have this preventive death sort of thing.'"

Joan Miller, who sits on the board of the Cat Fanciers Association and has studied feral cats for two decades, subscribes to this viewpoint. Once cats are sterilized, she says, they are content to live in stable colonies tended by people. Unaltered, they hunt nearly all the time and roam over vast territories, facing a higher risk of injury and death.

Now individuals from all walks of life are getting involved in TNVR efforts. "People were ready for it," asserts Becky Robinson, director of Alley Cat Allies, a leading TNVR advocacy group. "There are so many programs, we can't keep track of them all." Often things start small, with someone feeding the cats, then trapping them, treating them, putting them back out, and providing food and shelter. Subsequent arrivals are dealt with in similar fashion, although often the cats in an established colony keep newcomers away. And the endeavor spreads from there.

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Among the leading proponents of TNVR is veterinarian Julie Levy, who began spaying and neutering feral cats in the late 1980s, when she was studying at the University of California's Davis campus. She later founded a program at North Carolina State University and now runs Operation Catnip at the veterinary clinic of the University of Florida, where she is on staff. Her organization, which aims to sterilize as many feral cats as possible, has become a finely tuned machine. It has 250 humane traps available for which volunteers take reservations. One Sunday a month, four or five veterinarians and several of their students operate on 100 to 200 cats. Each animal is vaccinated for rabies, and an ear is tipped to indicate that it has been sterilized. No more than 10 cats are allowed per person. A \$5 donation is requested for each set of treatments, with the balance covered by foundation grants, backing from humane organizations, and T-shirt sales.

Levy has changed her approach over time. At one point, she and several colleagues at the clinic in North Carolina could not understand why their volume was not higher, so they paid a visit to the San Diego Feral Cat Coalition, the granddaddy of all TNVR spay/neuter clinics, where 200 cats were sterilized in the time it took Levy's group to do 30 or 40.

The North Carolina vets learned that they needed to move faster and streamline procedures. Early on, they had been testing every cat for feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), then euthanizing any cat with a positive result. But they changed this practice because studies showed that unowned cats and pet cats had about the same rate of FeLV and FIV--roughly 4 percent--indicating that individuals from either population pose about the same risk of infecting healthy animals. Levy and her colleagues discontinued testing for these viruses and now only put down cats that are obviously sick. Levy acknowledges a concern about the welfare of the animals that will become ill, but says hard choices must be made. "We are trying to do the most for animal welfare with our

limited resources, as opposed to leaving all those positive cats out there unneutered," she says. Costs have fallen from \$100 per cat to \$15, and the mission is simpler: to neuter as many cats as possible and reduce the population. Rabies vaccination, of course, remains mandatory.

The Merrimack group in Massachusetts likewise dropped testing for FeLV and FIV and stepped up the drive to stem reproduction among free-roaming cats. The organization works with volunteers in surrounding communities and, with the assistance of the Massachusetts Animal Coalition, holds spay/neuter clinics from southern New Hampshire to western Massachusetts. The group raises about \$200,000 a year through businesses, foundations, and individual donations, LeBaron says. It has managed to stabilize the feral populations in the cities of Haverhill and Lawrence, in part by operating foster-home and adoption programs for semisocialized cats and kittens.

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Many experts agree that LeBaron, Levy, and their associates are on to something. Given feline reproductive capacity, they say, rapidly sterilizing thousands of cats is the best way to bring the free-roaming population under control. Few studies of the effects of TNVR are available, but an analysis of statistics in San Diego in the mid-1990s reported that after more than 3,100 feral cats were neutered over a two-year period, the county's shelters saw a 35 percent drop in the number of cats taken in and a 40 percent decrease in euthanasia.

One thing is clear: TNVR is making the move from the minor leagues to the majors. Recently two large agencies have undertaken initiatives that make use of both the experience gained at the grassroots level and their own significant resources. Armed with nearly \$8 million from Maddie's Fund, a private philanthropy, the California Veterinary Medical Association set up its Feral Cat Altering Program a couple of years ago; with the cooperation of more than 1,000 veterinarians, it has spayed or neutered 131,000 felines. And officials in Maricopa County, Arizona, which encompasses Phoenix and 23 other communities, decided that attempts to eliminate feral cats through the trap-and-kill method were futile. Maricopa's Animal Care and Control Services endorsed TNVR, calling it a proven and humane method that practically eliminated "typical feral problems such as yowling females and spraying toms" while cutting rates of disease and malnutrition.

Not everyone is enthusiastic, however, and some caution that certain locales do not lend themselves to feral-cat colonies. "It might not work as well in Fargo, North Dakota, as it would in Miami Beach," remarks Patronek. The MSPCA endorsed TNVR about 10 years ago as one of several approaches needed to tame the feral-cat problem. But, say MSPCA officials, the circumstances must be right. "If you live off a busy expressway, that is not a good place for a sterilize-and-release program," Luke explains. "It would be more humane to find homes for the socialized cats, socialize the kittens, and

humanely put down those that cannot be socialized."

There also is concern over the fact that each colony must be carefully monitored in order to ensure that standards are met. Jean Weber, who directs the MSPCA shelter in Methuen, Massachusetts, says that success hinges on several factors, among them the financial stability of the program and the commitment of the people in charge. "We look at neighborhood attitude, wildlife, and traffic," Weber says. "It doesn't work if you have one person who wants to invest time and effort when other residents want the cats gone."

For some animal advocates, TNVR's potential negatives outweigh its rewards. They emphasize the risks feral cats face--being killed by a car, mistreated by humans, attacked by other animals, or dying of starvation or disease. They view allowing cats to live in colonies as inhumane. Others worry that the shortage of good homes and the difficulty of socialization will lead to the euthanasia of many cats that are trapped.

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There are other trouble spots as well. Many wildlife specialists have reported that free-roaming cats pose a serious threat to biodiversity, particularly to songbirds and to wildlife in island settings. Groups such as Alley Cat Allies counter that such studies place undue emphasis on feral cats.

Patronek explored this contentious issue in a study published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association in 1998. He found that while cats affect wildlife populations in some circumstances, the despoiling of nature by humans seems to have had a greater overall effect. He did conclude, however, that it is inappropriate to maintain feral-cat colonies near wildlife refuges, wildlife-breeding areas, zoos, or habitats of endangered or threatened species.

Public-health authorities, in addition, have voiced the fear that feral cats could infect people with rabies. The cats are vaccinated against the disease when they are neutered, but the feasibility of revaccinating them is another matter.

Such challenges are shared by all who are engaged in the effort to cope with feral cats. No matter what can be achieved after the fact, they agree, the long-term answer lies in the way people care for their pets. LeBaron puts it this way: "We don't have cat problems. We have people problems. People abandon their pets, and these animals are not spayed or neutered. If we can tackle our people problem, our cat problem will be much less."

Luke advises that, ideally, a cat should be kept indoors but, if it is outside, it should be under the owner's control. If a cat is allowed to roam unsupervised, limit the time, and a collar with an ID tag is a must. "We take in 10,000 or 12,000 lost cats a year," Luke says, "and they hardly ever come in with a collar and a tag." Another sobering statistic is that two-thirds of free-roaming cats once had a good deal of contact with a human. "They got lost or disappeared," Luke says. "Those are the things we've

got to prevent. Every cas should have a lap to sit on. But in the meantime, maybe there are creative ways, such as TNVR, that can help control the homeless cat population."

Pamela H. Sacks is a contributing editor for Animals.

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