

The Evolution of a No-Kill Approach to Animal Welfare

“Whose interests does shelter euthanasia serve? The traditional answer asserts that animals are the beneficiaries — it alleviates suffering and protects helpless creatures against fates worse than death. Based on this belief between 20,000 and 30,000 mostly healthy companion animals daily are ushered out of this life. In the face of those numbers still alarming even if improved over recent years, the question of whose interests it serves and the validity of euthanasia’s guiding assumptions deserve reexamination.”

- Craig Bestrup, Ph.D., author and former Executive Director of the Progressive Animal Welfare Society (1997)

The reexamination of animal welfare in the United States began in 1989, when Ed Duvin, a long-time animal and political activist and historian of social change, wrote an article titled, “In The Name of Mercy.” He wrote this after his own realization that many animal activists had essentially walked away from helping companion animals. Commenting on his article, Duvin said:

I was thoroughly immersed in articulating a larger vision for other beings, and there was no time or inclination for the dog-and-cat set. After all, the ‘new movement’ was charting an exciting course for the future, and there were ample humane societies and SPCAs to cope with unfinished business from the past. It will be to my everlasting shame that so many

years passed before I heard the screams of those animals closest to me. (Duvin, 2013)

Duvin continued by saying:

When I finally wrote ‘In the Name of Mercy,’ it did not take long to recognize that I had struck a nerve. This was the intention, as ‘Mercy’ was crafted to produce discomfort with the status quo — so much that never again would millions of companion animals be ‘euthanized’ as a matter of routine. (Duvin 2013)

In 1990, I co-founded Alley Cat Allies and later established Alley Cat Rescue (ACR), as a means of changing the way feral cats have traditionally been managed and

viewed by our society. Wrongly considered by some to be pests, these cats are labeled “dangerous and a nuisance” by some animal agencies and environmental groups and, as a result, are trapped and killed. ACR is committed to the development of viable no-kill policies. We agree with Ed Duvin that when shelters kill companion animals, they turn a blind eye towards the “damaging long-term effects of devoting most of their energy to collection, processing, and killing,

[while] leaving sparse resources for bold preventive measures” (Duvin, 2013).

In 1993, the San Francisco SPCA, under the direction of Richard Avanzino, re-evaluated its programs and created the “Feral Fix Program” (Maddie’s Fund, 2006). Free vaccinations and sterilizations were made available for all feral cats in San Francisco at no cost, five days per week. On April 1, 1994, the SF SPCA and the city’s Department of Animal Care and Control signed an Adoption

Pact (Maddie’s Fund, 2000). This historic agreement guarantees a home to every adoptable dog and cat in San Francisco. In the agreement, the SF SPCA takes sick, traumatized and under-socialized animals from Animal Control, and rehabilitates them, finding new homes for these animals who otherwise would have been killed.

In 1994, Lynda Foro established the nonprofit organization, Doing Things for Animals (DTFA). DTFA published an annual directory of over 1,100 humane organizations whose mission was to provide humane education to help end the tragedy of killing healthy, adoptable animals. The groups listed provided shelter for animals, adoptions, spay/neuter programs, and Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) programs for outdoor cats. Foro, quite progressive and ahead of the times, served only vegetarian

Personal Account from Louise Holton

In 1990, I had come full circle. Having been involved in the animal movement for many years and with wildlife and conservation groups, I was under the impression that companion animals and even community outdoor cats, were being taken care of by the thousands of animal shelters in the country. Unfortunately, that all changed when I became involved with my first feral cat colony in Washington, D.C. I got quite a shock to find out that the feral cat issue had been almost totally ignored, or viewed in a very negative light. The local animal control, and even rescue groups, called these cats “fractious” animals, with catch-and-kill considered the only solution.

Having worked with the Johannesburg SPCA in South Africa on TNR in the mid-1970’s, and knowing of all the fine work being done in Britain for outdoor cats, I decided to focus on stray outdoor cats and co-founded the first national network for outdoor and feral cats, Alley Cat Allies. Several years later, I founded my second organization, Alley Cat Rescue, to focus on helping all cats — domestic, stray, and feral.

food at her conferences, saying: “How is it that we can kill an animal to eat while advocating for no-kill?” (Foro, 2001).

The first no-kill organizations pledged never to euthanize healthy animals — only those who could not be treated, had terminal diseases, and were suffering. Many of these no-kill organizations cultivated relationships with their local animal control agencies to take shelter animals slated for euthanasia.

Contributing much success to the No Kill Movement is former lawyer Nathan Winograd, who helped run programs at the San Francisco SPCA and the Tompkins County (NY) SPCA. In 2004, Nathan founded the No Kill Advocacy Center and in 2005, he organized the current annual No Kill Conference. The No Kill Advocacy Center promotes saving lives by implementing the No Kill Equation. The equation emphasizes progressive programs, such as TNR, high-volume, low-cost spay/neuter, and community partnerships around adoption, foster care, and transfers to rescue groups, all with the goal of keeping animals out of shelters that do kill.

All those who work in the humane and animal welfare movement would like a no-kill country. No one who works in animal shelters condones the killing of healthy animals. We should therefore all be working together towards the goal of no-kill. Let those of us who are able to take in a small number of animals and who do not euthanize healthy animals

work with those agencies who are overwhelmed by the numbers of animals brought to them. If all the groups and concerned individuals worked together, if all those who place animals in homes spayed or neutered them before adoption, if all the feral cat caregivers could be given the resources to sterilize their colonies, it would go a long way towards this ideal of a no-kill society.

“Killing ‘surplus’ animals does nothing to solve the homeless problem. In fact, it perpetuates the problem by continuously ‘making room’ for more and more outcasts. ‘Excess’ animals are not the problem; the problem is in people’s heads and hearts, in the way they think and feel — or fail to.”

- Amy Blount Achor,
author of “Animal Rights:
A Beginner’s Guide” (1996)

Unfortunately, two other problems exist in the U.S. that are not easy to solve — the dumping of companion animals and individuals not spaying or neutering their animals, which creates litters of unwanted kittens that overwhelm shelters each spring. The two most common reasons people relinquish companion animals are due to a move or a “no pet policy” at their new residence (Salman et al., 1998). Other common reasons include behavioral issues, no time to care for the animal, death or illness in the family, and divorce or having a new baby.

The economy also plays a large part in why individuals abandon companion animals. The loss of a job, foreclosure on their house, and the inability to pay bills forces many families to give up their animals. And upon learning their local shelter is full and fearing their cat will be euthanized, they often release the cat outdoors hoping she will have some chance at survival.

As a compassionate society, it is our responsibility to use all available resources to address each of these problems mentioned above in order to progress toward being a no-kill nation.

Will Community Cats Suffer if We Don't Take Them to Shelters?

Dr. Kate Hurley, head of the shelter medicine program at U.C. Davis, initially believed outdoor cats should be



Working with outdoor cats where they are, out in nature, is more humane than bringing them to a shelter, where they will likely be killed.

rounded up and taken to a shelter where they would of course be killed. But today she travels to conferences to give a very powerful presentation on why this practice should end (Hurley and Levy, 2013).

She and Dr. Julie Levy make a really good case for leaving outdoor cats where they are living, regardless of whether they are spayed or neutered. Taking them into shelters (where most will be killed) will add to shelter overcrowding, which leads to the spreading of viruses and diseases, resulting in the deaths of even more healthy animals who would otherwise have a chance at adoption.

In a discussion through the no-kill Mad-die's Fund foundation, Hurley and Levy argue against long-standing assumptions that claim nothing but suffering and untimely deaths await outdoor cats not admitted to shelters. The veterinary experts cite growing evidence that these cats not only survive on their own, but that feral cats brought to TNR clinics are generally healthy; less than one percent require euthanasia for disease, trauma, or other incurable conditions (Scott et al., 2002, print; Wallace and Levy, 2006).

They also note veterinarians find less than 10 percent of cats have a medical condition on intake at shelters (Wenstrup and Dowidchuk, 1999). Though community cats have a higher risk of infection by parasites than owned cats, they have an equal risk of contracting feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and

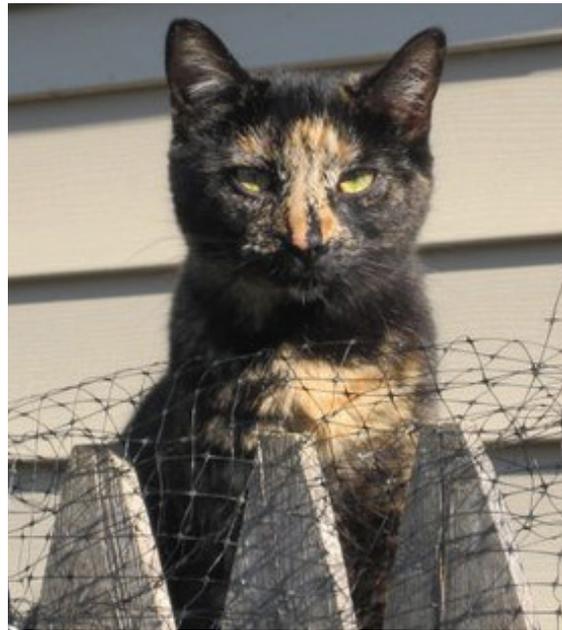
feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), and a lower risk of feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) (Lee et al., 2002; Luria et al., 2004). (Refer to “Health Care for Feral Cats: Guidelines for Colony Caretakers” for more information on viral diseases.)

Additionally, in what Hurley and Levy call “the most complete long-term study of community cats in a TNR program” (Hurley and Levy, 2013), researchers found the cats in a TNR’d colony lived an average of three to five years. Yet after the 11-year follow-up period, the cats still living on the property had been there for an average of seven years, meaning they live even longer than expected (Wenstrup and Dowidchuk, 1999).

Hurley and Levy argue to shelter directors that taking in and killing cats, regardless of whether they are friendly or feral, does not resolve complaints. They say it does not help reunite lost cats with their families. These cats usually do not find new homes while in a shelter; although there is a very good chance that community cats will be taken in and given a permanent home by local residents if left where they are living (Hurley and Levy, 2013).

Most community cats are being cared for in some capacity, with feeding being the most common activity. Studies have found that up to a quarter of American households are feeding one or more cats they do not own (Levy and Crawford, 2004; Lord, 2008). Hurley and Levy note that the 14-month survival rate “was 90 percent for ‘semi-owned cats’

(free-roaming cats fed by a community member who did not consider themselves the cat’s owner),” according to one study (Schmidt et al, 2007).



Louise Holton

Community cat in Mount Rainier, Md.

Free-roaming cats are sometimes so well cared for that it is not unusual for cat lovers to adopt them into their homes from the streets. Surveys show that more cats are directly taken in as strays, Hurley and Levy say, than are adopted from shelters or rescue groups (Hurley and Levy, 2013).

However, as Hurley and Levy point out, though adult cats are able to thrive in the community, kittens are often not as lucky. In a rate similar to that of other small carnivores, a study found 75 percent of feral kittens died within six months of birth (Nutter et al., 2004), a terrible statistic that TNR could lower by decreasing reproduction.

“The bottom line,” says Dr. Hurley, “[is that] traditional sheltering is not an effective tool to eliminate or protect community cat populations” (Winograd, 2013).

Alley Cat Rescue's Own Backyard in Maryland

Change comes slowly sometimes, but after many years of community advocacy, work with government officials, and even law suits, our county animal control agency is now required to work with community cat caretakers and those performing TNR. Whereas feral cats brought to the shelter in the past were promptly deemed unadoptable and euthanized, there now exist regulations that require a three-day holding period and notification of rescue groups, like Alley Cat Rescue, when an ear-tipped cat is brought to the shelter. The agency still does not practice or approve of TNR, and “stray” animals with no readily discernible vaccination or ownership history have little chance of survival once at the shelter. But, it is at least recognizing ear-tipped cats as cared-for members of the community.

Alley Cat Rescue is working towards a goal of having everyone on the same page regarding overpopulation of companion animals: 1) We sterilize every cat, and work hard to place every friendly cat in a home, while leaving outdoor cats in their outdoor homes and providing

them with proper medical care; 2) We educate the public on the importance of spaying and neutering their companion animals and providing committed, life-time care. Nowadays, most animal shelters work with other rescue groups, and together we can do even better.

However, we have much hard work still ahead. The current shelter system continues to kill 3 to 4 million companion animals every year, and that is far too many for a country like the United States (The HSUS, May 2013). Of those, 1.4 million are cats, and 41 percent of all cats taken to shelters are euthanized (ASPCA, accessed 2014). Still, it is a vast improvement compared to the 12 to 20 million animals euthanized each year in the 1970s. Previously, about 25 percent of American dogs and cats were euthanized every year, now only about three percent meet this fate (Pacelle, 2007).

Though euthanasia rates may be decreasing, the overpopulation of domestic animals remains a concern, and several factors are at the root of this problem. Despite growing campaigns promoting the spaying and neutering of companion animals, many guardians — as many as 35 percent in the U.S. — still fail to have their companion animals fixed (Scheer and Moss, 2011). This results in many unintended litters and many more cats and dogs who need homes. Unfortunately, guardians often find that they cannot take care of their animals.

The majority of companion animals relinquished to shelters are turned in

by their caretakers, perhaps as many as six to eight million animals every year (Scheer and Moss, 2011). Alley Cat Rescue receives calls every day from individuals looking to give up their cat(s) for a number of reasons: the person is moving, the person brought in another companion animal who does not get along with the cat, the arrival of a baby, behavioral issues, medical issues, financial constraints, or the person simply no longer wants the cat.

Along with this abundance of animals being born and abandoned, there are simply not enough animals being adopted from shelters. Every year, 17 million Americans get a new companion animal, with only 20 percent being rescued from shelters (Scheer and Moss, 2011). Because of this, rescue groups and shelters often deal with a huge number of animals and a shortage of homes to adopt them into.

Whatever the reason fueling overpopulation, Alley Cat Rescue and other



Alley Cat Rescue

Backyard cat.

organizations are working hard to form partnerships with local county-run shelters to continuously improve the situation for community cats. Merritt Clifton of *Animal People* states that the introduction of TNR into the U.S. has contributed greatly to the reduction of killing of cats in shelters (Clifton, 2003). We strive for a day when no healthy cats — domestic, stray, or feral — are killed in U.S. shelters.