



Don't fear the feral

Fixing and coexisting as an approach to the feral cat conundrum

Feline friends



October 16 is National Feral Cat Day. Find more information, resources and tutorials on how to care for strays at:

- www.alleycat.org
- www.hsus.org/feralcats
- www.aspc.org
- www.neighborhoodcats.org

By Penny Musco

ACCORDING TO MANY, we have a cat problem in the U.S. With population estimates in the tens of millions, ferals—felines who live their entire lives outdoors with little or no human contact—are everywhere. Which means that no matter where you live or work, chances are there's a colony nearby.

"People feed the cats, but then they call their local shelter for help, and the shelter doesn't know what to do except tell them to get a trap and bring them in," says Costco member Becky Robinson, president and co-founder of Alley Cat Allies (ACA). Once at a shelter, though, the cats are "not going to get adopted," Robinson continues. "Seventy percent of all cats taken to shelters are killed, and when it comes to feral cats, virtually 100 percent are."

It's not only an unpleasant way of dealing with them, but an ineffective one: "Euthanasia as a method of population control isn't cheap, easy or quick," notes Costco member Dr. Margaret Slater, senior director of veterinary epidemiology for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). Robinson cites the case of a large Midwestern county that spent \$185 per cat to eradicate ferals, numbering into the tens of thousands of dollars annually. "We're talking about a massive production line that ends the lives of healthy animals, that's cruel and inhumane and a total failure, [because] there are more cats than ever," she says.

Advocates for TNR

That's why ACA, the ASPCA and other organizations, such as the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), advocate trap-neuter-return (TNR), in which the animals are safely captured, sterilized and vaccinated, then returned to their colony. This stops breeding and limits the spread of diseases such as rabies—crucial for all cats, says Slater, since unneutered indoor pets may be allowed to roam.

TNR is also better for the cats: "It stabilizes the colony and they're not reproducing, so their health improves," Robinson concurs. And while kittens and a few adult felines may be socialized and brought inside, most cannot be. "Their home is outside," Robinson adds.

That's what bothers some who, although they may tolerate or even like animals, don't want them

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Trap-neuter-return programs have proven to be an effective approach to dealing with feral cats.

PHOTOS: ALLEY CAT ALLIES

FERAL CATS

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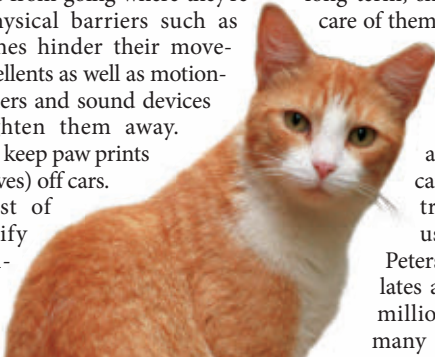
roaming around their lawns and using their gardens as litter boxes.

“[These people] may be upset because they see their neighbor feeding the cats and figure [because] the cats are there, the neighbor is to blame,” explains Costco member Nancy Peterson, cat programs manager at HSUS. She regularly fields inquiries not only from people who want to help, but also from those who just want the cats gone, although usually not exterminated. ACA’s research shows that 81 percent of Americans would prefer to let a stray cat live outside rather than have it caught and put down.

Other options

Fortunately, there are a variety of products to deter cats from going where they’re not wanted. Physical barriers such as fences and bushes hinder their movements; scent repellents as well as motion-activated sprinklers and sound devices harmlessly frighten them away. Protective covers keep paw prints (and dirt and leaves) off cars.

But the cost of items to mollify annoyed neighbors, as well as food and vet bills, adds up,



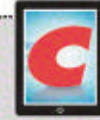
which is why, if you’re thinking about managing feral cats by trapping them and having them sterilized, experts warn you’d better look before you leap.

“That’s why I’m going to be working the rest of my life,” jokes Kay in New Jersey, who buys nearly all her pet supplies at Costco, and who for 16 years has supported a group of ferals in her backyard. (She wishes to go by only her first name and state, because “I prefer people not to notice I’m caring for outdoor cats.”) She practices TNR and hasn’t seen a kitten in her neighborhood for a decade.

Caregivers also need to think long-term, she cautions, since “if you take care of them right, they’re going to live full lives, and that means you have to commit 10 years to them, at least.”

In addition to Kay, “there are thousands and thousands of caring people who are willing to trap-neuter-return feral cats, using their own money,” says Peterson of the HSUS. ACA calculates anywhere from 1 million to 3 million people manage colonies; many of them belong to its Feral

Friends Network, a directory of individuals, clinics and even shelters (some funded by grants) that teach TNR, lend traps, offer advice and provide low- or no-cost sterilization.



Tablet or smartphone?

Scan or click here for more information about Alley Cat Allies. (See page 5 for scanning details.)

More on board

Becky Robinson is encouraged that more municipalities are embracing this nonlethal way of handling feral cats: ACA found that support for TNR has increased tenfold since 2003. She and Slater both quote a saying commonly ascribed to Mahatma Gandhi: “A nation’s progress can be judged by the way it treats its animals.” 🐾

The Costco Connection

Costco members will find a variety of items for feeding and caring for their pets—domesticated or otherwise—at Costco and on Costco.com, including food and treats, flea and tick treatments, health supplements, bedding, furniture, crates, carriers and grooming items. Many pet prescriptions can be filled at Costco pharmacies.