

Why TNR Works and Plays an Important Role in Achieving No-Kill

By Ed Boks

Without question, one of the biggest challenges to achieving no-kill in Los Angeles is implementing a program to effectively reduce the number of feral cats in our neighborhoods. Estimates on the feral cat population in LA are difficult to make, but they range from the tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands.

Feral cats are cats that have reverted to a wild state. They are born from tame unaltered cats that owners abandon or allow to run loose. These cats mate with other free roaming cats, and their offspring, raised without human *compassion, are wild, or feral. These cats then grow up and breed with other feral and free roaming pet cats and the cat population increases exponentially.*



Communities employ one of three methodologies to deal with feral cats: 1) Do nothing, 2) Eradication, or 3) Trap/Neuter/Return. While it is easy to understand why doing nothing has little effect on the problem, it is not as easy to understand why eradication does not work. Although many communities employ eradication or “catch-and-kill” as a remedy to this vexing problem, 30 years of catch and kill in communities across the United States has irrefutably demonstrated that this methodology does not work. There are very real biological reasons why catch and kill fails.

Wild animals tend to be “survivors.” Feral cats, which are wild animals, typically live in colonies of 6 to 20 cats. You often never see all the cats in a colony and it is easy to underestimate the number of feral cats in a neighborhood. When individuals or authorities try to catch cats for extermination it heightens the biological stress of a colony. This stress triggers two survival mechanisms causing the cats to 1) over-breed, and 2) over-produce. That is, rather than having one litter per year of two or three kittens, a stressed female could have two or three litters a year of 6 to 9 kittens each.

Even if a person was successful in catching and removing all the feral cats from a neighborhood, that creates a phenomenon called, “the vacuum effect.” When some or all the cats in a colony are removed, cats in surrounding neighborhoods recognize an opened ecological niche (especially a place with food sources). The removed colony actually kept surrounding colonies at bay. When a colony is removed, all deterrents evaporate and the surrounding cats enter the new territory to over-breed and over-produce, with all the associated annoying behaviors.

The end result of the catch-and-kill methodology is always the same: the vacated neighborhood quickly finds itself again overrun with feral cats fighting for mates, over-breeding, caterwauling, and spraying for territory. Thirty years of catch-and-kill has taught us that this methodology only exacerbates the problem. It is not a solution at all.

Albert Einstein defined “insanity” as doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results. That is why so many communities are trying an effective alternative called, trap/neuter/return, or TNR. TNR is being practiced in more and more communities across the United States and around the world with amazing results.

When TNR is employed, all the feral cats in a neighborhood are trapped, sterilized, and returned to the area where they originated. They are returned under the care of a Colony Manager. The Colony Manager is a trained volunteer in the neighborhood willing to feed, water, and care for the colony and keep an eye out for any new cats. Once the colony cats are all neutered, new cats tend to be recently abandoned domestics that can be caught and placed for adoption.

There are many benefits to TNR. 1) TNR prevents the vacuum effect from developing. 2) Altered cats display none of the troubling behaviors of intact cats: fighting and caterwauling for mates, and spraying for territory. 3) The cats continue to provide rat abatement, a service many neighborhoods unknowingly rely on, and 4) because feral cats tend to live significantly shorter life spans than domestic indoor cats the problem literally solves itself through attrition, provided TNR is implemented community wide.

TNR also addresses the concern that feral cats tend to create a public nuisance. There is an old adage that says “you can’t herd cats.” In fact, you can herd neutered cats because they tend to hang around the food bowl. Because they no longer have the urge to breed and prey they tend to follow the food bowl wherever the feral cat manager takes it. Feral cats can be trained to congregate in areas out of the way of the public. Clearly, TNR is the only viable, non-lethal, humane and cost effective solution to our communities’ feral cat problems.

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