

TRACKING OUR SUCCESS

Alley Cat Allies (ACA) was established to give guidance and support to caregivers of feral cats and aid them in helping this large section of the animal population that had no one else to speak for them. Millions of feral cats are in need of immediate help to ultimately bring their numbers under control and help them live better lives. Another, and equally as important, reason that ACA came into being was to change public attitudes about feral cats. More precisely, ACA is working to create a paradigm shift.

The current public attitude – or paradigm – about feral cats is that they are a public nuisance and health hazard, an animal not to be tolerated in our environment. The new paradigm that is being put forward by ACA and feral cat caretakers – one that has been embraced in many European countries for decades – is that cats are as welcome a part of urban wildlife as squirrels, raccoons, and birds.

Along with providing direct care for feral cats, education about the nature of feral cats and training must be provided if feral cats are to be included in mainstream public humane programs.

We know that, for many ferals, life has improved greatly in the last few years as a result of organized programs having been put into practice in numerous cities. Even some shelters and animal control agencies have embraced nonlethal control – trap-neuter-return (TNR). The success of their TNR programs is shown in the change in their statistics: higher numbers of spays and neuters and lower numbers of intakes and euthanasias.

The majority of activity in nonlethal feral cat colony management has been at the grassroots level. Thousands of individuals have taken the lead on their own without the help of any local organized and funded animal shelters, animal control officials, or humane groups. Armed with ACA factsheets and moral support, thousands of people have been able to successfully trap and have vetted the cats for whom they care.

One thing for certain is that the population of feral cats (estimated to be 60 to 100 million) will take a considerable amount of time to stabilize. To fast-forward our progress, established animal/humane organizations

must cooperate by creating their own large-scale formal feral cat programs, or help the individuals who are already practicing the principals of TNR. This is one of the reasons that the most requested service of ACA is our Feral Friends Network (FFN), whereby we facilitate this cooperation linking caretakers, veterinarians, and groups in a particular area to form their own coalitions on behalf of feral cats.

Things are finally beginning to change for ferals and we can see success on the horizon. But how do we prove this to the public and to the mainstream world of animal control that has not yet seen the advantages of TNR? And why do we need to prove this? First, we must clearly demonstrate to those that question the nonlethal approach that our methods are effective and accomplish what we say they accomplish. Second, and equally as important, we ourselves need to know how well we are doing and where we need to improve.

ACA believes that success has occurred on both objective and subjective levels. Measuring on an objective, or quantitative, basis how feral cat colonies have been effectively controlled and reduced is relatively straightforward. However, few caretakers and organizations, in the midst of doing their TNR work, have had the time to chart the progress of their colonies, i.e., the number in the original colony that was trapped and sterilized, exact starting dates of management, deaths, any additions to the colony for whatever reason, and current colony numbers. In other words, the more documented vital statistics we have for each and every managed colony, the better it is for the entire movement towards TNR. The organizations and individuals that have kept track of their progress can clearly document the positive impact of all their hard work. That is a reduction in the overall feral cat population through the means of nonlethal control.

There are many ways we can measure our success subjectively – or how we can view our progress without data to back up anecdotal evidence. When an entire city embraces a new program to implement nonlethal control for feral cats, this is a clear subjective measure of our success in the form of a paradigm shift. It is a clear indication that thousands of people in that area have

chosen what we have chosen – more effective and humane population control.

One of the questions most often asked is, “does TNR really work in bringing the numbers down?” Explaining and demonstrating that nonlethal control is effective needs to be done both on a small scale (statistics for individual colonies) as well as on a large scale (overpopulation numbers).

ACA has a tracking sheet available for caregivers. Data including names, ages, descriptions of the cats, and medical and vaccination history has proved to be an invaluable tool for caretakers. Upon completion of a trapping project, caretakers can show all statistics regarding the status of the colony.

An example of measuring success on a small scale is the original ACA Adams Morgan, Washington DC colony. This unmanaged colony was fed by residents, but unsterilized and breeding. The colony was brought under full management by the Fall of 1991. Twenty-eight adult cats were sterilized and 32 kittens were placed in homes. No new cats have moved into the Adams Morgan alley. This is a direct result of intensive feral cat management in the area since 1990.

On the large scale, we have only to look at the results achieved by the Feral Cat Coalition in San Diego, California. Since 1993, the Feral Cat Coalition has spayed and neutered over 10,000 feral cats (as of January 1999). This has resulted in a spectacular drop of as much as 50 percent in the city's total animal shelter intakes.

Several other city-wide programs have been examined to determine their impact on the overall numbers of feral cats. In 1998, Orange County Animal Services in Florida spayed and neutered more animals (domestic and feral) than they euthanized. This measure of success is even more remarkable in that they began their feral cat program along with a neuter before adoption program (for all animals adopted from the shelter) a mere two and a half years ago.

Another measure of success in our efforts to change public opinion, or the dominant paradigm, is Junction City, Oregon. A woman in that city was prepared to go to jail rather than pay a \$45 fine for feeding feral and stray cats. Because of this woman's compassion and courage, resulting in not only a dismissal of the fine, but also a statement from the city administrator that the ordinance would no longer be enforced.

Another example, among many, is Berkeley, California, where \$10,000 in city funds has been allocated specifically for sterilizing the city's cats and dogs. And anyone who has for any time been involved with the problem of companion animal overpopulation can attest to the fact that \$10,000 can go a long way toward addressing the problem.

We have accomplished a great deal. However, most of it has been on an individual, grassroots level. Now that the movement is maturing, our goal is to have the concept of nonlethal control and TNR embraced nationwide by the mainstream. Now that TNR has been introduced in the mainstream, it is even more crucial that we objectively measure our progress to succeed in making it the norm. Lack of tracking and numbers may be slowing down the acceptance of TNR.

Acceptance of TNR has grown tremendously in the past few years, but the magnitude of the problem is vast and TNR must be seen as an effective long-term solution, not a quick fix. The rate of progress will continue to increase, however, as more funds become available to increase spay/neuter efforts in the next few years. Because nonlethal control is more cost-effective than killing, animal control agencies and individuals will see more resources being freed up to “put back into the machine” and further increase the rate of success.

TNR must be practiced in conjunction with other tools at our disposal to help solve the huge companion animal overpopulation problem. These other tools include 100 percent neuter before adoption for shelters and humane groups, early-age spay/neuter, and help for individuals in getting their own companion animals sterilized – the latter in the form of education and wide availability of free and lowcost spay/neuter programs. Without these other important elements, statistics on the success of nonlethal control of the feral cat population may be muddied by a large number of stray, but tame, and adoptable cats in need of attention.

The importance of tracking our successes, both objectively and subjectively, quantitatively and qualitatively, is clear with respect to the big picture. But, the true measure of our success is in each and every cat who has reaped the benefits of TNR. This is what inspires us to continue. All of us who have seen happy, healthy feral cats rolling in the grass, sunning themselves on fences, and trotting purposefully on some mysterious feral cat mission know that this is success of the highest order. ■