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Making Feral Cats Welcome in Your Community

Most of the people in your community probably don't know the facts about feral cats or the benefits of managed feral cat colonies. They don't know

- The cats are regularly provided with food, shelter, and veterinary care.
- The cats may have lived in the area for many years and have surely developed a strong bond with their home territory.
- The cats have developed a strong bond with each other and the people caring for them, but are not tame and cannot be adopted into homes.
- The cats pose no health threat to humans or other animals.
- By sterilizing and then managing colonies of healthy feral cats, you can reduce and effectively control the number of cats in the area.

As a feral cat caregiver, your job is just as much to address the concerns of neighbors as to trap, sterilize, and care for the cats. A caregiver can forestall many problems by establishing and maintaining a friendly dialogue with people living near a feral cat colony. Present information in a reasonable, professional manner and you will give them confidence that you know what you are doing and care about their interests.

Explain tactfully that the cats have lived at the site for a long time, that they have been (or will be) sterilized, which will cut back on annoying behaviors, and that a managed colony will be stable and healthy. Also explain that if the present colony is removed, new, unsterilized cats are certain to move in and the problems will recur.

Address individual complaints by listening patiently and asking questions that uncover the specific problem. In most

cases, when a neighbor demands that all the cats be removed, it is because of a single, resolvable situation involving just one or a few cats. Maintain a constructive, problem-solving attitude in order to uncover the real objection.

Carry a supply of Alley Cat Allies' brochure "The Humane and Effective Solution" to pass out. If the neighbors express interest, arrange to show the ACA videos "The Humane Solution" and "Trap-Neuter-Return." These short training videos fully explain where feral cats come from, what TNR is and why it is the best solution, and what action you (and thousands of people nationwide) are taking to improve living conditions for the cats while controlling their population and solving a community issue.

Addressing Specific Concerns

There are straightforward solutions to most concerns about feral cats. Implement these solutions before situations get out of hand and the cats will be viewed in a more positive light.

Neighbors are often bothered by nuisance behaviors associated with breeding, such as roaming, fighting, yowling, spraying, and the birth of endless litters of kittens. The only solution is to humanely trap and sterilize the entire colony. This is the keystone of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) and the single most effective way to eliminate nuisance behaviors. If during the TNR process you place the tame strays and socialized kittens into adoptive homes, the number of cats will be immediately reduced, often by half.

Keep the cats' feeding stations or areas clean and trash free. Many caregivers build attractive but inconspicuous shelters and feeding stations. When painted dark brown or green, these structures blend into the environment.

STRATEGIES FOR SITUATIONS

Cats digging in a garden or lounging in a yard or on a porch:

- Embed wooden chopsticks or 10-inch plant stakes into the soil every eight inches.
- Cover exposed ground in flower beds with large attractive river rocks to prevent cats from digging. (They have the added benefit of deterring weeds.)
- Plant the herb rue to repel cats or sprinkle dried rue over the garden.
- Obtain Cat Scat, a nonchemical cat and wildlife repellent consisting of plastic mats that you cut into smaller pieces and press into the soil. Each mat has flexible plastic spikes that are harmless to cats and other animals, but discourage digging.
- Scatter fresh orange and lemon peels or spray with citrus-scented spray.
- Coffee grounds and pipe tobacco repel cats. Other suggestions include oil of lavender, lemongrass, citronella, eucalyptus, and mustard.
- Apply cat repellent (available at pet supply stores) liberally around the edges of the yard, the tops of fences, and on any favorite digging areas or plants. A repellent called Reppers comes highly recommended by ACA staff.
- Install an ultrasonic animal repellent or a motion-activated water sprinkler, such as the Scarecrow (Contech).

Cat paw prints and/or scratches on vehicles:

- Discourage cats from climbing on cars or other private property by gradually moving their shelters and feeding stations away from such areas.
- Purchase an appropriate cover for the car or other vehicle. This has been known to put an immediate end to complaints.

Never put out more food than the cats will finish in one meal. Remove what they don't eat after 30 to 45 minutes and always clean up the area. This will discourage wildlife from showing up to eat the leftovers and forestall complaints about unsightly feeding stations.

Cats can be discouraged from climbing on cars or other private property by gradually moving their shelters and feeding stations away from these areas. The cats will follow the food and shelter.

If fleas are a problem, have your veterinarian treat for fleas when the cats are spayed or neutered. Change the bedding mate-

rial or hay in the cats' shelters regularly. Some herbal products deter fleas. Sprinkling mint, dried pyrethrum flowers, or a non-toxic herbal flea powder beneath the bedding may work.

When cats are using gardens as litter boxes, build one or more sheltered litter boxes or place sand or peat moss in strategic areas for the cats to use as litter. Cats prefer sand or peat moss to garden soil and will use the litter areas you provide. Scoop regularly to alleviate odors and keep flies away. Be prepared to scoop more often in hot weather.

There are many safe, low-tech methods to discourage feral cats from hanging out where they are not wanted, such as in neighbors' gardens, yards, porches, or vehicles. Always offer to provide and apply these methods at your own expense. Consider pooling resources with other caregivers, if possible, to cover the cost of such items.

Addressing Further Concerns

Some neighbors may fear that feral cats could pose a risk to their children or health, or to local wildlife. Explain diplomatically that feral cats are naturally wary of people and will not approach humans they do not know. Feral cats will not attack anyone unless they are cornered. The neighbors can avoid risk by never touching the cats and by washing their hands after gardening, if they think the cats have been in their garden.

Also advise neighbors to teach their children not to approach or touch any animal that is not their own. Children should always ask an adult for help if they think an animal may be trapped, sick, or injured, or if they find a baby animal.

In general, cats are poor hunters of birds. Even the most skilled among them take very few birds compared with the number of small rodents and insects they catch. Other animals, such as raccoons, foxes, and opossums get along with adult cats in their own fashion. Kittens, however, are at risk because wild animals may consider them to be prey.

Conclusion

As a feral cat caregiver, you are the cats' guardian and public relations agency. You are their only source of help, should unhappy neighbors or property owners complain to animal control. This is why you must always maintain current, accurate health records, including vaccination data and photographs, for all the cats in your colony or colonies. It is also why establishing a friendly, open relationship with the humans living in proximity to feral cats can forestall problems and make the environment happy, healthy, and safe for all the residents. ■