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How to Talk to Absolutely Anyone About TNR

So, you want to institute a Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program in your community. Maybe you have already started one. You have the equipment, you have the information, you know you are doing the right thing. Now all you have to do is explain all of this to your neighbors, your local newspaper or radio station, or even your town council.

For many of us, the thought of speaking in public is even more intimidating than trapping feral cats. You can become an expert spokesperson for TNR, however, with a little preparation and by following these simple tips.

Define your primary message

What is the one point you want people to remember after listening to you? Your message may vary a little with each situation, but it should always be clear and strong. For example, if you are speaking at a town council meeting to oppose trapping and killing of feral cats living in a nearby park, you want to emphasize that, "...eradication of feral cats does not work. TNR does."

If you are going up against the misconceptions held by well-meaning community members, you need to get across that "TNR is the most effective and humane solution to the problem of overpopulation."

Occasionally you may be called upon to participate in a discussion targeting a specific issue, such as debating the head of a local bird watching group on the issue of feral cat predation. Then your main point would be that, "...feral cats are not responsible for declining numbers of song birds."

Most of the time you will want a broader message. If your message is, "TNR is the best way to manage the feral cat population in our community;" then you can back up your argument with specific evidence. Just remember that your main point must be simple and easy to understand. You do not want to confuse anyone.

Know your audience

Your method of presentation may have to vary, depending on to whom you are speaking. You will want a more formal approach if you are speaking at a community board meeting, whereas a "warm

and friendly" approach might be more appropriate for a talk radio program.

You need to assess the audience's knowledge of the issue at hand. If you are responding to a proposal to trap and kill feral cats, some listeners or readers may already know a little about feral cats. Many people, however, do not fully understand how feral cats are different from pet cats, and need to be educated that feral cats are unsocialized to humans and usually cannot be adopted into homes.

Consider whether your audience is cat friendly or not. Government officials and homeowners associations may not be concerned about saving cats' lives, but could be more receptive to learning that TNR is cost-efficient and effective at reducing the population. A group of restaurant workers who have been feeding the cats will want to know these facts, but will also need to be reassured that the cats will benefit from the program and will not be hurt.

Speak in sound bites

A sound bite is a quick, quotable, easy-to-understand sentence or two. At the end of this article we have listed some sound bites that you can use in a discussion or presentation about TNR. If you are speaking to the media, it is imperative that you use sound bites, because the reporter will cut what you have said to fit his or her piece.

Sound bites also keep what you have said from being taken out of context or misunderstood. If you use long rambling phrases, the chances are greater that something you say may not convey your actual meaning.

For example, someone asks you about bird predation and you say, "Well, cats do kill birds and that's natural, but you know, the use of pesticides and loss of habitat are the real reason why bird populations are declining." The next morning you find that you have been quoted in the local paper as saying: "Cats do kill birds and that's natural."

A much more effective statement would be the following: "Loss of habitat and the over-use of pesticides are to blame for declining bird populations." This clear, concise statement cannot be taken out of context or misconstrued.

Do not repeat the opposition's viewpoint, even when you refute it. You only have so much time—use it to talk about the benefits of

TNR. It is always helpful to make a list of sound bites to use during an interview and memorize them or carry the list with you.

Practice makes perfect

Give your presentation or repeat your sound bites out loud to yourself in front of a mirror, to your spouse, a friend, or your kids. You will be a lot less nervous if you have gone over everything that you want to say ahead of time.

Do not get flustered

You cannot be an expert on everything, and occasionally you might be asked a question that you are not prepared to answer. This has happened to nearly everyone who has ever done an interview. The most important thing is to keep your composure, and turn the conversation back toward a topic you are more comfortable with.

In some cases you might be able to ad lib your response. Just try to keep it brief. If an interviewer asks you about a new chemical birth control for cats that you have never heard of, you may still be able to respond. An acceptable response might be, "In my experience TNR is the best long-term solution to feral cat overpopulation, and it protects the cats from various forms of cancer." You have said that TNR is better, without putting yourself in the position of talking about the unfamiliar birth control drug.

In other cases, you may simply want to admit that you do not know the answer and move on. Try to end the sentence with a positive statement, emphasizing what you do know and are prepared to talk about.

For example, in response to the question, "How many pet cats are abandoned every year?" you could say, "No one knows the exact number, but every time we find tame cats living in a feral colony we remove them from the colony and put them up for adoption." This way you turn the attention away from the question, and back to the positive aspects of TNR.

Dealing with trouble

Now and then, a TNR advocate will face a hostile interviewer, or perhaps a heckler at a meeting. It is vital to remain calm, even when the other person is totally unreasonable. Remember, you may not be able to convince one closed-minded person, but you do not want to lose the entire audience by getting into a personal fight.

The best response to an unreasonable or abusive statement is to simply steer the discussion back to the benefits of TNR. You want your response to address the issue raised without drawing any extra attention to the person who made the comment.

Let's say that during a radio interview, a caller says something truly inflammatory, such as: "We just need to kill all these cats." You might reply with: "Well, I cannot understand why you would feel that way when the program in Orange County, Florida, has not only successfully reduced the number of feral cats, but also saved money for animal services and local taxpayers."

By staying in control of the debate, you have taken the heckler

out of the spotlight and put the successful Orange County TNR program on center stage.

Never leave them empty-handed

After a newspaper interview, give the reporter something that he or she can refer to when writing the article. If you are part of a group, give out a copy of your newsletter and a factsheet about TNR. If you do not have your own materials, you are welcome to use Alley Cat Allies' newsletters and factsheets.

Make sure that the reporter knows how to contact you should he or she have any further questions. If you are speaking at a meeting, bring enough copies to distribute to everyone. At the end of a radio interview, let the listeners know where they can get more information. You can give them the address and phone number for your own group, or tell them to contact Alley Cat Allies.

Although you may feel uncomfortable speaking to the media or in front of a group, keep in mind that you know that TNR works, you know the issue, and you believe in nonlethal control. You are far more knowledgeable on this topic than your audience. Believe in yourself. With a little research and preparation you will be a winner, and so will the cats.

TNR soundbites

General

"Trap-Neuter-Return, or TNR, is the most humane and most effective way to control feral cat populations."

"When feral cats are removed from an area, other cats move in to take advantage of the food source."

"TNR is the cutting edge of feral cat control. It's the accepted method in large and small jurisdictions in every region of the U.S."

"TNR is more cost-effective than trapping and killing feral cats. The average cost of sterilization is \$50, while the average cost of 'euthanasia' is \$105."

"The reason TNR is so popular is that people simply don't want the cats killed."

Health Issues

"A vaccinated, sterilized colony of feral cats poses no rabies threat to humans. Raccoons, skunks, and bats are the most common carriers of rabies."

"Toxoplasmosis in humans is overwhelmingly contracted from handling or eating undercooked meat."

Predation

"The number one cause of wildlife decline is habitat loss due to human activity." ■