

Letters to the Editor

Reducing numbers of homeless dogs and cats

We appreciate the recent article by Phillips et al¹ concerning steps private practitioners can take to help reduce the number of homeless dogs and cats and shelter euthanasia rates. This issue is of great importance, and we applaud the multiple points the authors make to address the problem. However, we argue that assisting with feral cat colony management is not beneficial either to the cats themselves or to wildlife in the area.

Under a one-health approach, veterinarians must balance the health and needs of animals, humans, and the environment. In our opinion, however, feral cat (community cat) colonies do not balance these considerations but instead represent a bias towards what is perceived as good for cats. The Veterinary Oath obligates us to place feral cats and wildlife in the same context.

With regard to the use of trap-neuter-release programs for managing feral cats, a central question is whether the abandonment of these cats following neutering is ethical.² We suggest that it is not and contend that allowing such abandonment creates one set of standards for the care of owned cats and a second, less rigorous set for the care of feral cats. Further, similar abandonment of other animals, such as dogs or cows, is not considered acceptable.

A related concern is whether the value of feral cats outweighs the value of the wildlife that feral cats kill.³ Some estimates are that free-ranging domestic cats kill several billion birds and small mammals every year in the United States.⁴

Feral cat colonies have been a controversial subject for many years. Results of several studies^{5,6} suggest that trap-neuter-return programs are not effective in reducing numbers of feral cats or

eliminating feral cat colonies. The costs of managed feral cat colonies (eg, for food, shelter, vaccines, surgical services, and personnel time) are high.⁷ Thus, it may be more prudent and possibly more cost effective to trap feral cats and maintain them in permanent closed catteries that can optimize their welfare. The protection of public health, private property, and the lives of cats would seem to be worth it, while preserving the lives of countless wildlife that need a voice in this debate.

Mark L. Drew, DVM
President
American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians
Boise, Idaho

Colin Gillin, DVM
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife
Corvallis, Ore

1. Phillips SC, Hedge Z, Peralta JM. The role of private practitioners in reducing numbers of homeless dogs and cats and shelter euthanasia rates. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2018;253:404–408.
2. Barrows PL. Professional, ethical, and legal dilemmas of trap-neuter-release. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2004;225:1365–1369.
3. Roberto, P. Whose right to live? The cat rescue movement vs wildlife defenders. *California Coast and Ocean* 1995;11:31–40.
4. Loss SR, Will T, Marra PP. The impact of free-ranging domestic cats on wildlife of the United States. *Nat Commun* 2013;4:1396.
5. Foley P, Foley J, Levy J, et al. Analysis of the impact of trap-neuter-release programs on populations of feral cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2005;277:1775–1781.
6. Longcore T, Rich C, Sullivan LM. Critical assessment of claims regarding management of feral cats by trap-neuter-return. *Conserv Biol* 2009;23:887–894.
7. Nutter FB, Stoskopf MK, Levine JF. Time and financial costs of programs for live trapping feral cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2004;225:1403–1405.

We applaud Phillips et al¹ for their recent article encouraging veterinarians to become more engaged with animal welfare issues at the local and national levels. We agree wholeheartedly that general practitioners have a critical role to play in reducing the population of unowned, free-roaming companion animals—especially cats—through education, outreach, and direct assistance with local trap-neuter-vaccinate-return (TNVR) programs.

In responding to Phillips et al, Fox² concedes that these programs “may reduce local shelter euthanasia rates” but argues that TNVR programs “typically do little to reduce the number of local free-roaming cats.” However, a growing body of evidence suggests that targeted efforts can, and often do, produce positive outcomes. A recently published study,³ for example, reported that TNVR programs in a densely populated

Instructions for Writing a Letter to the Editor

Readers are invited to submit letters to the editor. Letters may not exceed 500 words and 6 references. Letters to the Editor must be original and cannot have been published or submitted for publication elsewhere. Not all letters are published; all letters accepted for publication are subject to editing. Those pertaining to anything published in the *JAVMA* should be received within 1 month of the date of publication. Submission via email (JournalLetters@avma.org) or fax (847-925-9329) is encouraged; authors should give their full contact information, including address, daytime telephone number, fax number, and email address.

Letters containing defamatory, libelous, or malicious statements will not be published, nor will letters representing attacks on or attempts to demean veterinary societies or their committees or agencies. Viewpoints expressed in published letters are those of the letter writers and do not necessarily represent the opinions or policies of the AVMA.

neighborhood in Chicago resulted in a mean population reduction of 54% across 20 sites. And, in one of the earliest TNVR programs documented in the United States, an estimated 300 cats on the Newburyport, Massachusetts, waterfront were eliminated over 17 years.⁴ In both cases, approximately 30% of the cats and kittens were removed and adopted, an outcome almost unimaginable in the absence of a focused TNVR program. We are unaware of studies documenting comparable results associated with the impoundment-euthanasia approach that has been used for over 100 years in this country.

Fox² also suggests that elected officials who adopt recommendations to accept such programs do so “without fully considering the consequences.” We argue that, in fact, local officials do generally understand the consequences of their actions and, perhaps more to the point, the consequences of inaction. For these officials, the important question is “if not TNVR, then what?” Constituents expect solutions, however imperfect. National surveys have demonstrated a strong preference for TNVR programs over impoundment and euthanasia⁷ as well as a strong distaste for euthanasia as a means of population control.⁶ It is little wonder, then, that more often than not—for reasons political, economic, and ethical—local officials are likely to decide in favor of laws and policies supporting TNVR programs. No doubt, additional progress could be achieved if, as Phillips et al¹ recommend, veterinarians participated more fully in the policy-making process.

It is encouraging to see the community cat issue receiving attention from veterinarians interested in promoting humane, evidence-based solutions and encouraging others to leverage their expertise, experience, and authority for the same purpose. We look forward to future case studies, reports, and other communications documenting these efforts and their results.

Peter J. Wolf, MS
Kanab, Utah

G. Robert Weedon, DVM, MPH
Urbana, Ill

Rachael E. Wooten, DVM, MPH
Palos Hills, Ill

Teri Kidd, DVM, MPH
Eureka, Ill

1. Phillips SC, Hedge Z, Peralta JM. The role of private practitioners in reducing numbers of homeless dogs and cats and shelter euthanasia rates. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2018;253:404-408.
2. Fox MW. Decreasing the population of homeless dogs and cats (lett). *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2018;253:844.
3. Spehar DD, Wolf PJ. A case study in citizen science: the effectiveness of a trap-neuter-return program in a Chicago neighborhood. *Animals (Basel)* 2018;8:14.
4. Spehar DD, Wolf PJ. An examination of an iconic trap-neuter-return program: the Newburyport, Massachusetts case study. *Animals (Basel)* 2017;7:11.
5. Faunalytics. New survey reveals widespread support for trap-neuter-return. Available at: faunalytics.org/new-survey-reveals-widespread-support-for-trap-neuter-return/. Accessed Oct 11, 2018.
6. The AP-Petside.com poll. Available at: surveys.ap.org/data%5CGfK%5CAP-Petside%20com%20October%202011%20Pets%20Topline%20FINAL_Shelter.pdf. Accessed Oct 11, 2018.

Working to solve the shortage of theriogenologists

In the recent *JAVMA* News article¹ on the shortages of specialists in certain areas of veterinary practice, Dr. Jimmy Barr, chief medical officer for BluePearl Veterinary Partners, is quoted as saying that “[t]he limiting factor, at this point, is the number of residencies.”

The Theriogenology Foundation (TF), the charitable arm of the Society for Theriogenology and American College of Theriogenologists, identified this deficiency four years ago and adopted a proactive approach to solving it. Theriogenology is the foundation of the biology of veterinary medicine, but some veterinary colleges were not meeting the demand for breeder services or even providing basic core knowledge to veterinary students.

The TF initiated 2 novel partnerships with entities that would receive direct benefit

from educating reproductive specialists: the American Kennel Club (AKC) and the AKC Canine Health Foundation (CHF). The initial commitment to fund 13 AKC-CHF-TF residency training positions in companion animal theriogenology has already generated 5 specialists who earned board certification. Every college that has expanded its theriogenology service through this program has experienced a substantial increase in client visits.

The theriogenology training program is poised to continue for years to come and has now extended to research. The most ambitious canine behavioral genetics study ever conceived, the Working Dog Project, is currently a cooperative effort of the TF, AKC Reunite, and private donors in conjunction with the project’s scientific partner, the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard. The Working Dog Project (www.workingdogproject.org) is designed to identify the genetic basis for working ability in dogs by comparing the DNA of thousands of dogs through the use of whole genome sequencing.

The TF has demonstrated that leadership, partnership, and a commitment of its membership are indeed one answer to the question of how to remedy our shortage of veterinary specialists.

Anita M. Migday, DVM, MS
President
Ira C. Kaplan, DVM, MS
Advisory Council
Theriogenology Foundation
Pike Road, Ala

1. Cima G. Specialists in short supply. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2018;253:964-968.

Specialty diets and heart disease

The recent *JAVMA* News story¹ about a possible link between certain specialty diets and heart disease in dogs reminds us that just because a food is sold commercially does not necessarily mean it is safe. While there continues to be discussion regarding the merits of various types of diets for companion animals, it is important to remember that

numerous commercial diets have been recalled for reasons ranging from potential bacterial contamination to possibly high amounts of thyroid hormone or contamination with pentobarbital.² Nutritional

guidance for our patients and their owners is complex and requires careful and reasoned consideration by veterinarians.

Lori D. Leonard, DVM
Concord, Va

1. Cima G. Unusual pet diets may be linked to heart disease. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2018;253:256.
2. AVMA. Animal food recalls and alerts. Available at: www.avma.org/News/Issues/recalls-alerts/Pages/pet-food-safety-recalls-alerts.aspx. Accessed Oct 11, 2018.