

Sunday Column – The Cat Problem
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I'm pretty sure there is nothing more controversial in companion animal welfare than the problem of unowned cats. These guys are everywhere and from what I can tell there are two distinct, diametrically opposed, human responses to them.

One camp wants to take care of them and will go to great lengths to provide clean water, food, and shelter for an adopted colony. If this individual has enough money, and access to an affordable veterinary clinic, he or she will have the cats spayed or neutered. If the cats are not altered these compassionate caregivers will find themselves tending an ever-growing herd of felines.

When you consider that a pair of adult cats can produce up to 3 litters annually of 3 – 5 kittens each, and that their kittens will do likewise, it doesn't take any time at all before they are eating you out of house and home. Your neighbors will call animal control and your family members will contact adult protective services. This can get seriously out of hand very quickly and I've spoken to more than one otherwise rational person who is in a financial fix they can't see a way out of.

There is another faction who experience unowned cats as annoying, or worse. They want the government to do something but don't want to get into the details of what that might entail. Of course not, because the "go to" for local government is trap and kill, and who wants to claim they are a proponent of that?

I've written over the past two years about Columbus, Georgia and the Community Cat Project funded by Best Friends Animal Society since August, 2014. The program has been carried out through Columbus Animal Care and Control and the funding will come to an end in August, 2017. PAWS Humane is now working out a plan to carry it forward and we just ended two days of meetings with Best Friends to discuss the transition.

Our vision of a no-kill community requires that we find a way to continue this program which alters 2,000 cats each year. This has cut animal control cat intakes by more than half and reduced the euthanasia rate to below 10%.

Most of the cats taken in are returned to where they came from. Cats generally do not thrive when placed in unfamiliar territory. Some special circumstances require that they be placed as barn cats but this is a last resort. Some of the cats are quite adoptable and will be rehomed through one of the shelters in Columbus.

Last Thursday the O-A News published a letter to the editor written by a frustrated citizen about "feral cats" in his neighborhood and a decline in wildlife. Feral cats can be problematic in various ways and I understand the gentleman's concern.

The argument against trap and kill is that it doesn't work. Biologists claim that any given geographic area has a "carrying capacity", the number of animals the available resources will support. If you eliminate the cats entirely new cats will move in and/or new litters will take the place of the missing cats.

A scientific study published in 2011 concerned street dog populations in China. They found that the culling rate would have to be about 10 times the spay/neuter rate to have an effect equal to trap-neuter-release.

On the other hand, community cat projects work if they are targeted and paced to address one colony at a time by altering 90% of each colony before moving on. This approach begins to reap rewards immediately though it takes a sustained multi-year effort to get to a point where on-going maintenance is all that is required.

We have a choice. Most of us don't want large populations of unowned cats in our neighborhoods. Some don't want the nuisance factor. Others don't want to see them suffer. There is a humane solution that works if we're willing to invest the time and money.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.