

## ON THE POSITIVE SIDE

### Dealing with the feral cat problem

By Joe Miele

Posted: 08/23/2009 12:00:00 AM MDT

Communities nationwide are becoming aware that the old "catch and kill" approach to feral cat control has failed to reduce cat populations nearly everywhere it has been tried. After a relatively small number of cats are caught and killed at taxpayer expense, the population soon returns to previous levels when the remaining cats resume breeding litter after litter.

There is a solution to this problem called Trap, Neuter, Return - TNR for short. As part of a TNR program, feral cats are humanely trapped and brought to a veterinarian, where they are spayed or neutered, vaccinated against disease, and "ear tipped" (the surgical removal of the top of a cat's left ear) for identification.

The cats are then returned to the area where they were trapped to be cared for by volunteers who feed, provide shelter, and monitor the health of the cats. TNR'd cats no longer breed, they are no longer at risk of contracting or passing along disease, and they sometimes become friendly enough to be adopted.

A perfect example of a feral becoming a happy house cat lies with "Pretty," a cat I took out of a feral colony and brought into my home. Since not accustomed to handling as a feral and leery of humans, Pretty was trapped for spay surgery and vaccinations and returned to her colony.

Little by little, Pretty became friendly. She began showing interest in people by "talking" and by rubbing into her caregiver's leg. Soon she was asking to be petted and scratched, and before long she was jumping into her caregiver's lap, curling up, and falling asleep. After living outdoors in her feral colony for five years, Pretty became a happy and healthy lap cat who slept in bed with me every night before moving on to her permanent home.

Many people who do not understand TNR, believe the program will harm the local bird population or that it will somehow increase the number of cats in the community. Both assumptions have been proven false.

According to an article published by the National Wildlife Foundation, the greatest risk to bird populations is not cats, but human development (Defenders of Wildlife, spring 2003). In fact, the article specifically states that cats are not having any known effect on the population size of any continental bird species.

TNR has also been scientifically proven to reduce cat populations when other methods have not. A study published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association followed a TNR program on a Florida college campus over the course of 11 years and determined that the population had decreased by 66 percent by the end of the study (Levy, Julie K., David W. Gale, and Leslie A. Gale. Evaluation of the Effect of a Long-Term Trap-Neuter-Return and Adoption Program on a Free-Roaming Cat Population. Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association 2003, 222(1): 42-46.)

Fewer feral cats are good for the community, good for the local wildlife population, and good for those who care for the cats. Feral cats are a fact of life in Las Cruces and through TNR their lives can be managed in a humane and responsible way.

Las Cruces should embrace TNR as a humane and cost-effective way to reduce feral cat populations in both the short and long term, and recognize that it is the only method of feral cat management that has been scientifically proven to work.

To learn more about feral cats and feral cat management, visit the Web site of F-Camp at <http://www.nmsu.edu/~fcamp/> or Alley Cat Allies at [www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org).

Joe Miele is a Las Cruces resident and an advocate for both wildlife and feral cats.