

On the Positive Side

How do we deal with stray cats?

By Dr. Judy Long For the Sun-News

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Those thin, swift, shadowy forms that flash through our yards or lurk under the cars in our neighborhoods: Are they "feral," "stray," "roaming cats" or just vermin? The whole range of terms appeared at a recent Members & Friends meeting of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico.

The term "stray" has an optimistic connotation to me. These may not be eternally homeless cats, just ones that are unintentionally and temporarily outdoors when they should be indoors. Bad luck for them, though. If they are picked up by Animal Control, they are taken to the Animal Services Center. Even where the cat is a "stray" rather than a feral, pet owners often fail to reclaim their animals from the ASC and they are euthanized. The kill rate for cats is much higher locally than for dogs, and has increased since 1989, when data were first compiled.

The term "feral" is usually taken to mean wild animals, unable to be domesticated. Whether that is accurate or not, these ownerless cats are governed by local statutes that forbid citizens to feed, vaccinate or spay/neuter the neighborhood strays unless you commit to providing a permanent home for them. As cat-lovers know, veterinarians strongly advise making all cats indoor cats. The means, cat-lovers, adding the hungry visitors permanently to your pet census. It is illegal to maintain them, in better condition, in their neighborhood habitat. In extreme form, "natural" cat colonies may be hoarding situations in the making. And we know that's not a good outcome.

An exception to the state law is the sanctioned FcaMP program on the NMSU campus, a stunning success story for cat lovers. It is a Trap-Neuter-Return program following the models across the U.S. and India. Michel Corella, the director of the program, reports that in 2002 there were 200 to 250 cats living wild on campus. This year's count is 75. Only one litter was born this year. These free-roaming cats are exceptionally healthy, since all receive vaccinations, veterinary treatment and, of course, spaying or neutering.

The cat population on campus has actually declined during the time records have been kept. Although Corella concedes that some cats from outside the colony may be attracted to this lush habitat, they don't add to the overpopulation problem because the cats in the colony are all spayed or neutered.

If NMSU's cat colony is a shining example, there are many counter-examples. In many neighborhoods in Las Cruces, unowned cats hunt, dig, yowl, spray, mate, breed and fight. These are colonies, too, and their fate is unenviable. Lacking a census or records of free-roaming cats, it is impossible to estimate their numbers or track their lives (and deaths).

Ellie Choate of Animal Control is an expert on the negative side of free-ranging cats. She sees a city-wide infestation of cats that can be not just hungry but sick or aggressive. Responding to complaints, Animal Control picks up stray cats and takes them to the Animal Services Center.

In an earlier column, I asked, "When is a rescue?" If you feed stray cats, you are an outlaw according to the official position. You may also be enabling the cat population explosion. You preserve life by preventing starvation, but the animals you feed are still exposed to illness, pregnancy or death by predation, cars or poison.

The pressures of animal overpopulation cast a shadow over ownerless cats, whether we call them strays, feral or free-roaming. Cats, besides being beautiful, intelligent, loving and worthy of adoration, are fertile. A future column will explore the spay-only proposal that is currently receiving a good deal of discussion, concentrating on females exclusively since they are the ones bearing kittens.

Are there other options? Give it some thought, and contact me at Pipsqueak2@comcast.net.

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