Trap-Neuter-Return: How to Manage a Feral Cat Colony

Humane Society University

COURSE INTRODUCTION

Welcome

Welcome to the world of working with feral cats! Although these cats have been around for centuries, the study of their behavior and the development of methods to control their populations is a relatively new field in animal welfare. After taking this course, you may be one of the first in your community to learn in depth about feral cats and feral cat management. You will be better able to help both the cats and the people they live among.

This course is designed to give you a strong working knowledge of Trap-Neuter-Return, commonly known as "TNR." Whether you're concerned with one backyard or an entire neighborhood, TNR holds great promise for effectively limiting feral cat reproduction and gradually lowering the cats' numbers. In addition, nuisance behavior, such as yowling and odor, are significantly reduced by the neutering. The returned cats are looked after and allowed to live out their lives in a manner often most suitable to their feral nature. When properly implemented, TNR is a win-win for the cats and the community.

Lesson 1: FERAL CATS AND "TNR"

What Is a "Feral" Cat?

Although they may look exactly like tame, domestic house cats, ferals are far different from your average pet – an important point to grasp from the outset, especially for safety reasons when attempting to handle them.

Ferals are cats who live outside a typical domestic setting and have reverted to a wild state to some degree. They may be former house cats who were lost or abandoned and forced to fend for themselves, or their offspring. Typically, they live in a tight-knit social group known as a "colony," the size of which will vary depending on how many cats the particular habitat can support and whether the colony is neutered.

Often feral colonies are found in locations where contact with humans is slight, such as abandoned buildings, alleyways, vacant lots, remote parts of parks, warehouses and barns. It's not unusual, however, to also find the cats in more populated areas, such as the backyards of a residential block, the parking lot of a supermarket, the grounds of a prison or jail, or around the clubhouse of a golf course. They are extremely adaptable

animals who can survive almost anywhere if enough food and the most basic of shelter is available.

The vast majority of feral cats are not completely wild because they rely on people for their food and do not subsist by hunting alone. Whether it's a kind soul who leaves food out for them, a dumpster behind a restaurant, the leftovers at a fish market or garbage cans in front of houses, the cats' main food source is usually connected to humans in some manner. That they live at a distance and separately yet remain dependent upon us is what gives feral cats such a unique place in our environment.

Four Factors

The quality of being "feral" is not a black or white thing – instead, cats can be wild to greater or lesser degrees. Four factors combine to determine just how feral a cat is:

Age

In most cases, kittens less than eight weeks old can be readily socialized and reintroduced to domestic life. The ideal age for capturing feral kittens is six weeks old – at that age, they are old enough to eat on their own, but young enough to tame very quickly, usually within a day or two. The older the cat grows beyond infancy, the more his feral nature will develop and the harder it will become to socialize him. It's interesting though that young kittens, even when they swiftly learn to become house cats, will often retain some feral characteristics, such as hypersensitivity to changes in their environment.

Generation

A cat who once lived in a domestic home and was then lost or abandoned will tend to be less feral then her offspring. Even after years of being on her own, she may regain her domestic nature if given enough time and attention. With each subsequent generation born outdoors, the link to the original human home grows weaker and the cats become wilder.

Human contact

The amount of daily contact with people will also play a role in determining how feral a cat will be. A cat who lives in a community garden where people are constantly present and interacting with her - talking, leaving treats, playing - will be more adapted to humans than a cat who makes his home in a back alley where few people ever venture. Some feral cats become so used to certain people, particularly their caretaker, that they will let this chosen person touch them or will rub up against their legs. Be forewarned that such behavior does not necessarily mean they are ready to be house cats – how they behave in their own territory is not always indicative of how they will act once displaced. Even with so-called "friendly ferals," care must be taken to trap and evaluate them outside their territory before reaching any conclusions about how tame they are.

Personality

Each cat is an individual and their personality will factor into how wild they are. I once trapped a female cat who was seven months old, came from a lineage of ferals dating back many years and lived in a remote maze of alleys in the inner courtyard of a block. Yet she quickly warmed up to me and was tamed within a couple of weeks. Keep in mind though that while some feral cats simply like people no matter what, this cat was very much the exception. Normally a cat with her characteristics would tend towards the extreme feral end of the spectrum.

Whatever their degree of wildness, feral cats are usually very social creatures who form strong bonds to their colony mates, defying the stereotype of the cat as an aloof, solitary creature. Their ties to each other can be deep and complex. In the very first colony I ever worked on black cat (pictured above) are always together. Except for one winter when Patches mysteriously disappeared. During her absence, another female in the colony, Fearless, took over A, two cats have been a couple for over five years – Patches the calico and Apollo the big pollo's affection and became his constant companion instead. At the onset of spring, Patches suddenly came back covered with soot – the result of her residing in an apartment building for the season and traveling up and down a chimney to raid unsuspecting homes for food! Upon Patches' return, Apollo took up with his long-time mate again, leaving Fearless to her own devices.

Stop and Consider

Are there any feral cat colonies near where you live? If so, have you observed how the cats interact with one another, and with people? Do any of the cats share special bonds with one another? Are they very feral or closer to a domestic state?

What is TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return)

The TNR approach involves trapping the cats in a feral colony, having them neutered, marked for identification and vaccinated for rabies, and returning them to their original territory. A caretaker then provides regular food and shelter and monitors the colony over time for newcomers and any potential problems that may arise.

Ideally, all the cats in the colony will be caught and fixed and every effort should be made to do so, even if they can't all be trapped at once. Caretaking a feral colony is made much easier when the neutering rate is 100 percent. Otherwise, that one female you didn't get may keep having litters of kittens. Still, getting most of the adults fixed will at least temporarily stabilize and improve the situation.

The minimum veterinary intervention upon capture includes spay/neuter, "eartipping" and rabies vaccinations. Eartipping is a procedure where a quarter inch off the tip of the left ear is removed in a straight line cut. It is the only reliable method known for identifying a neutered feral, as will be discussed at length in Lesson 7.

Whenever possible, kittens young enough to be easily socialized should be removed from the colony along with friendly adults who are clearly former domestics and can be re-homed. Removing adoptable cats immediately reduces the size of the feral population (a primary goal of TNR) and gives the removed cats a chance at longer,

safer lives. That said, if foster resources are not available, the TNR of the colony should not be delayed. A mistake well-meaning caretakers sometimes make is to devote all their time initially to rescuing kittens and abandoned adults and finding them homes, believing this should take priority over getting the colony fixed. As a result, more kittens are born in the interim, the caretaker's resources become drained and the TNR may never happen. A better approach is to go ahead right away with getting the colony neutered and to rescue as many kittens or friendly adults that resources available at the time allow. This approach provides the greatest benefit to the most cats in the long-term.

Following surgery and a recovery period lasting usually two to three days, the ferals are returned to their territory. They must be brought back to the location where they were trapped and not released elsewhere – ferals are extremely tied to their surroundings and will flee in search of them if placed somewhere new without a proper relocation effort having been made. To relocate ferals safely, two to three weeks of confinement in the new territory is required, as discussed in Lesson 8.

While less dramatic then the trapping phase, after-care is the key to success of any TNR project. The cats will continuously need food and shelter and should be provided these basic necessities in as consistent a manner as possible. Moreover, many things will happen over the years of the cats' lives, such as new unaltered cats occasionally showing up, injuries or other health issues, conflicts with neighborhood residents and the like. When a caretaker is present to address these matters, the cats are more likely to lead a healthier and safer life than if they are left on their own. A caretaker who watches for new cats will also help sustain the gradual reduction in the colony's size over time through attrition.

Advantages of TNR – Colony Level

Trap-Neuter-Return has many benefits when all or almost all of the cats in a colony are neutered:

Population stabilization - The size of the colony stabilizes as new litters are either eliminated or greatly reduced in number. Gradually, if newborns or newly arrived friendly strays are promptly removed from the colony as they appear, the number of cats will decline over time.

Noise reduction - A common complaint about feral cats is their high-pitched screeching in the middle of the night, which can disturb the sleep of an entire residential block. Most of this noise is the result of mating or fighting – behaviors which are eliminated or greatly lessened after neutering. Not that you won't hear a good snarl once in a while, but not to the point where it becomes a constant nuisance.

Foul odors reduced - The noxious odor often associated with the presence of feral cats in an area is caused primarily by unaltered males spraying to mark their territory. Testosterone mixed in the urine is responsible for the powerful smell. Neutering stops the cat's production of testosterone and, a few weeks after the surgery, any remaining

testosterone has cycled out of the cat's system and the odor is eliminated. In my experience, most male cats stop spraying completely after they're altered, but even if they don't, the "I can't even use my own backyard" smell is gone.

Less visibility – Once mating behavior is eliminated, the cats tend to roam much less and stick closer to home base where food and shelter is supplied. As a result, they become a less visible presence in the area and are less likely to sustain fatal accidents with cars.

New cats are kept out – Feral cats tend to resist the intrusion of new cats into their territory. The degree to which they keep out newcomers is a function of the size of their food supply and territory. If they have a small territory and are fed only as much as they need, colony cats are highly motivated to guard their small space and limited food supply from newcomers. On the other extreme, if only a few cats inhabit a large space and are provided unlimited food, they may be more willing to allow new cats to join them.

Rodent control – Cats deter rodents, more by their scent than by hunting. Feral cats' best friends are often the superintendents of buildings or managers of warehouses because these people know the choice is cats or rats and prefer the former. Typically, someone will bring a cat or two into a rodent-infested situation in to alleviate the problem. However, new problems arise when the cats proliferate. With TNR, the cats get to stay, the nuisance problems from feline overpopulation are eliminated and rodent control is maintained.

Improved community relations - When a feral cat colony is out of control, with litters of kittens continually recurring and noise and odor a real complaint, neighborhood residents often become hostile towards both the cats and anyone they believe is helping perpetuate the situation, such as feeders. When TNR is implemented and its advantages realized, the caretaker becomes an asset to the community instead of an enemy and the cats are better tolerated.

Failed Alternative: Trap and Remove

Perhaps the greatest advantage of TNR when it comes to controlling the population growth of feral cats is that, in most instances, all other known methods have historically failed. It's important when you're advocating for TNR to know why it may be the only practical way to resolve a feral cat overpopulation crisis.

Removing feral cats as a means of solving the problems associated with them certainly has the appeal of simplicity. What would stop overpopulation and nuisance complaints faster than just taking away all the cats? But while in theory this may sound plausible, in reality removing feral cats almost never works to eliminate their presence. Here's why:

The vacuum effect

Feral cat colonies spring up in certain locations because the habitat is suitable for their survival. If shelter and food adequate for at least their bare subsistence was not available, the cats would not be there.

Feral colonies usually exist side by side throughout a neighborhood or area. When one colony is completely removed from a site but the habitat is left unaltered, a vacuum of unutilized food and shelter is left behind. Migration from adjacent colonies is the inevitable result and soon new cats replace the old. This "vacuum effect" was first observed by wildlife biologist Roger Tabor in his extensive studies of London street cats, recorded in *"The Wild Life of Domestic Cats*."

The phenomenon of new cats moving in can happen very quickly. I was once involved in the spay/neuter of a 35 cat colony that lived in a bungalow community. On the day of surgery, when all the colony cats were being fixed, new cats from adjacent blocks started showing up, tentatively exploring the vacated grounds. They left when the colony cats were released a few days later.

The vacuum effect might be avoided if, upon the removal of the colony, the habitat was altered to also remove the food and shelter. This is extremely difficult to do in practice. Shelter can take the most meager of forms – a shed, a hole in a wall or tree, a broken window leading into a basement, some pallets piled high, etc. Removing food sources is even harder and requires constant oversight. All it takes to create one is a person walking by, spotting a cat and continually leaving out food. Trying to change habits when it comes to sealing dumpsters and disposing of trash bags is also difficult.

<u>Overbreeding</u>

Trapping all the cats in a colony requires patience and persistence. Practitioners of trap and remove efforts – whether animal control officers, private extermination companies or private property owners – rarely have the time, resources, commitment or knowledge to successfully trap and remove 100 percent of a colony. Instead, trap and remove attempts typically involve laying out a number of traps, waiting a few hours at most, then carting away whoever was caught.

Not surprisingly, some cats are almost always left behind. These remaining cats now have less competition for the food and shelter provided by the habitat. As a result, a higher percentage of their kittens are likely to survive than when the colony was fully inhabited. This "overbreeding" continues until the colony again reaches its natural population cap, which is the number of cats the habitat's available food and shelter can support.

<u>Abandonment of domestic cats & lack of monitoring</u>

Feral cat colonies originate with lost or abandoned and sexually intact domestic cats. Abandonment of cats is unfortunately an ongoing problem which isn't likely to end any time soon. Many abandoned cats were dumped because they reached sexual maturity and began displaying the problem behavior associated with unneutered cats, including spraying to mark territory or yowling.

These cats wander until they either die or find a suitable habitat where they can survive. A habitat where a feral cat colony was just removed will offer suitable refuge, allowing sexually intact and abandoned cats to begin the reproductive cycle anew.

An advantage of TNR is the presence of a caretaker to watch for newly arrived cats and either remove them for adoptive placement or at least ensure they get neutered and don't reproduce. Trap and remove efforts rarely leave this kind of monitoring system behind. Consequently, removed cats, if they are not replaced by new ferals, are eventually replaced by lost or abandoned cats.

Alienation of caretakers

Trap and remove efforts, especially if the cats' fate is euthanasia, are usually conducted against the wishes of the cats' caretaker - the one person most needed to guarantee the success of the trapping. The caretaker knows how many cats there are, their habits, their hideouts, their feeding pattern. She controls their food source and, by not cooperating, can thwart attempts to make the cats hungry enough to enter baited traps. Trying to trap cats when their caretaker is actively opposing the effort is very much an uphill struggle. TNR, in contrast, by allowing the cats to live, transforms the caretaker into a willing population control worker and makes it reasonably possible to capture all the cats and get them altered.

Insufficient animal control resources

Few municipalities, especially larger urban ones, can devote the manpower needed to remove a substantial percentage of the feral cats living in the community. For example, in New York City, there are at least tens of thousands of feral cats by even the most conservative estimates, and fourteen full-time animal control officers. Even if every one of them devoted all their working hours to capturing feral cats, it would have little effect. Considering that this undermanned force has numerous more pressing issues to deal with at any moment, the impracticality of attempting the task is apparent.

Even in smaller communities with one or two animal control officers and perhaps a couple of hundred feral cats, it's not realistic to expect these officers to be able to devote the time and effort required to trap enough cats to get ahead of the reproductive curve. As discussed earlier, volunteers are not going to join a trap and remove program in sufficient numbers to fill in the gap.

All of these factors may be operating together to defeat a trap and remove attempt – the vacuum effect of neighboring ferals migrating into emptied territory, the overbreeding of colony cats not captured, the re-supply of feral colonies by newly lost or abandoned cats, the lack of cooperation from caretakers, and the lack of adequate animal control resources. In light of this, it's hardly surprising the trap and remove approach has historically failed to curb feral population growth.

Communities that do trap and remove typically see constant annual levels of both complaints and number of cats captured. This reveals that all that's being achieved is

turnover – new feline faces, but not fewer. A successful control program, by gradually reducing the feral population, would see falling levels over time.

Stop and Consider

If trap and remove has been the most prevalent method practiced in recent decades for controlling feral cats, what does the current feral cat overpopulation crisis say about its effectiveness? How would educating the community about the advantages of TNR help bring about a change in approach?

Failed Alternatives: Feeding Bans

As with trap and remove, feeding bans may at first glance appear to be a simple means of ridding an area of feral cats. No food, no cats, is the thinking. Once again, however, the truth is far more complex.

Number one, feeding bans are almost always unenforceable. Caretakers, driven by compassion for their homeless wards, are a most determined breed. They will risk losing their jobs, losing their homes and incurring civil and even criminal penalties in order to prevent their cats from starving. I've seen work situations where feeding bans were combined with video surveillance of feeding sites and severe penalties threatened for violations, and the ban still didn't work. The employees simply left food inconspicuously in other areas when no one was watching. I also know of one caretaker who was denied access to a colony which lived on the second floor of an abandoned building. She made balls of cat food, placed them in her freezer to harden them, and then threw them up to the cats. You can't keep a good feeder down!

What feeding bans do accomplish is a tremendous amount of conflict. The community becomes divided into cat-lovers and cat-haters. Neighbors spy on neighbors, residents move out of towns or leave jobs rather than face the choice of watching animals starve or getting jail time or fired for feeding them. Co-op board meetings become scenes of constant warfare, etc.

But even if a feeding ban could be enforced, it still probably wouldn't work. Feral cats are extremely territorial and will not wander off to the next block or neighborhood or town in search of food. Instead, as they grow increasingly desperate, they encroach further into the territory they do know – getting into offices, basements, garages, and so on. Because they are malnourished, they are more susceptible to disease and parasites, especially fleas. So as they probe deeper into the riskier "human" sections of their territory, they cause infestations of fleas where people are living or working. In addition, cats can live for weeks without food and continue to reproduce during this time.

A feeding ban makes the situation worse, not better. Community conflict and suffering among the cats may rise, but the population remains.

Stop and Consider

If solving feral cat problems was as simple and easy as imposing a feeding ban, why would there be so many feral cat problems?

Failed Alternatives: Rescue and Socialize

Some well-meaning people believe feral cats should be removed from the streets, socialized and adopted out into homes. This “rescue” model may have worked well when there were only a small number of cats living on their own and most of them were recently abandoned and still friendly. Those days, if they existed, are over. Most of the cats outdoors now are feral and unadoptable and number in the millions. Trying to change them into house cats is not an effective form of population control in the current circumstances. Socialization of a feral beyond kittenhood requires training and a great deal of time and effort. Even then, the outcome is uncertain. There are too many cats to make rescue a global solution to feral cat overpopulation.

As a caretaker, at some point you’ll likely be confronted with “Why don’t you take the cats away?” or “Why don’t you stop feeding them?” or “Why aren’t you finding them good homes?” Your understanding of the “whys” will help you be a more effective advocate. TNR does not always make sense to people right away. If you take the time to explain how it works and why it’s often the best alternative, your chances of success in helping both the cats and the community will greatly improve.

Suggested Activities

Find out what organization or agency in your community is responsible for animal control, then:

1. Ask what their policy is on feral cats – trap and remove, do nothing, TNR?

2. Find out, if the data exists, how many complaints a year they receive about stray and/or feral cats, and is the number dropping, steady or rising over time?

3. Find out what is the euthanasia rate for cats at your local animal control shelter or facility (meaning, what percentage of cats entering the shelter are euthanized?) This information is accessible as part of the public record if your shelter is run by a municipality or operates under a municipal contract. It will also be helpful if the shelter can break down the data in terms of reasons for euthanasia - sick, injured, aggressive, lack of space, etc.

4. Find out how much it costs for each cat euthanized? The total amount spent each year?

Additional Resources

Website

http://www.hsus.org/pets/issues_affecting_our_pets/feral_cats/

Scroll down the page to click and view a 16-minutes video giving an overview of feral cat issues

Books

Community Approaches to Feral Cats: Problems, Alternatives and Recommendations by Dr. Margaret R. Slater (The Humane Society of the United States, 2002) http://www.hsus.org/press_and_publications/humane_bookshelf/community_approaches_to_feral_cats_problems_alternatives_recommendations/

The Wild Life of the Domestic Cat by Roger Tabor (Arrow Books, 1983)

Articles

"The Great Australian Cat Dilemma," by Sarah Hartwell (www.feralcat.com)

"The Race to Outpace Feral Cat Over-population," by Linda Kelson (www.feralcat.com)

"Why Feral Eradication Won't Work," by Sarah Hartwell (www.feralcat.com)

Lesson 2: COMMUNITY RELATIONS – THE FIRST STEP IN IMPLEMENTING TNR

The Importance of Building Good Community Relations

People new to TNR often think the first step is to trap the cats. In fact, trapping is one of the last steps. Before the cats are captured, a fair amount of preparation needs to be done if you want the TNR project to go well and the colony to have long-term security afterwards. Rather than trapping, the first matter to address is building good relations within the community where the colony is located.

A particular "community" is defined by the people who live or work within the area the cats reside and who will be impacted by your TNR work. Depending on the scope of your project, the relevant community may be an apartment complex, nursing home, residential block, city park, factory or the entire town.

Attitudes within the community towards the cats will generally be a mixture of tolerant, indifferent and hostile. The dominant attitude will depend on how out of control the situation is. If the overpopulation in a neighborhood is extreme and disturbing nuisance behavior a frequent occurrence, hostility is likely to be high towards both the cats and anyone perceived, rightly or wrongly, as enabling them to be there, such as feeders. If the situation is relatively calm with only a few cats, there may be more tolerance. In most cases that I've been involved with, the reason attention is being paid to the cats is because there are too many and they have begun to negatively impact residents' quality of life. So a fair amount of hostility is to be expected.

The important thing to realize is that you have the ability to shape the community's feelings towards the cats, whatever the dominant attitude is when you first enter the situation. By taking the time to find out how people feel, to listen to their concerns and to educate them on the benefits of TNR, the community can be won over to your side. You will be seen as a problem-solver, not a problem-maker. With the community's support, the work can go more smoothly as residents cooperate and get actively involved. Plus the cats will be better accepted in the long run, after they've been neutered and returned.

Too often, caretakers ignore the fact the cats are part of a community and go about their work with a kind of missionary zeal that brooks no opposition and regards every complaint about the cats as an ill intentioned challenge to be pushed aside. People are seen as obstacles, not potential allies. This approach fosters confrontation and misunderstanding, which naturally can be quite harmful to the cats. Many caretakers first come to me for assistance with tales of battle – they were yelled at by a landlord or threatened with arrest by a store owner, or a fence was put up to keep them out of a lot. Instead of commiserating over the injustice done to them, I ask whether they ever sought permission from the landlord to enter his property and place food or traps there. Was the feeding site kept clean or were plates and cans left strewn about? Was an effort made to explain to neighbors how most of their complaints would be resolved once the cats were fixed? Was any effort made to find out what those complaints might be?

Often the caretaker has not tried to win over the community, but has immediately assumed an "Us vs. Them" attitude. This is a disservice both to the cats and the caretaker. I have found most people facing a feral cat problem will be supportive of TNR once they are educated about it. At Neighborhood Cats, we have persuaded landlords, co-ops, hospitals, businesses, prisons, government agencies, neighborhoods and municipalities to implement TNR. This was accomplished by recognizing the community, and not only the cats, has a stake in the outcome and by discovering and addressing their concerns.

There may be rare circumstances in which a caretaker may reasonably decide to act quietly and under the radar rather than alert others and create potential problems. One example might be if a feeder has had unfettered access to the cats for years in a vacant lot and there have been no significant complaints or hostile actions taken to try to stop him. In that situation, it might be wiser not to dig up property records and find the landowner in order to seek permission. But in most cases, it will be better to have the backing of people who are in a position to shut your project down at a moment's notice and attempt to remove the cats. If you don't ask for support and don't try to educate, you have no chance of gaining the long-term security that comes when those in authority know and approve of what you're doing.

When deciding whether to seek permission from property owners or management, keep in mind that you have the most leverage and best chance of gaining approval **before** the TNR is carried out. If you make your case before the cats are neutered and are still causing all sorts of problems, the person or entity in charge has the most motivation to

support your problem-solving efforts. If you try to get approval for TNR after the fact, then the decision-maker will not have as much reason to try to work with you.

Stop and Consider

If you owned property and someone started neutering the cats and feeding them on your property without your permission, how would you feel about that person? Or if you lived in a neighborhood and one of your neighbors started doing TNR without telling you? Would it make you feel more or less favorably towards the cats?

Local Laws and Animal Control Policies

One of the first things you should do is find out whether there are any local laws pertaining to feral cats in your municipality and, if so, what they are. In many places, this can be done by examining the town's ordinances, either online or at city hall. Look under "animals," "rabies," or the like. Many municipalities won't have any laws that impact ferals and there will be no legislative impediment to performing TNR.

In other townships, however, you may find an ordinance that prohibits the feeding of any animal outdoors. Often this prohibition comes under the Board of Health Code and is intended to deter the presence of raccoons or other potential rabies-carrying species. Or there may be an ordinance limiting to a few the number of animals a resident can "own" and defining "ownership" as regularly providing food. These types of laws effectively make TNR and managing a feral colony illegal, subjecting the cats to seizure and their caretaker to penalties, including fines and jail terms.

Even if there are no laws on the books effectively outlawing TNR, you need to do a little more research because the local Department of Health or animal control agency may have what amount to anti-TNR policies in place. For example, health officials may consider leaving out food for cats to be creating a public nuisance, whether or not the feeding site is kept clean. Or animal control may have a practice of trying to trap and remove any feral cat spotted, neutered or not. The way to find out is call up and ask whether there is an official policy on feral cats and, if so, what it is.

The reason you want to find out about local laws and policies is obvious – you don't want to go through the trouble and expense of TNR'ing a colony of cats, maintain them for a time, and then be charged with some civic offense and have animal control come and take the cats away. If you are facing that possibility, then an effort to change the laws or policies should be attempted first, before anything else is done. In these instances, it is the town council, the mayor, the head of animal control or the Commissioner of Public Health who need to be educated. Once official approval has been gained, the strongest possible foundation for community-wide TNR has been built.

If you need to go the route of changing laws first, then please consult with an organization with experience and success in pro-TNR lobbying. This is very important because it is not always apparent how to get the results you want. Organizations to consult may include a nearby feral cat group that got their town on board, a feral-friendly humane society or SPCA, or an organization such as Neighborhood Cats

(www.neighborhoodcats.org) which can provide advice and resources. One resource to review and adapt for your purposes is the Neighborhood Cats sample TNR policy presentation, available at www.aspca.org/tnrkit (scroll down the page).

A couple of quick tips for TNR advocates – focus on the population control aspect of TNR and its ability to reduce the number of cats. Don't try to persuade public officials with arguments that TNR is humane and the cats have a right to their lives and territory. Public officials will care much more about the impact of the cats on the community, not so much on the cats themselves. A second tip, if you are meeting resistance, is to propose a pilot project rather than demand a complete change in the law. Then, if they agree, make sure the pilot succeeds!

If you are not facing any prohibitive ordinances or policies, then it's a judgment call whether to seek municipal support before proceeding. If you believe no one in local government will ever care if you neuter and maintain a feral cat colony, then it might be reasonable to just do it and not stir the soup. Likewise, even when there are prohibitive laws, sometimes animal control or the agency entrusted with animal control responsibilities will realize TNR is helpful and have an informal practice of looking the other way. Here too, you need to consider whether to leave well enough alone.

If you are performing TNR in a legal vacuum – no laws or policies for or against - the day may come when municipal officials begin to take notice and show an interest in feral cat policies. Prepare for that day by documenting your work – including vet records and colony tracking sheets – and be able to prove the benefits of TNR. Nothing persuades more than success in practice rather than merely in theory.

Stop and Consider

If you wanted to change a local ordinance in your town, how would you begin to go about it? Would you first talk to the officials in charge of carrying out the law? Meet with your city councilmember? Speak at a monthly city council meeting?

Techniques for Mobilizing Community Support

Start by simply gathering information. If you're dealing with a neighborhood colony, for example, walk around and talk with anyone who might have knowledge of the cats. This is a method particularly suited to densely populated areas like Manhattan where people are easily encountered going about their day. I'll talk to doormen, superintendents of buildings, store owners, people standing on the sidewalk and observing the cats, parking lot attendants, residents sitting on the steps of their buildings, the closest veterinarian – anyone who might be acquainted with the felines. The idea is to get as much information as possible: "How do you feel about the cats? Do you know who feeds them? If so, when, where and how often? How many cats are there? How did the situation start? Has anyone done anything in terms of rescue or removal?" The more you learn, the better your plan of action will be.

If you come across someone friendly, try to get their contact information or give them yours – you never know down the road when you might need their help, even if it

involves finding out whether they've seen a particular cat. Stay alert for volunteers who might help feed or trap, or others who will donate food or money. It's always better if you have others to share the work of caretaking. That way you don't become overburdened and the cats have a stronger support network.

During this "get acquainted" phase, have literature on hand, such as a one page flyer that describes TNR, its benefits ("no more kittens, noise, odor; continued rodent control") and your plan to organize a project, plus your contact info. Hand it out and post it throughout the area. Refer people to informative websites so they can learn more on their own. If you can, make up business cards. Dress neatly and businesslike – the more professional you appear, the better received your message will be.

In many cities, there are neighborhood organizations such as community boards or block, town or village associations. They tend to meet regularly and be open to the public. Go to one of the meetings, calling up ahead of time to get the cats on the agenda. Then make a brief presentation, ask for help and bring a signup sheet for volunteers which lists possible tasks, such as trapping, providing holding space (like a garage), feeding, or providing intelligence about the cats' whereabouts.

You can also hold your own "cat meeting." Post flyers around the area announcing a meeting at a local coffee shop. Invite "everyone concerned about the stray cat problem in our neighborhood." You want residents unfavorably disposed to the cats to come as well as those who might help you. The chance to hear them out and educate them on TNR could result in an unexpected ally, or at least a more tolerant attitude. Leading community organizations such as churches or civic groups can be approached for support, as well as the offices of local government officials (assuming all is well with your local laws and policies).

Try to make appointments with co-op boards, landlords, superintendents, management of buildings or workplaces – anyone whose permission you need or who has the ability to make your work easier or more difficult. Be especially prepared at these types of meetings to talk about how TNR will improve the current situation and why other methods won't work.

One technique for mobilizing community support is to write a letter describing your TNR plan and get a copy to everyone in the neighborhood; you can either mail it or slip it under doors. An example of a "community appeal" letter can be downloaded from the Neighborhood Cats website. Go to www.neighborhoodcats.org/info, look under "Community Relations," then click on the download for the sample letter.

Undoubtedly, you will think of more ways to reach out and educate. The main thing is to realize TNR is not only about working with the cats. Ferals are a community problem and require a community solution.

Dealing with Hostility

As mentioned, an effort to perform TNR is often started only after a situation is in crisis. The population has grown too large and the amount of nuisance behavior has crossed

over the line. In these circumstances, there's a good chance you'll be met by a lot of angry people when you first come along and start talking about working with the cats, especially when you advocate letting them stay. How you handle this hostility may determine the cats' fate. If you get angry back and argue, you will immediately create enemies and be labeled a fanatic. On the other hand, if you listen patiently and try to understand people's frustrations, the hostility can be diffused and the same people can be educated.

You wouldn't want to be woken up late every night by yowling, deprived of the use of your backyard by foul odors or constantly finding litters of kittens under your porch. These are legitimate problems and few people are familiar with TNR and know how to resolve these issues. You have to be the messenger who says, "Yes, you're right to be upset and want this to stop, and I can help you do it. Here's how."

There will be times when people won't accept your approach no matter how hard you try. In these cases, keep the lines of communication open. Sometimes, unfortunately, people have to find out for themselves that removing feral cats rarely works. I worked on one project where a large unneutered feral colony lived on the grounds in the back of a nursing home. Despite the affection of many employees for the cats, management decided to try to get rid of them and hired an extermination company to trap and take them away. The exterminators only caught a few victims and the problems with the colony as a whole continued unabated. After this costly failed effort, management was receptive to trying TNR, which did end up solving the problems.

Poisoning Threats

Hostility towards the cats sometimes reaches the point where the danger of poisoning arises. You may find it difficult to get law enforcement involved at this stage, but you can still take steps to stop or prevent it by distributing "poisoning posters" around the area. For a sample poisoning poster, go to http://www.neighborhoodcats.org/info, look under "Community Relations" and download the sample poster. The poster offers a $1000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of anyone poisoning cats. It accurately states that in New York poisoning is a felony and punishable by a prison term and substantial fine. Finally, it lists the phone numbers of Neighborhood Cats and local humane law enforcement. We advise caretakers to print the poster out on bright pink paper and plaster it all over the affected neighborhood, leaving an extra copy or two in front of the suspect's residence, if there is one. The poster accomplishes two things: first, it lets the poisoner or would-be poisoner know that poisoning cats is a serious crime, which is not something many people realize. Second, the poster serves notice that people in the neighborhood are watching. Very few people, no matter how angry they are about the cats, will continue to act when they learn they are committing a felony and others are on the lookout for the perpetrators. Most of the time, putting out the poster will put an end to the poisoning activity or threat. You'll need to research the laws in your area to determine if poisoning is a crime and, if so, whether it's a felony or a misdemeanor and what the penalties are. Then adapt our sample poster. However, the poster should only be used if there is a reasonable fear that poisoning has or will take place. "Reasonable" means someone was overheard making a threat, or cats have

mysteriously died or been seen having convulsions. “Reasonable” is not simply being afraid that people are so hostile that they will may try it. You don’t want to spread the poster and unnecessarily plant ideas or ratchet up the level of conflict.

Keeping Cats Out of Yards and Gardens

Many complaints about feral cats come from homeowners who don’t want the cats in their backyard, digging in their garden, or peeing on their lawn. One possible way to address the problem is to argue the cats have every right to go wherever they want and do as Nature bids. However, that’s not an approach that will accomplish much more than an ongoing feud. Protecting the cats means resolving problems, not perpetuating them.

For the first few years I was caretaking my colony, the cats had an open invitation from a friendly tenant to roam the backyard of his apartment, which he rarely used himself. He even let me put winter shelters there. Then he moved. The new tenant threw away the shelters and planted an elaborate garden. She was none too pleased when the cats, who still favored the site, started ruining her plants.

As a caretaker, naturally my first impulse was to defend the cats. I could have argued with her that the cats were there long before she was and how could she care more about vegetation than these animals. I could have asked how could she fail to appreciate they were all neutered and the situation was far better than it had been a few years back because of my efforts, so she should be thanking me rather than giving me a hard time.

Instead, I put myself in her shoes and saw the garden was very important to her. She had spent a lot of time and money fixing it up and it must have been distressing to see it being destroyed by the cats. She had every right to want to preserve it. So instead of arguing, I expressed sympathy for her problem and offered to try to find a way to solve it. My willingness to work with her helped melt away her initially confrontational attitude and made her more willing to find a mutually acceptable solution. In the end, I bought her a motion-activated sprinkler, described below, and the device succeeded in keeping the cats out of her yard.

There are other possible solutions to similar problems, as also discussed below. But before you can attempt them, you must first respect others’ views and establish a sense of understanding and cooperation.

Motion-Activated Sprinkler

A motion activated sprinkler sends out an infra-red field which you can set the boundaries on, such as covering a backyard. When a cat enters the infra-red field, the sprinkler shoots out a sudden, violent burst of water in the general direction of the feline. It rarely gets them wet, but it does scare them away. In time, the cats become trained not to enter the field and the sprinkler becomes unnecessary. The device (which requires a hose) needs to be introduced in warmer weather so the cats are trained by

wintertime when water freezes and the sprinkler become inoperable. Two devices on the market include:

- "Spray Away," manufactured by Havahart, $89.99*

Online: http://www.havahart.com (search for “Spray Away”)

Phone: 1-800-800-1819

- “The Scarecrow,” manufactured by Contech, $89.00*

Online: http://www.scatmat.com/Products/Scarecrow/

Phone: 1-800-767-8658

*Prices are subject to change.

Scent Repellants

Both naturally-based and chemically-based scent repellants are available. The chemical products contain the active ingredient methylnonylketone, which the manufacturers warn should not be applied to food crops. Reports on the effectiveness of scent repellants are mixed, sometimes working quite well and in other situations, not at all. Repellants should be sprayed around the edges of the yard, the top of fences and on any favorite digging areas or plants.

Naturally-based products include:

-The border plant “Coleus-Canina,” now being marketed as an effective scent deterrent for dogs and cats by Gardener's Supply.

-For protecting gardens or flower beds, common household items may be effective, including the herb rue, either planted or sprinkled in its dry form. Other suggestions for garden areas are orange and lemon peels (cats dislike citrus smells), cayenne pepper, coffee grounds, pipe tobacco, lavender oil, lemon grass oil, citronella oil, peppermint oil, eucalyptus oil, and mustard oil.

-“Havahart's Cat Repellent” uses capsaicin pepper and oil of mustard as its active ingredients. It repels by both taste and odor, has a lemon scent, lasts 7-10 days and needs to be reapplied after rain or new growth. Model 5400/5401; 32 oz. bottle sells for $12.99.*

Online: http://www.havahart.com/cats/straycat_repellent_5400.asp

The most popular chemically-based repellant is:

-“Reppers**” –** this product can be purchased as grains which are placed in a sealed “evaporator” to keep the grains safely enclosed. Or it is available as a spray repellant or in stick form. For more information on the product, go to http://www.reppers.com

*Prices subject to change.

Ultrasonic Devices

These devices emit a high frequency sound annoying to cats and not perceptible to people. The key to their effectiveness is matching the capacity of the device to the size of the area to be covered. A device not powerful enough for the size of the territory won't work. Reports again are mixed, with more success reported in indoor locations than outdoor. These devices can be found at most large outdoor garden stores. Here’s one with an interesting twist:

-“Yard Control Dog and Cat Repeller” - Unlike most ultrasonic devices which emit a constant sound, this one only goes on when activated by an animal entering its infra-red field, thereby saving batteries. It's designed to attach to a wall, fence, stake in the ground, etc. Model P7810; $69.95.* Google the name to find online sources.

*Prices subject to change.

Physical Barriers to Digging

Gardens and flower beds can be protected from digging through a number of means:

-"Cat Scat Mats" from Gardener’s Supply consists of plastic mats that are pressed into the soil. Each mat has flexible plastic spikes and is cut into four pieces. The spikes are harmless to cats and other animals, but discourage excavation. Set of five sells for $14.99.*

-Cover exposed ground with rough surfaced rocks.

-Take branches from a thorny plant, like a Rose of Sharon tree, and lay them on the ground in a lattice-type pattern, then plant flowers and seeds in the openings. Regular lattice fencing used in this way will also discourage digging.

*Prices subject to change.

Make an Outdoor Litterbox

By creating a spot that cats are attracted to because of ease of digging, you can help situate where they choose to go. A regular sandbox will do the trick. Cats will be drawn to the fine sand, which is inexpensive. If you want to get fancier and neater, you can create an outdoor litterbox.

Take a large Rubbermaid storage bin (approximately 40 to 55 gallons in size) and fill it with several inches of regular sandbox sand.

Above the level of the sand, cut open a doorway in one of the bin's short sides with a utility knife, 8 inches by 8 inches.

Cover the bin with its top.

Scoop occasionally and once a month or so, dump and replace the sand. Putting in a couple of pieces of the cats' poop will help get them started.

To be even neater, take the Rubbermaid storage bin with its top on, turn it upside down and cut a doorway (8 in. x 8 in.) in one of the short sides. Place a normal litterbox containing litter inside the bin.

Another suggestion is to place a pile of peat moss (4 feet square, 8 inches deep) in a corner of the yard and replace it once a month or so. It's cheap, easy to handle and dispose of, keeps the smell down, and is far more attractive to the cats than your neighbor's garden.

Fleas

Well fed, healthy feral cats will likely have some fleas on them during the warmer weather, but not to the point where they are infested and constantly scratching. Nonetheless, sometimes the fleas do get to the point of causing problems for human co-habitants of the territory. One method that has proven successful in controlling fleas in an outdoor setting where there is a lawn, foliage or soil is spreading nematodes around the site. Nematodes are tiny worm-like creatures which naturally live in healthy soil and eat flea larvae. Nematodes, in the form of a product called "No Flea," are available from BioControl Systems. Coverage of 1500 square feet costs $21.50.*

*Prices subject to change.

Suggested Activities

1. Research whether your municipality has any laws or policies on feral cats, or that would affect caring for feral cats.

2. If you reside in an area with a feral cat problem, or know of one, call a local meeting to discuss the problem and educate people about TNR.

3. If you're caring for feral cats on your property, ask your neighbors if they're having any problems with the cats. If so, how can you help?

Lesson 3: FOOD and SHELTER

TNR, properly implemented, does not end when the cats are returned to their territory. Long-term maintenance and monitoring of the colony is essential to protect the gains of the initial trapping, both in terms of population control and to ensure the released cats

are provided for as best as possible. This is why Neighborhood Cats has always strongly opposed programs that as a matter of routine release altered feral cats without making any effort to provide caretaking afterwards. There may be times when release without organized after-care is unavoidable, but every attempt should be made to prevent this from happening and it should never become standard procedure.

Two of the most basic functions of a caretaker are providing food and ensuring there is adequate shelter. With a little creativity, this can be done within any budget and in the face of what may appear to be challenging conditions at the site of the colony.

Setting Up a Feeding Station

How and where you feed your colony will largely depend on what kind of access you have to the site. If you are able to enter the site without restriction, then you can set up a covered feeding station in a hidden location and replenish food and water on a daily basis. On the other hand, if access is limited in some manner – it's impractical or not permitted to put out a covered station or you can gain entry only at certain times - then you'll have to compromise and the goal is to come as close to the ideal as possible.

The ideal feeding station will be covered to protect food and water from sun and rain. The photo below depicts one such station. It was built out of wood by a carpenter, so not everyone will be able to duplicate it, but it's informative to know what features it has that make it an excellent structure.

The station is slightly raised off the ground to prevent flooding and has a roof to keep away the rain. As an added feature, the roof is pitched towards the rear so rainwater runs off the back, not the front where the cats enter. The station is also long enough (approximately 30 inches) for the food to be placed in the rear and leave space for a cat to come in and also be sheltered from the elements while eating. The opening is large – one entire side of the "box." A large opening prevents any one cat from going in and deciding he wants to stay and keep everyone else out. Finally, the wood is painted with a latex deck paint and the seams sealed with silicone – this will prevent the wood from rotting and greatly increase the useful life of the station.

Because few of us can call in a carpenter to build something like this, the next best (and much simpler) station can be built using a large storage bin. Best is 40 to 55 gallons in interior space, although smaller ones can be used, too. The best brand is Rubbermaid because they don't crack in extreme cold.

Notice in the top photo above the large opening cut out in the long side (9 in. x 16 in.) and how I left a lip of a few inches at the bottom to prevent flooding. The plastic can be cut by tracing the opening with a box cutter or utility knife, then going over the traced line repeatedly, gently pressing down and cutting a little more deeply into the plastic each time around. Eventually, the knife will slice all the way through. (Be careful and work slowly – the blade is very sharp!)

Instead of the large doorway in the Rubbermaid bin pictured above, another option is to cut two small doorways – one on each of the shorter sides of the bin. Only one small opening could lead to problems with dominance.

The lid of the bin can be easily removed for cleaning and re-stocking. Because the bin is light, you may need to weigh it down on top with a few bricks or heavy rocks.

Inside the station, you can place something as simple as plates or bowls of food and a bowl of water. Another idea is to use automatic feeders and waterers (pictured in the bottom photo above). These gravity-driven devices dispense dry food and water into bowls that automatically refill as they're emptied.

Automatic feeders and waterers come in a variety of sizes, ranging from capacities of 2 to 20 lbs. of dry food, and 2 quarts to 5 gallons of water. What size you should use depends on how many cats are in the colony and how often you can come to refill the dispensers. Weather is a factor, too, because food will spoil faster in hot temperatures. I prefer the smaller sizes myself, especially for the water. It's much easier to tote a gallon of water to the site than five gallons! Also, continually changing the water keeps the dispenser cleaner and the water fresher. Make sure your feeding station is tall and wide enough to accommodate the size of the dispensers you would like to use. Your average storage bin, for example, will not be tall enough to hold a 10 lb. dry food dispenser, although an oversized bin might.

The brand of auto feeders and waters I recommend is "Le Bistro" (pictured above). Le Bistro products are available through KV Vet Supply (go online at www.kvvet.com and do a search for "Le Bistro," or phone: 800-423-8211.). They can also be found at many PETCO stores. KV Vet Supply prices include $11.79* for a five pound feeder (Item No. 83827) and the same price for a 1 gallon waterer (Item No. 83831).

At many colony sites, covered feeding stations and automatic dispensers are not practical – either because the property owner won't allow it, the terrain is unsuitable or anything large left behind would be quickly stolen. In these circumstances, do the best you can. I have access to a vacant lot for feeding my colony, but am not permitted to put out a covered station. So I piled up large rocks in a semi-circle near some bushes to provide at least some protection and I lay a small board on the ground so the cats don't have to stand in mud after it rains. On a daily basis, I put out a bowl of food and dish of water. Other examples of ad-hoc feeding stations include leaning a large board against a wall to create a lean-to, putting the food under a stairwell or other structure or finding a sheltered nook in an alleyway.

Before I had access into my colony's lot, I had to feed through an iron fence. Following the adage of "do the best you can," I bought an arm extender – one of those devices used in stores to grab items off of high shelves – and used it to push the food and water behind some foliage and as far away from the sidewalk as possible, out of arm's reach of prying hands.

In selecting location, ideally the feeding station will be in a spot accessible only to the caretaker and not visible to the public. This protects the cats and makes them feel more secure about going to eat. I've found that hiding the feeding station or spot also has a significant impact on the rate of abandonment. During the years I fed my colony through the fence, leaving the food out for all passing by to see, an abandoned cat would turn up every few months. One time, someone actually left a six month old kitten in a cardboard box by the fence. Another time, a young boy was ordered by his parents to get rid of a kitten he had found, so he let it go at my site, figuring there would be food. While I'm glad these poor creatures ended up in my hands instead of suffering a worse fate, it got to be a bit much. Since I gained access to inside the lot and started hiding the food and water, there has not been a single dumped cat.

If there is no spot at your site that is totally off-bounds to the public, then it's even more important to hide the station as best you can, using boards or boxes, camouflaging with debris, painting any covered station to match the surroundings, etc. And pick as remote a spot as you can under the circumstances.

One last but extremely important point to make about feeding stations – whether you're dealing with the deluxe covered version or the push-bowls-through-a-fence variety, clean up! A common complaint against feral cat feeders is the mess they make. You don't endear yourself to the neighborhood if the feeding spot is a jumble of plates, cans, flip tops, plastic dishes, and whatever else was left behind. On the other hand, if you clean up carefully – and not just the items you personally are responsible for but anything else lying around as well – then you create a positive image for yourself.

*Prices subject to change.

Stop and Consider

Does TNR cause the abandonment of domestic cats, or does the abandonment of cats cause the need for TNR?

Nutrition

Life outside a domestic setting can be physically demanding for cats, especially in colder climates. In addition, ferals are rarely going to receive the same kind of veterinary attention over their lifetimes as their domestic counterparts. Often the best way a caretaker can boost the cats' health and help them cope with their outdoor surroundings is through what they eat.

My recommendation for a caretaker is to feed the best quality food that you can comfortably afford. This takes two important factors into account: (1) that nutrition is important and quality of food matters, but also (2) that your budget is important, too. If a caretaker is feeding 20 cats and relies on Social Security for his income, then it is appropriate for him to purchase large bags of discount dry food. On the other extreme, if a caretaker is feeding a few ferals in her own backyard and can easily afford a top brand wet food, then that would be the ideal way to go.

Good cat food does cost more. The point of discussing how to tell a good quality food from a lesser one is not to imply that only top quality food should be purchased for ferals. Instead, the goal is to give you, the caretaker, the knowledge you need to make the best choice that fits within your budget.

The Ingredients Label

Cats are strict carnivores and require a high protein, low carbohydrate diet. The place to begin evaluating the quality of cat food in terms of meeting these needs is the ingredients label. Ingredients are listed in order of weight – the first listed is the heaviest one present in the food, the last listed is the least.

A serious limitation of the ingredient label is that terms such as "meat by-products" are difficult to evaluate. Meat by-products such as liver, kidney, and lungs have excellent nutritive value whereas other meat by-products such as udder, bones, and connective tissue have poor nutrient availability. “Meal” is often by-products ground together, such as “poultry by-product meal” or “meat meal.” Meal, too, is an ingredient of varying quality – the nutritional value depends on what was ground up, whether it was a human-grade by-product such as liver or something less digestible like bones. An excellent guide to what other common ingredient terms really mean can be found in **Dr. Pitcairn’s Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs & Cats** by Dr. Richard Pitcairn and Susan Hubble Pitcairn (see Chapter 2, “What Do They Really Put In Pet Food?”) Higher quality brands tend to not contain by-products or meal, but will exclusively use whole meats instead. The first ingredients listed on the label will be “chicken,” “beef,” “turkey” and so on. This general rule has exceptions, however, when by-products or meal originate from ingredients of high nutritive value.

Many foods contain carbohydrates in the form of grains such as corn or soybean meal. Carbohydrates can be a source of energy for cats and a healthy cat can digest grain if it is properly processed or cooked and there is adequate protein in the food. However, because cats are strict carnivores, a cat food that relies primarily on grains to provide nutrition will be of lesser quality than one that contains some grain but relies primarily on meats for nutritive value. Watch out for unnecessary sweeteners such as brown rice syrup, molasses or blueberries. These can be fine if they are added to already high quality ingredients, but they can also be used to mask the taste of lower quality ones. And don’t be fooled by lesser quality cat food that “looks” good – those artificial colors and thick sauces are meant to be attractive to you, the consumer, but don’t mean anything in terms of nutritional value for the cat.

Wet vs. Dry Food

As mentioned, ingredients on the cat food label are listed in order of weight. In canned food, the wet weight of a meat product may cause it to be listed among the top ingredients. This moisture (60 to 70 percent of its weight) is removed from the meat in the production of dry food, resulting in the dry form of the meat being listed farther down on the ingredients label. In other words, there may be the same or similar amounts of meat (minus moisture) in a dry food as in a wet food despite the different placements of

the product on the two ingredient labels.

Many nutrients are destroyed in the high temperatures of the baking process to produce dry food (kibble), especially if vitamins and supplements are added before the baking process. This is why higher quality brands add the vitamins and supplements after the baking.

A more difficult question is whether the dry food of a higher quality brand is more nutritious than the wet food of a lower quality. Perhaps a combination would be best. When feeding ferals, however, sometimes dry food is the only practical form to provide. Wet food will freeze quickly in winter and spoil faster in hot weather. In addition, automatic food dispensers use dry food, not wet. If you do need to rely primarily on dry food, do try to supply some wet food now and again as the opportunity presents itself.

Remember when feeding wet food to always take the food out of the can and place it on a plate or in a bowl. Cans have sharp edges which can cut.

Affordable Ways to Improve Nutrition

One easy way to significantly and inexpensively boost the nutritional value of wet food is to add ground beef. Plain hamburger meat is great for cats. The cheapest variety – chuck – is best because it contains the highest fat content, an ingredient cats need. The beef can be mixed in raw if it is very fresh (meaning just put out that day and not browned) or cooked. It is important, however, to mix in one teaspoon of calcium for every pound of meat in order to maintain the proper calcium/phosphate balance in the food. Otherwise, the cats' health may be compromised over time. Calcium can be provided in the form of either calcium lactate or bone meal.

Other nutritious and affordable foods that can be added to canned cat food include steamed broccoli, zucchini or carrots, or cooked chicken, but always take out the bones – they can splinter after being cooked and cause injury. Avoid adding fish (which can also cause urinary problems) or grains such as rice. An excellent, easy-to-make and inexpensive vitamin-mineral supplement can be found on page 55 of **The New Natural Cat** by Anitra Frazier. During times of stress, Vitamin C is an excellent supplement, too, such as during the trapping phase of a TNR project, extreme cold spells in winter or when the cats appear to have upper respiratory infections. An article by Anitra Frazier on how and when to use Vitamin C can be found at this link:

http://www.neighborhoodcats.org/info/nutrition.htm#Vitamin%20C%20to%20the%20Rescue

Tricks for Common Feeding Problems

Here are some suggestions for a few common feeding problems you might encounter:

- Ants

The way to keep ants out of the food is to build a moat they can't cross. Do this by first filling a tray or something similar (such as a flat Tupperware container) with a half an inch or so of water. Then place the bowl of cat food on the tray so it is surrounded by the water. The cats can easily reach the food, but the ants can't.

Another suggestion sent in to us by a caretaker is to use vegetable oil to keep ants and slugs out of food and water bowls. Put a generous amount of oil on a cloth and smear it onto the outside of the bowls. The oil can also be poured directly on dirt, but will stain concrete. Some cats will lick it, but it's safe and may even prevent hairballs. Clean the bowls once the food is gone, so the oil doesn't go bad, and store the bottle somewhere out of the heat and sun. It loses strength when it gets watery or thin.

- Flies

Flies are attracted much more to wet food than dry. In hot weather, when flies are the thickest, don't leave wet food sitting around, but remove it once the cats have eaten. If the cats are not on a schedule where they show up and eat when you arrive, then rely on dry food or feed wet food after dark when the temperature has cooled down.

- Slugs

These snail-like creatures leave a slimy trail behind as they move, ruining cat food that they crawl in. I've found the best way to keep them out of the food bowl is to give them a little food on the side, a foot or so away. Rather than climb up and into the bowl, they'll first go to what's more easily reached on the ground. Also, as mentioned under "Ants" above, you can try smearing vegetable oil onto the outside of the food and water bowls.

- Raccoons

Raccoons are nocturnal and come out to eat primarily when it's dark. If you feed the cats during daylight hours, you should be able to avoid them. If you need to leave food out overnight, however, then it gets more complicated. Raccoons have extremely dexterous paws and can actually pick up and empty an automatic feeder. One idea, though this method is still untested, is build a feeding station out of a large covered storage bin. Cut out two round entrances – one on each of the shorter sides of the bin – and make them just large enough for a cat to enter, that being about six inches in diameter. Place the food on the floor in the middle of the bin. The raccoons might be hesitant to try to squeeze into such a narrow opening and hopefully won't be able to reach in and grab the food.

- Pigeons

Especially in an urban area, a swarm of pigeons can take over a feeding site very quickly, either eating the food themselves or scaring away the cats. The trick is to feed the cats after it starts getting dark when the pigeons go to sleep. This works with any

bird that poses a similar problem.

If you can't feed at night because of your schedule or because you're also dealing with raccoons, then try building the "cat-only" feeding station described above under "Raccoons" and try using it during the day time. It might keep pigeons out as well as raccoons.

- Rain

If you don't have a covered feeding station, there is still a way to keep rain out of the food if you anticipate wet weather. Take a Tupperware bowl, deli dish, or any similar container that comes with a lid. Fill it with the food (wet or dry) but not to the brim. Instead, leave a little empty space below the top edge. Place the container on the ground where you feed and put the lid on upside down. This way, the lid keeps rain out of the container, but the cats can easily push it off after the rain stops and get to the food.

Preventing Water from Freezing

In cold climates, providing ferals with water during the winter can be one of a caretaker's toughest challenges due to freezing temperatures and the necessity of relying on dry food as the staple diet. Fortunately there are many ways to prevent water from freezing or at least slow down the freezing process, as described below. Which method is best for you will depend on your colony's particular circumstances. If the cats live in your yard and you can run an electric cord outside, then an electrically heated bowl will solve the problem. If the cats live in an alleyway some distance away from you, then putting the water bowl inside a Styrofoam cooler might be your optimal choice.

One myth to dispel is that it's better to put out hot water. The mistaken theory is that the higher temperature will delay the time it takes for the water to freeze. In fact, what happens is the higher temperature causes the water to evaporate faster, leaving less water in the bowl and causing what's left to freeze faster. So stick with normal room temperature water.

Electrically heated water bowl

When circumstances allow, which means only the caretaker and/or trusted others have access to the feeding site, this is the ideal solution. A weather-protected cord supplies electricity to the bowl which remains heated at all times and prevents any freezing. The water does tend to evaporate quickly, so the bowl needs to be large (at least one gallon) and re-filled daily. These bowls can also be used to keep wet food from freezing, but the heat will cause the food to dry up quickly.

One product you can try is the "Plaza Heated Bowl" from KV Vet Supply (Item No. 86041; $23.95*). Order online at www.kvvet.com or by phone: 1-800-423-8211.

Solar heated water bowl

As the name implies, the bowl uses solar energy to warm the water. It has a top with a small round opening and was originally designed to provide water for birds in wintertime. The manufacturer, the Happy Bird Corporation, has now come out with a version for small animals called the "Pet Sipper" that is effective at 20 degrees Fahrenheit and above.

For the "Pet Solar Sipper Model 10011," which costs $29.95* with shipping, go to: http://solarsippers.com/animalsipper_std.html

Microdiscs

These discs are nine inches in diameter and can be heated in a microwave oven. They're designed for slipping under a pet's bedding to provide extra warmth during chilly nights. They can also be placed underneath a water bowl and, during frigid conditions, will prevent the water from freezing for two to three hours. They reportedly can be safely heated for up to eight minutes in a 1000 watt microwave, but because microwaves vary in their intensity, be cautious at first or you'll melt them. The disks can also be wrapped in a pillow case or similar cloth and placed inside the cats' shelter to help provide warmth.

It's best to order two – that way you can bring a fresh hot one with you to replace the one you left behind during your last trip to the colony site. The product is called "Snuggle Safe" and is available through PETsMART (Item No. 451284; $19.99*). Order online at www.petsmart.com or check your local PETsMART store to see if they have the item in stock.

Styrofoam cooler

A simple Styrofoam cooler normally used to keep soda or picnic lunches cold during the summertime will help slow the freezing process if the water bowl is placed inside. The coolers usually are white in color, cost only a few dollars, measure approximately two feet long by one foot wide and can be found in most supermarkets or hardware stores, though they are a summer seasonal item. Use a box cutter to cut out a doorway six inches by six inches in one of the shorter sides of the cooler, leaving a lip at the bottom of the cooler to prevent flooding. Place the water bowl at the opposite end of the cooler from the doorway and put the top on, weighing it down if necessary.

Don't use too large of a cooler or the cats may try to use it to sleep in, which would be dangerous. The worst thing for a feral cat health-wise in the wintertime is to get wet and not have a dry place to bed down.

Styrofoam vaccine shipping container

Vaccines are typically shipped to veterinarians and others who order them through mail catalogues in small Styrofoam boxes measuring about 8 inches long by 4 inches wide. This box can turned into an insulated water bowl, which will slow down the freezing process. Cut a round hole in the center of the lid of the box, large enough for a cat to drink out of. Place a plastic bag (like a large Glad sandwich bag) inside the container,

effectively lining the walls, then fill the bag with water through the hole in the top of the box. Make sure the water level is high enough for a cat to be able to sip the water.

An old tire and rocks

This method is used to provide water to horses out in the pasture. Find an old car tire that's been removed from its rim and stuff it full of rocks. Wedge a large bucket in the center opening of the tire and fill with water. Use more than one tire if necessary so that the bucket is completely surrounded. The tire absorbs sunlight and warms the rocks, which then radiate heat and slow down the freezing of the water in the bucket.

The drain from an indoor heating system

Place a large, deep water dish filled with small rocks beneath the drain from an indoor heating system. The water coming out of the pipe will be warm plus the rocks will absorb and radiate heat from the sun.

Place the water bowl near heating pipes located inside a wall

One trick with alleyways is to locate where the heating pipes run inside a building's walls. If you place the water bowl next to this area, the heat will help prevent freezing. One way to find where the pipes are, besides touch, is to see if the cats tend to gather in a particular spot near the wall. If they do, chances are it's because that spot is warmed by a heating pipe.

Deep and wide thick plastic bowls

The type of bowl used will be important. Thick plastic is better insulation than thin plastic or ceramic. Likewise, a dish that is deep and wide will cause the water to freeze more slowly than one that is shallow or narrow.

Add water to the wet food

If the cats come to eat when you arrive, add a tablespoon of water to each of their meals to help them get the moisture they need.

Speaking of wet food, it freezes relatively quickly in cold temperatures because of its high moisture content. Some of the tips mentioned above in regard to water can be adapted to slow freezing in canned food, too, though probably not as effectively. Still, for example, putting a bowl of canned food inside a Styrofoam cooler is better than leaving it unsheltered. One method I've found that works pretty well can be attempted if your cats have good insulated winter shelters, as described in the next section. What I do is put a bowl of wet food inside the shelter, tucked away in a far corner. Even if it then freezes, the cats' body heat will defrost it when they come and stay inside.

However, the same thing should ***never*** be done with water. A water bowl inside a shelter could easily get knocked over or otherwise cause a cat to get wet. A wet cat in

wintertime, especially inside the one place where it's always supposed to be dry, can mean a very sick cat.

*Prices subject to change.

Winter Shelter

Feral cats are perfectly capable of surviving and doing just fine in harsh winter climates if they are provided adequate food and shelter. People whose experience with cats is limited to indoor settings only sometimes don't realize just how adaptable they are. In the Northeast, where I live, the cats' coats begin to thicken in the autumn and by the time it gets cold, their bodies may appear to be much larger than normal because of all the added fur. It is common for me to hear reports of Snow, a large male tabby with a ringed tail in my colony, being mistaken for a raccoon. Male cats are often reported as being pregnant, another indication of how thick their coats can get.

That said, cats still must have a warm, dry place to sleep and be protected from cold, rain, snow or other severe weather. This can be provided without great expense. In constructing winter shelter for ferals, two factors are most important – one, the shelter must be made of material that has strong insulation qualities and, two, air space must be kept to a minimum. Good insulation, such as thick Styrofoam, will trap a cat's body heat, effectively turning the cat into a little radiator. In turn, a minimal amount of air space will make it easier for the trapped body heat to warm the interior of the shelter.

So, for example, a large dog house made of good insulation will not be good winter shelter for a feral cat because there will be too much interior air space for the cat's body to warm. Likewise, a smaller cardboard box will cut down on the interior space, but will not provide sufficient insulation to hold the cat's body heat in. Both good insulation and minimal air space are needed.

Stop and Consider

What kind of shelter do the feral cats in your neighborhood or community have when the winter comes? Is it adequate? Could it be easily improved using the ideas below?

Neighborhood Cats Winter Shelter

This shelter, invented by Karin Hancock of Port Washington, NY, is made from a single two foot by eight foot sheet of two-inch thick hard Styrofoam. The insulating quality of the Styrofoam is excellent while the interior of the shelter has a floor space of 20 by 18 inches and a height of 12 inches. Three or four cats (sometimes even five) can squeeze inside and make it toasty as an oven, even in temperatures way below freezing.

Ideally, a table saw would be used to cut the Styrofoam into the needed pieces, to ensure the edges are straight. Otherwise, however, the only skills needed are being able to cut open a doorway, stick on a couple of linoleum tiles, glue the pieces together and slap on a couple of coats of paint.

Plans for building this shelter, which costs in the range of $20 to $30 for all the materials, are located on the Neighborhood Cats site at this link:

http://www.neighborhoodcats.org/downloads/shelter_plans.pdf

(If you're unable to open the link, you may need to download the software for the Adobe Reader, which is needed to open any pdf file. The software is available for free at www.adobe.com – see the lefthand column of the Adobe home page).

Ashot's Design

Another excellent shelter has been designed by Ashot Karamian of Forest Hills, NY. He lines the interior of a large Rubbermaid storage bin with precisely cut pieces of two-inch thick Styrofoam that are then held together with pressure, not glue. In the summertime, the top piece of Styrofoam can be removed so the shelter won't be too warm for the cats to continue to use. A photo guide showing construction of Ashot's shelters is found here:

http://www.flickr.com/photos/ucl/sets/72157602171198946/show/

A table saw is preferable for cutting the pieces for this design, too.

The CSM Stray Foundation Shelter

This shelter, designed by CSM Stray Foundation of Kew Gardens, NY, can be made without a table saw or any construction skills. It costs in the range of $20 to $30 to build and consists of a large Rubbermaid storage bin with its interior walls loosely lined with one-inch thick Styrofoam.

Materials needed are: an eight foot by two foot sheet of one-inch thick hard Styrofoam, a yardstick, a box cutter or utility knife, and straw, shredded newspaper or other insulating material. Then assemble as follows:

Cut a doorway six inches by six inches in one of the long sides of the storage bin towards the corner *(see photo above)*. To prevent flooding, cut the opening so that the bottom of the doorway is several inches above the ground.

Line the floor of the bin with a piece of Styrofoam, using the yardstick and box cutter to cut out the piece. You don't need an exact fit, but as close as you can.

In similar fashion *(see photo below)*, line each of the four interior walls of the bin with a piece of the Styrofoam. Again, perfect cuts are not necessary. Don't make the Styrofoam go all the way up to the top of the bin, but leave a uniform gap of at least three inches between the top of these Styrofoam "wall pieces" and the upper lip of the bin. There needs to be room for an interior Styrofoam "roof" to fit.

Cut out a doorway in the Styrofoam where it is lined up with the doorway that has been cut out already in the storage bin. Trace the outline of the doorway on the Styrofoam first before cutting.

Stuff the bottom of the bin with straw or other insulating material to hold the Styrofoam interior wall pieces in place.

Cut out a Styrofoam "roof" to rest on top of the Styrofoam interior wall pieces *(see photo below)*. Again, the cut does not have to be exact.

Cover the bin with its lid.

This shelter is easy to clean by taking off the lid and the Styrofoam roof. It's also lightweight and may need to be weighed down. A flap over the doorway is optional. Catnip can be sprinkled inside at first to attract the cats.

Styrofoam Packing Crates

Meats are often shipped to stores or individuals in thick white Styrofoam crates. These can be transformed into feral cat winter shelters by simply gluing the top on, turning the box upside down and cutting out a doorway in one of the sides. Instructions and a photo guide to making this type of shelter can be found on the website of Animalkind (Hudson, NY):

www.all-creatures.org/ak/feral-shelter.html

Cardboard Boxes & Newspaper

In a pinch, a temporary shelter can be made using two cardboard boxes, one slightly larger than the other. Line the bottom of the larger box with thick newspaper, then put the smaller box inside the larger one. Stuff the empty space between the two boxes with newspaper. Tape the top of the smaller box shut with duct tape, then pile newspaper on top if it. Finally, tape the top of the larger box shut with duct tape, too.

Next, wrap the outer box in plastic – either large trash bags or a plastic drop cloth –and use duct tape to seal the seams and hold the plastic in place. Then cut out a six inch by six inch doorway in one side of the shelter that leads through the two boxes and layer of newspaper. Raise the shelter slightly off the ground and place underneath a tree or bush or something similar to provide further protection against rain and snow. A better and sturdier shelter should then be constructed to replace this one.

Insulating Materials

Contrary to popular belief, it's a bad idea to place blankets, towels or folded newspaper inside a feral winter shelter. These types of materials absorb body heat when a cat lies on top of them and thereby make the cat colder. They only create warmth when somebody is lying underneath them. Good insulating material for the shelter's interior requires the cats be able to burrow into it.

Straw is the best and can usually be found at large gardening stores. Hay has been reported to be problematic at times: it possibly causes nasal sores and allergic reactions and may absorb too much dampness. Stick with the straw if you can. Shredded newspaper will also work. Ellen Perry Berkeley, on page 63 of her book, **Maverick Cats**, describes how she loosely stuffed pillowcases with Styrofoam packing peanuts and placed them in the cats' shelter. When the cats laid down on the pillow cases, the peanuts conformed to their shape, wrapping them in insulation.

Insulating materials like straw and shredded newspaper should be checked periodically and replaced if moist or dirty. If you are not in a position to check after you've put the shelters out, then it's better not to use insulating materials at all.

In extreme cold, lining the interior walls of the shelter, or at least the floor, with a Mylar blanket will provide added heat. Mylar is a thin, metallic material that reflects back body heat, so it does make the cat warmer if he lies down on top of it, unlike with ordinary blankets. Mylar blankets are designed as a part of winter survival kits for people – if you get stuck in your car in the cold, for instance, you can wrap yourself in one to stay warm. They're available through Healthy Harvest at a cost of $1.49* each. Order online at: http://www.healthyharvest.com (do a search for "Mylar Blanket").

Another excellent item for the floor of a feral winter shelter is the "Flexi-Mat Mysterious Purr Padd", available through PETCO. This synthetic pad, measuring 20 inches by 20 inches, not only absorbs but also retains body heat, so it too will warm a cat lying on top of it. A set of two costs $10.99* and can be found in most PETCO stores or you can order online at www.petco.com (do a search for Item No. 166626, or for "Flexi-Mat Mysterious Purr Padd.")

*Prices subject to change.

Placement

If possible, position shelters close to the feeding station so the cats won't have to travel far in bad weather. However, placing the shelters in a spot that is private and secure should take priority over proximity to feeding, if a choice has to be made.

One way to bring the food closer to the cats, if there are at least two winter shelters, is place the shelters so they are a couple of feet apart with their doorways facing one another. Rest a large board across the roofs of both, bridging the gap between them. This covered space in the middle of the two shelters can be a good place to put food and water.

Suggested Activities

1. If you're feeding feral cats, or know someone who is, evaluate the feeding site to determine if there is a more private and protected location available, and whether a covered feeding station could be maintained.

2. Read the ingredients label on the cat food you use and compare with other brands that you can afford and talk to your veterinarian about food choices.

3. Build, or help others build, better winter shelter for neighborhood feral cats.

Additional Resources

• Books

Dr. Pitcairn's Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs & Cats by Dr. Richard Pitcairn & Susan Hubble Pitcairn (Rodale Press, 1995)

Food Pets Die For by Ann N. Martin (New Sage Press, 2002)

The New Natural Cat: A Complete Guide For Finicky Owners by Anitra Frazier (Penguin Books, 1990)

Maverick Cats: Encounters with Feral Cats by Ellen Perry Berkeley (The New England Press, 2002)

Lesson 4: PREPARATIONS FOR TRAPPING

Preparation is the key to success for TNR projects. The process discussed in this lesson is based on years of experience trapping cats, from small to large colonies, in all sorts of weather and in a wide variety of settings. There is a way to do the work that maximizes the chances of getting as many cats in as short a time frame as possible. While there are likely to be some unexpected developments once things get underway, the more you've put all the pieces in place and anticipated what may happen, the smoother the trapping will go.

Step One: Establish a Feeding Pattern

Feral cats are habitual creatures by nature and can be trained to eat at the same time of day and place. If you're able to establish a regular feeding pattern, it will make the trapping much easier. Rather than spreading out traps throughout the cats' territory and hoping they make an appearance, you can let the cats come to you because you'll know where and when they'll arrive to eat.

The pattern should start being established at least two weeks prior to the trapping. If you can't come every day at the same time, then be as consistent as possible. Don't feed in the morning one day, late at night the next, then in the afternoon and so forth. Try to keep it to the same general time of day. Don't leave food out when you're not there, or at least not as much as usual, or the cats will learn to come and go as they please. If you have to leave food out, then feed the cats something special when you come, such as a can of tuna, so they have an incentive to show up at the time you arrive.

If you're able to choose the time of day when you feed, pick a time that will facilitate the trapping. For example, if the cats live behind a factory, feed them after most of the workers have left for the day and it's quiet. Remember that after you trap the cats, you may need to transport them and set them up with food and water, so don't make the feeding time (and hence the start of the trapping) too late at night.

Setting up a regular feeding pattern will also allow you to get an accurate count of the cats and assess any special cases. Unless you already know all the cats well, start logging them and making a record, whether you take digital photos or write notes. Having a reasonably accurate count will mean you're able to schedule the correct number of spay/neuter appointments, have the right amount of equipment, and have sufficient transportation and volunteers.

While counting, note whether there are any special cases like young kittens who can still be easily socialized, friendly adults who might be adoptable, or sick or injured cats who will need extra veterinary care. Finding out if there are special cases before the trapping begins will give you the time and opportunity to make arrangements for them. You might not be able to find a foster home for kittens, for example, but you'll have a better chance if you start looking a couple of weeks in advance, rather than waiting until you've got them in a trap.

Many individuals practicing TNR, and the communities in which they live, may not have the resources available to care for all special cases as well as might be desired. While it is always better to take a friendly cat or potentially adoptable kitten off the street and give them the chance at a good home, it isn't always possible. Don't let this stop you from going ahead with the TNR, if that's the situation. Neutering the cats and preventing the birth of more cats into the same circumstances is extremely important, and will improve the quality of the lives of the cats that are fixed. Even if you can't do everything for them, you can still do a lot.

Another thing to be careful of is that many caretakers, especially those new to TNR, will delay neutering the colony and first concentrate their energies instead on pulling out kittens and friendly adults to find them homes. They see rescuing the cats who can be saved as the priority and think the TNR part can wait. If proceeding in this manner will lead to a long delay in the TNR, more often than not it's a mistake. Two cats get saved, yet five more are born to take their place. Nuisance behavior continues and neighborhood hostility towards the cats and their caretakers rises. If you can't TNR the colony and rescue potential adoptables at the same time, then it's better to first get the cats fixed and stabilize the situation, then concentrate on finding homes for the adoptables.

Stop and Consider

What would it be like to try to do a TNR project without knowing how many cats are in the colony? What are the chances of successfully stabilizing the population and significantly reducing nuisance behavior without this information?

Step Two: Find a Holding Space

Most people performing TNR will not be boarding the cats at the vet, but will drop them off at the clinic in the morning for the spay/neuter, then pick them up late in the afternoon. This means that for several days during the trapping, the cats need to be held somewhere. This type of location is referred to as a "holding space."

Using the methods taught in this course, while the cats are being held, they do not leave their traps except for the surgery. The rest of the time, the trap doubles as a cage. How to safely manage caring for the cats while they're confined in traps will be described in detail in Lesson 6. The point to be made now is that while in the holding space, each cat will be housed in a separate trap.

How long the holding space is needed will depend on when you begin trapping. If you're doing a "mass trapping" – defined as the TNR of an entire colony at once - I recommend two, preferably three days of trapping for colonies of more than a few cats. Following the spay/neuter, 48 hours post-surgical recovery time is usually sufficient. This would mean keeping the cats confined a total of five to six days.

An adequate holding space is anywhere that is *warm, dry and secure*. "Warm" means at least 65 degrees Fahrenheit at all times. The cats may be used to being outdoors in frigid temperatures, but when confined in a trap, they can't move around or huddle with one another to generate warmth. If it's too cold, they'll get sick. In addition, the anesthesia applied during the spay/neuter surgery causes a cat's body temperature to drop. In the hours after surgery, as the anesthesia wears off, they regain their normal temperature. But during the time it's low, it is vital they are in a warm enough space. Otherwise, they could die.

A "dry" holding space is one protected from the elements, such as rain, direct sunlight, strong wind or snow.

"Secure" means the space is accessible only by people working on the project and not by strangers or other animals who might pose a threat to the cats.

I've seen a variety of settings serve as holding spaces. The easiest are a garage, basement or outdoor shed. When these are not available, you might need to be a bit more creative. At Neighborhood Cats, we've used a warehouse, an empty apartment, an unused park bathroom, a vacant trailer at a jail, a storage room, a former employees' lunch room, a large canopy set up in a fenced-in backyard, a terrace, a shelter's adoption van, empty office space and even a cargo van parked in a driveway.

Concerns about smell, fleas or other type of damage to indoor areas are easily addressed. As will be covered in more detail in Lesson 6, lining the floor and any tables with thick plastic sheeting, then cleaning up the space thoroughly after the project, eliminates these potential problems.

Step Three: Locate and Schedule Spay/Neuter

Once you have a fairly accurate count of the cats in the colony and have found a holding space, then you can schedule a spay/neuter date. If you're doing a mass trapping to neuter the whole colony at once, then get appointments for the total number of cats. However, there may be reasons why trapping and fixing all the cats at the same time is not possible. The holding space may not be large enough, you might not be able to round up enough traps or available spay/neuter options may be too costly. If you're facing these obstacles, then schedule a spay/neuter date for as many cats as you can comfortably handle.

The availability of affordable spay/neuter, especially for ferals, varies widely among communities. You may need to do some research to find out what is available in your area. Start by calling your local shelter or humane society. Also ask any local cat rescue groups what clinics or veterinarians they use. Check whether there are any mobile spay/neuter vans operating in your county or even in your state – they can and often do travel.

If there are currently no free or low-cost spay/neuter programs specifically set up for your area, then here are some tips for getting the ferals fixed at an affordable rate:

Low Cost Spay/Neuter Certificate Programs

A low cost spay/neuter certificate program involves purchasing a certificate for spay/neuter at a discounted rate, then redeeming it at a participating veterinarian. These certificates tend to cost far less than the going rate for spay/neuter and can make doing TNR possible. One word of warning, however, if you buy them: don't automatically assume that all veterinary charges will be included in the certificate price. Sometimes veterinarians add on services and charges, such as vaccines, antibiotics and testing, but the client doesn't find out about these extra costs until after the surgery is performed and the bill presented. The way to avoid this from happening to you is to ask for a written estimate of all charges before the surgery takes place.

Ask at nearby shelters and humane societies whether any local certificate programs are being offered. If so, find out whether any of the participating veterinarians or clinics do ferals.

Also contact the two national spay/neuter certificate programs to see whether they have any veterinarians in your area as part of their network. If they do, find out if they will neuter ferals. The two national programs are:

-SPAY USA (1-800-248-SPAY; phone counselors are available Monday-Friday from 9 am to 4:30 pm, EST, or register for a certificate online at: www.spayusa.org). SPAY USA keeps a separate list of veterinarians willing to work on feral cats, so you can ask them directly for such a referral. The program also has less red tape than most because you make payment for the certificate directly to the veterinarian.

-Friends of Animals call 1-800-321-PETS, or purchase certificates online at www.friendsofanimals.org (see right hand column of home page).

Private Veterinarians

Many veterinarians believe it's their civic duty to help out with feral and stray animals and will offer steeply discounted rates for spay/neuter. The only way to find out if a particular vet will help in this manner is to ask. Best place to start, if you have one, is with your own veterinarian. Explain what you're attempting to do and the benefits that would accrue to the community – fewer cats, less nuisance behavior, less crowded shelters. If the answer is no, don't take it badly, but thank him for considering it. Down the road, minds may change.

If your veterinarian is interested in assisting with your TNR efforts, consider referring him/her to "Working with Feral Cats in Veterinary Practice," an instructional video by Dr. Brenda Griffin and Whitney Lemarr (class of 2005), College of Veterinary Medicine, Auburn University. Contact Dr. Larry Moore at moorelj@auburn.edu. for information on obtaining this video.

When I first started working with feral cats, I would look for a veterinarian who was just opening a practice. Often, the first several months of a new practice is slow in terms of business, so any cash flow is welcome -- even if it's heavily discounted feral spay/neuter or other feral veterinary care. As business picks up, discounts are likely to continue if you've developed a good working relationship.

It's not hard to develop a good relationship with a veterinarian as long as you treat him or her with respect. Truth be told, most veterinarians have had negative experiences at one time or another with animal rescuers, involving bills not being paid in a timely manner, animals not picked up from the clinic on schedule, repeated emergency requests, failure to make or keep appointments, and so on. If instead you conduct your business in a professional, considerate manner – doing what you say you will, providing notice, not arguing when the answer is sometimes no – this will be very much appreciated and a long-term, mutually satisfying relationship is more likely to happen.

If a veterinarian agrees to assist you, but has no experience working with ferals, realize that you may know more than he/she does about handling them after you've taken this course. Don't be shy about bringing in a photo of an eartipped cat even if the vet says he knows what an eartip looks like. You want to be absolutely sure you're talking about the same thing. I've seen ears with V-notchs, tips on the right ear, too much taken off, not enough taken off – all this can be avoided by a simple photo. In Lesson 6, we'll discuss why a feral cat should be housed in a trap and never transferred into a cage, and how the trap is kept clean and the cat fed by using a pair of tools known as trap dividers. You should ask your veterinarian whether he/she intends to transfer the cat into a cage before and/or after surgery. If so, explain that you know a better way and would prefer the cat being housed only in his trap. It's even a good idea to give your vet a pair of trap dividers and demonstrate their use – something most of them have never seen done.

One strong word of advice, especially when you first begin working with a veterinarian: put what you want done in writing! Get a copy of the vet's intake form, write down your

instructions, then hand it in when you bring in a cat. This can be crucial when you want other than the standard treatment. For example, you may have decided a particular cat is friendly enough to find him a home and don't want him eartipped. If you give only a verbal instruction of "Don't eartip," this may be forgotten if things get hectic, which they often do. If you write it down, there's nothing to remember and so nothing to forget.

Mass Spay Days

There can be tremendous economies of scale when performing spay/neuter. As a result, some communities resolve the affordable spay/neuter issue by holding what are called "Mass Spay Days." These are one-day clinics in which a high volume of feral cats are neutered by multiple veterinarians and veterinary technicians who mainly donate their time and services and are assisted by volunteers. 100 cats in fixed in a day is not unusual with this type of operation.

Mass Spay Days can make it easier for veterinarians and other professionals to help out. They can contribute one day a month, or one day every few months, and still make a big difference.

One of the organizations that pioneered Mass Spay Days is the Feral Cat Coalition of San Diego. On their website, they offer extensive materials on how to run a one-day high volume clinic: http://www.feralcat.com/pindex.html

Stop and Consider

How vital to TNR is the availability of low cost spay/neuter? What is more expensive to society in the end – paying to neuter cats or dealing with all the problems of feline overpopulation?

Step Four: Reserve Traps

Having counted the cats and secured a spay/neuter date, the next step is to make sure you have enough traps on hand for the number of cats you're planning on catching. Contact your local feral cat organization, shelter or humane society to see if there are trap banks which will lend you the needed equipment at low or no cost. If there aren't, then try contacting local animal rescue groups to see whether they have traps you can borrow.

If there are no resources for equipment available, you may need to purchase traps yourself. Lesson 5 lists recommended traps, their cost and how to obtain them. To raise money for traps (and also veterinary expenses), consider holding a small fundraising event, such as a garage sale, bake sale or raffle. Put out collection jars at flea markets, pet stores or fairs with flyers explaining your project. Then buy the number of traps you can afford and have room to store, even if it's only one!

If your access to traps is limited, this will limit the number of cats you can bring in for spay/neuter. So before you do Step Three and schedule your spay/neuter appointments, check out the general availability of traps in your area. If you discover

you'll most likely only be able to get a small number of traps, then don't schedule spay/neuter for too many cats.

Whatever the size of your project, once your spay/neuter appointments are booked, immediately reserve the number of traps you'll need if you're working with a trap bank. If you're not working with a trap bank, then start going about gathering the equipment that you'll require.

As you'll learn in Lesson 6, you'll also need at least one pair of trap dividers. These tools allow you to safely care for the cats while they are confined. The items are inexpensive, costing approximately $11 each, so consider buying a pair to always have on hand. Otherwise, check local trap banks or rescue groups to see if they have any to lend you.

Step Five: Arrange Transportation

Transportation may be needed during three phases of the TNR project: (1) picking up and returning traps, (2) bringing the cats from their territory to the holding space after they're trapped, and (3) bringing the cats back and forth from the spay/neuter clinic. Plan this out in advance and draw up a schedule for yourself and any other volunteers.

Whatever vehicle you use to transport the cats, line the floor (or seat) with thick plastic sheeting. Plastic drop cloths are available at most hardware stores and can be cut easily with a scissors. At least 3 ml thick is recommended. One professional transporter we work with places the traps (with cats) inside heavy duty trash bags, leaving the bag open at one end. This ensures no urine or other waste will seep out.

Step Six: Arrange Emergency Veterinary Care

Especially when working with experienced spay/neuter veterinarians, it's quite rare that anything goes wrong after the surgery. Still, if something does (and what to look for will be discussed in Lesson 7), that's the worst time to start looking for where you can get help. Find out ahead of time what emergency resources are available in your area. Are there any 24 hour veterinary facilities? If not, will the veterinarian you use for your own house cats agree to be on call? Ask the clinic that's performing the spay/neuter if they have anyone you could contact. With this information already in hand, you'll be able to act quickly if the time should come that you need to.

While arranging emergency veterinary care is highly recommended, I don't believe a TNR project should be canceled if none can be found. Post-neutering complications are few and far between, in my experience. The benefit to the cats of being neutered outweighs, in my mind, the risks of proceeding without emergency backup.

Suggested Activities

1. Ask your local shelter or humane society whether there are any low cost spay/neuter programs in your area.

2. Contact SPAY USA and find out if there are any veterinarians in your area who will do low cost spay/neuter. Ask if they'll do ferals.

3. Make a list of possible holding spaces located on property you have access to.

4. Make a list of possible holding spaces for which you would need permission from others.

5. Find out if there are any organizations in your area who will lend traps for a TNR project.

6. Locate the closest 24 hour/7 day emergency veterinary facility.

Lesson 5: TRAPPING

You've educated the community on TNR, established a feeding pattern, counted the cats, made arrangements if possible for special cases, found a holding space, scheduled spay/neuter, reserved traps and arranged transportation and emergency vet care. Now it's time to trap! For some, trapping may seem like the most intimidating part of the process, but if you've prepared well and followed the steps, you'll have greatly eased the task of catching the cats. Using the right equipment and following a few basic guidelines, as outlined in this Lesson, will further increase your chances of success.

Traps

The key piece of equipment is, of course, the trap, generically known as a "humane box trap." The cat enters the trap through an open front door in order to reach the bait placed at the back. On the way to the bait, the cat steps on a "trip plate," causing the front door to shut behind him.

There are a large variety of humane box traps available, from small ones designed to catch rodents to ones big enough to catch large dogs. To work with feral cats using the methods described in this course, the box traps you use must have two special features: (1) a rear door and (2) a length of 35 to 36 inches.

When caring for the cats while they're confined in their traps, you'll need to be able to access each trap from both ends. To do this, a rear door is required. Rear doors also make it safer to transfer a cat out of one trap and into another trap, a transfer cage, or a carrier. When the cat is returned to his colony, releasing through a rear door is safer than through the more-difficult-to-open front. Likewise, if a raccoon or other animal is accidentally trapped, a rear door makes release easier and safer.

A length of 35 to 36 inches is recommended because the trap will double as a cage. Any shorter and the space may be too cramped, especially for a larger cat. Any longer is unnecessary and means extra weight and expense.

Safeguard Large Raccoon trap (Model SG-36D)

Available from Animal Care Equipment & Services (ACES) at $49.50* with a 10% discount for ordering two or more: phone 1-800-338-ACES or order online at: www.animal-care.com/

The advantages of this trap, pictured above and in the previous photo, include its light weight (approximately 12 lbs.) and low cost. It's also easy to use – the trap is set by raising the spring-loaded front door and moving the hook-shaped trigger forward beneath a cross bar. The light weight, low cost and ease of use make it an excellent trap for beginners or for purchasing in large quantities.

Disadvantages include a small trip plate. However, as will be discussed in detail in the next section, this can be easily compensated for by taping a piece of cardboard to the trip plate, thereby extending it. Another negative is the locking mechanism on the rear door which can be confusing and lead to unlocked doors if someone is careless. The rear door locks by way of two hooks which slide ***under*** the top of the trap cross-bars. If these hooks are not placed under the cross-bars but are left to rest on top, the door can be pushed open from below. To make sure this mistake isn't made, I've developed a habit of tugging the rear door upwards after I close it. I also always check that the rear door is locked before I lift a trap with a cat inside, for example, right after the cat is caught or when a cat is returned to me by the clinic.

In addition, because it is made of a lighter weight metal, the Safeguard trap is more vulnerable to damage than the Tru-catch and Tomahawk models described below, especially if it is tossed around. Treated a little more gently, it is durable though may need occasional readjustments of the trigger mechanism (done by moving the trigger ever so slightly backward or forward with needle-nose pliers.) Repeated use tends to bend the sliding rear door, making it a little sticky unless the door is unbent.

Safeguard Collapsible Large Raccoon Trap (Model SG – 35F)

Available from Animal Care Equipment & Services (ACES) at $63.00* with a 10% discount for ordering two or more: phone 1-800-338-ACES; (this model is not currently listed on their website)

This is the collapsible version of the Safeguard Large Raccoon Trap just described. It's one inch shorter in length and one pound heavier. When collapsed, it takes up one quarter the space of its non-collapsible counterpart. This makes it ideal for transporting large numbers in a normal sized car and for storage when space is limited. It, too, is

easy to use after it's set up.

The main problems are that, in order to be collapsible, the trap has numerous extra parts that are easily bent out of shape and the folding/unfolding mechanism is not that simple to use. As a result, repeated use by multiple trappers inevitably leads either to the traps being badly broken or having parts missing. It's not suitable, therefore, for a trap bank, but will last if used by a small number of people who take care in assembling and disassembling it.

Another disadvantage is the small trip plate, though this is easily solved with a cardboard extender. The rear door locking mechanism is actually much better than on the non-collapsible version, so that's not an issue. The collapsible trap does cost more than the non-collapsible version.

All in all, this trap -- similar to the SG-36D version -- should not be purchased unless storage space is a critical issue and even then, not if the traps will be handled by multiple users and the general public.

*Prices subject to change.

Tru-Catch Large Raccoon Trap (Model 36D)

Available from Animal Care Equipment & Services (ACES) at $65.00* with 10% discount for ordering two or more: phone 1-800-338-ACES or order online at: www.animal-care.com.

This trap is a nice piece of workmanship - it's made of a heavy gauge metal and is extremely durable, plus the metal is coated to help prevent rust. The front door does not operate on a spring and slam shut like most box traps, but instead slides shut when tripped. As a result, the front door shuts quietly, making it less likely other cats will be frightened away (though cats frightened by the sound of traps closing usually do come back). The trip plate is large, making a cardboard extension unnecessary. The trap is also a little wider and higher than most, improving its functionality as a cage for holding the cats.

The main disadvantage is that it's not easy to use, especially not for a beginner. The trigger mechanism involves two bars resting against one another. If the trigger is not set properly, a cat's weight may not be enough to make the front door close. To avoid this, the trick is to rest the two bars against one another at their tips.

The Tru-catch also weighs more than most traps its size, approximately 14 lbs., so it can be heavy to carry around, especially with a cat inside. Another possible disadvantage is that, when set, the front door sticks out its entire length from the rest of the trap, parallel to the ground. Theoretically, this makes the front door vulnerable to a cat rubbing or knocking against it and accidentally closing it. But in my limited experience with the trap, I have yet to see that happen.

*Prices subject to change.

Tomahawk Flush Mount Raccoon Transfer Trap (Model 608.2)

Available from Tomahawk at $78.13* per trap if ordering 1-5 traps, $66.01* for 6 or more; phone 1-800-272-8727 or order online at: www.livetrap.com (click on “deluxe transfer traps”)

The Tomahawk is similar in appearance to the Safeguard Model SG-36D, but is made of stronger materials and is more durable. Like the Safeguard, the trap is set by moving a trigger hook underneath a crossbar and is easy to use. The locking mechanism on the rear door is a safety snap, a simple mechanism that avoids the mistakes possible when locking the rear door of the Safeguard trap.

The Tomahawk is slightly heavier than the Safeguard SG-36D and more expensive. It, too, has a trip plate too small for feral cats, but also can be remedied with a piece of cardboard and tape. Being one inch narrower than the SG-36D, there’s a bit less interior space, but it’s not significant.

*Prices subject to change

Cardboard Extenders for Trip Plates

All of the traps mentioned, with the exception of the Tru-catch model, have too narrow a trip plate for feral cats. When I first started trapping, I repeatedly observed cats stepping over the plate to reach the bait, or stretching their neck and leaning over it. The plate may be narrow because these models are designed for raccoons who are not as nimble as cats in a confined space.

The problem is fixed by cutting a piece of cardboard (the thicker kind) that measures a little less than the width of the trap and six to seven inches long. Tape the cardboard to the middle of the trip plate as in the photo below. Duct tape is best. Attaching the cardboard effectively doubles the length of the trip plate and makes it far less likely a cat will avoid stepping on it.

We add this cardboard extender every time we set out one of these traps – no exceptions. It’s that important. The small amount of time required to attach them is a very wise investment.

Trap Dividers

A “trap divider,” also known as a “trap isolator,” is a pitchfork-looking tool and is essential for safely doing TNR. Its primary function is to isolate the cat on one end of the trap while you clean and feed at the other end (see Lesson 6). It’s also very useful while out in the field trapping. It can be used to separate two cats who get caught in the same trap, to lessen the space a frantic cat has to move around in during transport and to perform transfers of a cat from one trap into another. A veterinarian or vet tech can

also use dividers to pin the cat to one end of the trap and force him to be still for purposes of injecting a tranquilizer or anesthetic.

Most trap manufacturers make trap dividers designed for use with their particular brand of trap. However, at this time, ***there is only one trap divider on the market which is adequate for the methods taught in this course.*** I emphasize this because the trap divider is a key piece of equipment when it comes to safety for preventing both injury and escape. The only brand and model I recommend is the one pictured in the previous photo. (See next page for information.)

The Tru-Catch Trap Isolator (Model TD-2)

Available from ACES, $12.00* with a 10% discount when ordering two or more; phone 1-800-338-ACES or order online at: www.animal-care.com/

WARNING: Do not let the sales representative you are dealing with talk you into buying a different brand. The Tru-catch divider will work with any brand of box trap, not just the Tru-catch models. It is the only divider I know of that is made with both a strong gauge of steel and properly spaced prongs. Other brands tend to be made from inferior materials, bend easily, have prongs spaced too far apart, are difficult to insert in the trap, or are not wide enough. They are simply not safe for the methods taught here. By contrast, the Tru-catch model is strong, durable, the correct size and easy to use.

Because their usefulness is not yet widely known, you may have difficulty finding a trap bank or shelter where you can borrow trap dividers. Consider purchasing a pair yourself. You should buy a pair because you'll need two of them when feeding and cleaning inside a trap.

*Prices subject to change.

Basic Trapping Supplies

This basic list will cover what's needed for most trappings:

- Traps
- Trap divider
- Bait
- Can opener
- Plastic forks or spoons
- Paper or plastic plates (small)
- Pounce or a similar cat treat
- Cardboard extenders
- Duct tape
- Bed sheets (one per trap) -- or similar coverings

Have at least one or two additional traps on hand than the anticipated number of cats. Catching the last cat or two will be much easier if you have extra traps to put out in more spots. Plus it's insurance against the appearance of an unexpected feline or two.

A trap divider will be needed if more than one cat gets caught in a trap, and you need to separate them and transfer one into another trap. Also, if a cat gets agitated during transport, the divider can be used to limit the amount of space he has to move about in.

Two kinds of bait should be used – the primary one should be a very smelly, fishy kind, such as cheap tuna, sardines or salmon. The second one should be a more standard canned cat food without fish – chicken, beef, etc. – just in case you come upon the occasional cat who doesn't care for seafood. Have a can opener on hand, even if all your bait is in flip-top cans, in case you run out and have to go buy something that doesn't pop open. Plastic forks or spoons are for doling out the bait, which is put on paper or plastic plates.

Pounce or a similar cat treat is excellent for crumbling up and making a little trail leading into the trap. If you don't use Pounce, be sure you get a treat that is soft and crumbles easily. The juice from tuna or other seafood baits will also work well for making trails.

Cardboard extenders are needed, as discussed earlier, for widening the trip plate on most traps. The cardboard is attached to the plate with tape, duct tape being best.

Sheets are a necessity. Most cats when trapped initially become agitated and may quickly move back and forth, trying frantically to escape. This sometimes leads to bloody noses or claws. The cat will calm down soon after you cover the trap with a sheet. From the point of capture until the time of release, a sheet should always be covering the trap. Each sheet should be large enough to comfortably cover an entire trap. To avoid having to run around and find one during the trapping, tuck a folded sheet under the handles of each trap when you first put them out.

Optional Trapping Supplies

Consider bringing the following supplies, as well, if there's a reasonable chance you may need them, given the circumstances of your project:

- Newspaper
- Clothespins
- Blankets
- Plastic drop cloth
- Flashlight
- Water bottle (1 liter, full)
- String
- Needle-nose pliers
- Vegetable oil spray
- Logging sheet
- Labels
- Pens
- First aid kit
- Another person

Newspaper is a good item to have on hand for a few possible uses. As previously mentioned, it can be used to cover the trip plate/cardboard extender mechanism so a cat can't tell what to try to step over. Many trappers also believe cats don't like the feel of the metal floor and will be more likely to go into a trap if the floor is covered with newspaper. I've found that most cats don't care, so I wait to see if there's a reluctant feline before making any extra effort to lure him in. If you do use newspaper to line the floor and there's even a slight breeze, use clothes pins at the corners to keep the paper from flapping around and scaring the cats away.

Blankets are useful if you're trapping in cold weather and the cats can't be placed immediately into a warm space. Blankets should be relied upon for only brief periods of time, depending how cold it is. If it's very frigid out and we need to leave a set trap unattended for several minutes or more, we'll wrap the empty trap in a blanket, leaving the front and rear doors uncovered. This provides added warmth for any cat who ventures in while we're gone.

Plastic drop cloths, at least 3 millimeters thick, are good for protecting car seats and floors. A flashlight is a necessity if you're trapping after dark.

If desired, a full, one liter water bottle with string tied around its base can be used in place of the trap's normal trigger/trip plate mechanism. By propping up a corner of the trap's front door on top of the bottle, you can decide if and when to close the trap by pulling the string. This is useful if you're trying to catch multiple young kittens at once, only one particular cat in the colony, or a cat who won't step on the trip plate.

Needle-nose pliers are handy for quick trap repairs, while vegetable oil spray helps loosen up sticky moving parts of the trap.

A logging sheet can be used to record the following at the time of trapping: when a cat was caught, where, a description of the cat, and any special notes (e.g., limps on front paw). Later, the same sheet can be used to track sex, vaccinations, eartipping, and the outcome (e.g., released, fostered, etc.).

If you're trapping at multiple sites, the traps should be numbered using labels attached to the metal plate on top of the trap. A trap's number should be recorded on the logging sheet when a cat is caught in it. To ensure no mix-ups later, it's wise to also write the colony location and a brief description of the cat on the label. Have pens with you for writing.

A basic first aid kit is good to have ready should a bite or scratch occur. Quickly cleaning a wound might prevent a more serious infection from developing. The kit should include, at a minimum, hydrogen peroxide, cotton balls and band-aids. Gauze and surgical tape could also be added.

Having another person accompany you is highly recommended, even if you're after a small number of cats. It's possible attention may be required for more than one task at

the same time, or you may find you need an item and someone to go get it. Plus it's good for morale to have company. Don't turn it into a big party though or you'll distract the cats – two people is plenty for a small number of cats and no more than three or four for a relatively large number.

The Days Before

Before you head into the field to lay out traps, be sure you've done the following first:

- Leave yourself enough time

Plan on trapping for at least two days – three if you're trying to trap more than a few cats. If you only allow for one day or night, you're taking a big chance. Even if everything goes according to plan, some cats are naturally very wary and may not enter a trap the first time you try. It will take an extra day or two of being denied food before they'll venture in. Furthermore, it often happens that not everything goes according to plan. You might experience inclement weather or other unexpected conditions at the site, such as an unusual amount of noise or foot traffic. The cats may not all show up that day. One of the colony feeders may "forget" to withhold food and put out a huge bowl of dry food that morning. Too much can go wrong not to schedule more than one trapping day.

Stop and Consider

How much work will it be for you to set up your TNR project, -- learning how to trap, making veterinary arrangements, and finding holding space, equipment and transportation, etc? Then, considering the amount of time you will have invested, isn't it better to allow more than enough time for trapping and give yourself the best chance of success?

Withhold Food the Day Before

The single most important factor for a successful trapping is how hungry the cats are. When it comes to your average box trap, most cats have a natural wariness of going in. It's possible you may tempt some well-fed cats with the scent of tuna or something very tasty, but many will not overcome their wariness unless they are driven by hunger.

The day before the trapping, do not feed and be sure to remove any food from the site. This way, when it comes time to trap, the cats will not have eaten for 24 to 48 hours and will be quite hungry. A healthy adult cat can survive for weeks without food, so tit will be fine, even if a bit displeased. I've found withholding food is actually harder on the caretaker than the cats!

If you're trapping in the middle of winter and conditions are severe, it's best for the cats' health to minimize the amount of time they go without eating. In these conditions, give the cats a meal 24 hours before the trapping, but remove all food within a few hours afterwards, so that they will have gone 18 to 24 hours without eating by the time the

trapping begins. For example, if you'll be trapping on a Saturday morning and the temperatures are below freezing, leave food out for the cats Thursday night and Friday morning, but remove all food by noon on Friday. Also withhold food for only 18 to 24 hours if there are sick cats or young kittens in the colony.

Water should be left out for the cats at all times and should never be withheld.

Make every effort possible to coordinate with feeders. If you can't get in touch will everyone who feeds, or if you suspect a feeder may ignore your instructions, go by and inspect the site a couple of times during the day or night before the trapping. This way you can remove any food placed out.

Check the Traps

Read all the manufacturer's directions on how to use the trap or have the people you borrow the traps from show you how to set one. Then practice setting the trap and opening and closing the rear door. Don't wait until you're out in the field to figure it out.

Next, test each trap you're going to use to make sure all are working properly. If you're borrowing from a trap bank, test them before you leave the premises. If you purchase traps, test them when they arrive. Usually they're in good repair and function properly, but once in a while they get damaged in transit. It's a bad time to find out the trip plate doesn't work when a cat steps on it and nothing happens.

Especially if the traps are older, oil all movable parts with a nontoxic lubricant such as vegetable oil spray. A well-oiled trap is quieter and works better. When traps are not in use, store them in a dry space to avoid rust. If you have to keep them outdoors, cover them with a heavy tarp.

The Trapping

If the cats have been trained to eat at a certain time, that's when to start the trapping. You don't need to begin at the same exact hour, but within the same general time of day.

Note: They'll be hungry and may show up even a bit earlier than usual.

Prepare the Traps

Baiting and other final preparations to the traps can be done once you're on site, but preferably some distance from where the traps will be laid out and out of sight of the cats. Too much activity too close to where they're used to eating may alarm them and frighten some away.

Line up all the traps in a row, rear doors facing you, and lift up or remove the rear doors. Then tape the cardboard extensions onto the trip plate, placing the edge of the cardboard on the middle of the plate. *(See photo in this Lesson under "Cardboard*

extenders and trip plates.") Next, fold up the sheets and tuck one between the handles of each trap. Finally, dish out the bait, using generous amounts, and place each plate at the far rear of each trap. Close the rear doors, double checking they are securely locked.

If you're trapping a cat that you know will be operated upon within a few hours after you catch him, then use only a small amount of bait. Ideally, a cat's stomach is empty during surgery to preclude the possibility of vomiting, followed by choking and gagging. So if you have to use bait soon before surgery, you want to minimize how much food will be in the cat's stomach. You should also let the veterinarian know that the cat ate a small amount.

Laying Out the Traps

Once all the traps are ready, place them out into the cats' territory. If you've successfully established a feeding pattern, then most of the traps should be concentrated near the feeding station. Other locations for placing traps could include paths the cats may travel to reach the feeding site, or other spots where you have repeatedly observed the cats spending time.

Put out all the traps at once – don't put out only a few, wait for cats to get caught in them, then put out a few more. You want to limit the number of times you enter the cats' territory because each time you do so, there's the possibility one cat will run off for the day. In addition, placing all your traps at the same time will give the cats more opportunities to enter one.

When you put a trap down, be sure the ground is fairly level so the trap doesn't rock back and forth. If there is no level ground, place a board or something flat under the trap. Whenever possible, lean the trap up against something length-wise, like a wall, a fence or a bush, and don't leave it sitting out in the open surrounded by empty space. Cats are more likely to enter if the trap appears to be part of a familiar structure. Don't place traps right next to each other but spread them out, preferably a couple of feet apart, at least.

Depending on the landscape, try to blend the traps into the environment as best you can. Placing traps on a lawn, for example, allows the grass to come up through the floor. Or if you're trapping in a parking lot, sprinkle some pebbles and similar debris onto the trap floor. You can toss in leaves or loose grass. Lean a board or box against the trap, or place branches on top. Anything you can do to make it look as though the trap naturally belongs to the landscape will help.

At this point, some trappers like to unfold the sheet and drape it over the top and sides of the trap, leaving the front and rear doors uncovered. The theory is the cats are more attracted to a sheltered space. While the theory is probably true, most cats will enter an uncovered trap. Draping a sheet properly can be time-consuming -- you have to tuck the sheets under the trap or weigh them down to make sure they don't flutter in the wind

and scare a cat away. I usually save doing this for when the cat has proven difficult to catch.

The one situation when I will cover with a sheet as a matter of course is when I need to leave the trap unattended for any period of time, say more than half an hour or so. In that case, once trapped, the cat will be somewhat calmed by being covered. If you do this, make sure you leave the rear door uncovered as well as the front – the cats will be more willing to enter the trap if they're able to see out the other end.

With the trap properly positioned, open the front door and set the trigger. Remove any rocks, plants or debris that might block the front door as it's shutting. Feral cats can move with astonishing speed and will be out of the trap and gone if anything obstructs the shutting of the front door.

Take your Pounce or other soft cat treat, crumple it up and make a trail from a few feet away to the front door of the trap, then back through the trap towards the bait in the rear. The juice from tuna can also be used.

Observing the Action

Once all the traps are set, move out of the territory to a spot where you can comfortably observe as many of the traps as possible. When the cats start showing up, it's natural to want to watch the action, but try to avoid staring at them, especially when they're poised at a trap's front door and considering whether to go in. If they pick up on your anxiety, it may cause them to back off. Instead, look off in another direction until you hear the trap shut.

Once a Cat Goes In

Immediately after the trap door shuts, most cats will realize they're trapped and panic, moving rapidly back and forth and looking for a way to escape. If this occurs, walk over to the trap and quickly cover it with a sheet, then step back and let the cat calm down. Covering does have a calming effect. Once the cat is still, pick up the trap and carry it away, keeping the trap covered at all times. If the cat panics while you're carrying her, tilt the trap at a severe angle – this forces the cat to expend her energy hanging onto the floor of the trap rather than dashing back and forth. You can also use a trap divider to lessen the amount of space the cat has to move around in. Don't be afraid if the cat gets a bloody nose or paw – these are common, minor injuries that usually heal quickly on their own.

There will be some cats who do not realize they're trapped right away when the front door shuts behind them. They may go on happily munching away on the bait for several minutes. Or there are occasionally cats who do realize they're caught, but don't panic. In these cases, don't rush in to cover the trap with a sheet – there's no need to enter the territory at that point and potentially frighten away another cat. Leave them alone until they begin to show signs of agitation, then enter and cover.

When you pick up and remove a trapped cat, replace the old trap with a new one in the exact same spot. Often there are "hot spots" where cats keep going into traps in disproportionate numbers. I'm not sure why that is – there must be something about the positioning that makes the cats less wary - but take advantage of the phenomenon.

The Next Trapping Days

If all goes as it should, most (not all) of the cats in the colony will be caught on the first day of trapping. One may have gotten frightened early on and not returned while you were there. Another might have found a scrap of food that escaped your attention and was not that hungry. Perhaps yet another is particularly trap shy. The key to overcoming these problems is to continue to withhold food throughout the trapping period. The increasing hunger of the cats is what will get them to go in.

On the second day of trapping and thereafter, the same procedures are followed as the first day, only with fewer traps. If you begin to suspect you have a "hard-to-catch" cat or two on your hands, then try some simple things like placing newspaper on the floor of the traps and covering them with sheets. Also consider using some of the special techniques discussed later in this Lesson under "Hard-to-catch cats."

Trap-to-Trap Transfers

If two cats end up in the same trap, which happens once in a while, you'll need to first separate them and then transfer one into a different trap. To do this, first cover the trap with a sheet and give the cats a moment to calm down. Then pull back the sheet and insert a trap divider from above between them. Re-cover with the sheet.

Next, take another trap and cover it with a sheet, too, though not over the rear door. Then line up the rear door of the empty trap with the rear door of the trap containing the cats. If you're doing the transfer alone, the empty trap should be backed up against something immovable, like a wall. If there are two of you, each should be pressing down on one of the traps. To ensure the transfer goes well, you'll need to take precautions against having either trap suddenly shift and create an opening between them through which a cat can escape.

Once the rear doors of the two traps are lined up and both traps are securely in place, lift both rear doors. Fold back the sheet covering the rear half of the trap containing the two cats. Most of the time, exposing the cat in the rear compartment will cause him to move into the covered, empty trap. If it doesn't, give the cat a little push by tilting the divider separating the two cats towards him. Once he enters the second trap, shut both rear doors.

Advantages of Mass Trapping

When it's possible, TNR-ing all the cats in a colony at once is much more efficient than catching one or a few at a time over the course of weeks or months. Going "one-at-a-time" not only takes longer, but also means having to repeatedly make trips to the

clinic, secure a holding space, borrow equipment, arrange transportation and so on. A mass trapping, by contrast, involves going through the process just once.

It's also easier with a mass trapping to catch all the cats. If you're going one-at-a-time with an average sized colony, you're bound to run into problems trying to catch the last few cats. In order to get those remaining cats hungry, you have to withhold food from the entire colony. Then you have to pick out the cats you're after from the rest of the crowd, which can be tricky. By contrast, with a mass trapping, you withhold food once and when you're down to the last few cats (which are becoming increasingly hungry), they're the only ones still out in the territory.

In fact, when doing a mass trapping, I recommend that you keep on trying to catch the last cat, even if the spay/neuter date has come and gone. As long as the rest of the colony is confined, there will never be a better opportunity. The hassle of arranging a spay/neuter appointment specially for him once he's trapped will likely be far less than the trouble you'll go through trying to catch him later once all his colony mates have been returned.

Stop and Consider

Are the resources available in your community – free or low cost spay/neuter and equipment – to allow you to perform a mass trapping? If so, would you rather do more work in a short period of time and resolve the whole situation at once, or proceed more slowly and gradually get the cats fixed?

Winter Trapping

During the first years after TNR was introduced to the United States, the prevailing sentiment was not to trap cats during the winter in colder climates, but only during the warmer seasons. The logic was that trapping placed too much stress on the cats and potentially compromised the health of the females whose bellies are shaved during the spay procedure.

At Neighborhood Cats, we've been conducting winter-time TNR projects in the Northeast for several years now. The cats' reproductive activity is dramatically lower during the cold season, which means there are rarely any kittens, nursing mothers or pregnant cats. This can greatly simplify the trapping. In addition, you can get a huge jump on the upcoming spring kitten season. We conducted community-wide TNR in the Village of Atlantic Beach, NY, over the winter of 2005, resulting in the neutering of over 90 percent of the feral cats in town. As a result, almost no kittens were born in the village the following spring and summer.

We haven't found winter trapping to be more stressful for the cats than at other times of the year. As far as avoiding jeopardizing their health, the key is to make sure the cats are well fed and that adequate winter shelter is in place. A warm, dry place to bed down

will compensate for a shaved stomach. If adequate shelter is not in place during cold weather, then we won't trap.

Hard-to-Catch Cats

Fortunately, there are very few cats who will not enter a trap if you follow the methods outlined in this course and give it two or three days. But occasionally there is one who will not enter a box trap, no matter what you do. At my colony, Grandma was the matriarch and for years I tried to tempt her into a normal trap. I studied her patterns, tried every kind of bait, every time of day, multiple traps at once. One time, I used fresh, organic catnip as the bait and made a little trail of it leading into the trap. She showed up as anticipated, caught a whiff of the catnip and headed towards the trap, sniffing away. I had her, I thought! When she reached the front door, she lay down and started rolling on her back, enjoying the catnip trail I had sprinkled. After a minute or so, she got up and walked away.

My career fostering Grandma's kittens finally came to an end when Laura Burns of HubCats (Boston) shared her version of a drop trap with me. Being that it was Grandma, of course, I had to set the trap on three different nights before she consented to go in, but at last I caught her. Now she's spayed and a much more content kitty.

The Drop Trap

A drop trap is an enclosure propped up on a stick. The cat walks underneath it to reach the bait and while she's eating, the trapper pulls a string attached to the stick, causing the enclosure to fall down over the cat. The cat is then transferred out of the enclosure and into a normal box trap.

Cats are not nearly as wary of going under a raised enclosure as they are of going into a long, narrow box trap. They may sniff around a bit and be a little cautious at first, but almost always they end up going under. It is remarkable how effective the device is. It has become part of our standard equipment at Neighborhood Cats, brought along to all trappings. No longer do we wait hours for a particular cat to finally enter a box trap – once we see there is one who is especially reluctant, we break out the drop trap and try to move things along. The trap is also ideal for selectively trapping a particular cat out of a colony and for catching multiple kittens at once.

The trap pictured here was designed by Laura Burns and is simple to build if you or someone you know has basic carpentry skills. Using the trap does take a bit of skill, especially when it comes to transferring the cat out of the drop trap and into a box trap. For this reason, a drop trap should never be used by someone for the first time on a cat you've been trying to capture for years. You must first practice doing the drop and then transferring. Pick out a cat you've already fixed. You can either let him go afterwards or get him re-vaccinated. Once you've practiced a couple of times, you'll understand what to do and be much less likely to make the kind of mistake that results in an unaltered Grandma on the loose again.

For complete instructions on how to construct and use Laura's drop trap, go to the following link. Be sure to download, print out and carefully read the pdf file in the left-hand column which gives detailed instructions on how to use the trap:

http://www.neighborhoodcats.org/info/droptrap.htm

Feed in the Trap

One way to get a cat to enter a trap is to gradually train him to eat inside one. Place a trap near the cat's usual feeding spot and tie the front door open or jam it open with a stick. At first, place the cat's daily meal a few feet away from the trap's front door. Keep putting the plate there over succeeding days until you see the food is being eaten. Then move the plate closer so that it's just in front of the trap door. Again, keep placing the plate at that spot until the food is being eaten. Then move the plate a couple of inches inside the trap. Continue this pattern, moving the plate a few inches at a time further into the trap each time you see the food is being eaten. When you see the cat is going all the way to the rear of the trap to get to the food, then the trap can be set.

This method requires leaving a trap out in the cat's territory. If it's your own backyard and there's no chance any strangers are going to come along, then you might not need to take any precautions against the trap being damaged or stolen. If you're at all concerned or if the trap must be placed in a more open, accessible location, then take the steps described below.

First, pick a spot that's the least visible possible. Next, chain the trap onto an immovable object, like a fence or pipe. Finally, remove the rear door and take it with you. This way, the worst that could happen is someone steals an unusable trap – there's no chance it will be used against your cats or any others.

Once you remove the rear door and take it away, keep the front door of the trap closed and train the cats to enter through the open rear. When the time comes to set the trap, it won't matter that the cats will have to enter through the front instead of the rear.

This method can be used not just for difficult cats, but to facilitate any trapping. During one project that I know of, the trapper set out traps in the caretaker's backyard and for two weeks trained the eight cats in the colony to eat out of the traps. When the appointed day arrived, all eight were quickly caught.

The Camouflage Trap

Extensively blending the trap into the environment will make it appear less threatening to a shy cat. In the photo above, the trapper placed burlap on the trap floor and over the top and sides. She then covered the burlap with branches and leaves. You can see the end result.

Other camouflage techniques include putting the trap inside a large cardboard box (such as the one it arrived in from the manufacturer), cutting out the rear of the box so the cat can see through. Leaning a large board against a wall to create a lean-to, then putting the trap under the board, is another technique. Place the trap under a bush or by a pile of old tires – anything you can do to make the trap look like a natural part of the territory will help.

Lure into a Closed Space

If you can lure a cat into a shed, garage or room and then shut him in, you'll be able to eventually get him into a regular trap. How much effort that will take will largely depend on how well you prepare the closed-in space ahead of time.

Once the cat is lured inside and the door is shut behind him, he will look for a place to hide, preferably somewhere dark and hidden. Create the place where the cat will run to hide by leaning a large board against a wall and removing any other possible hiding places in the room. Then set a trap under the board, as in the photo below.

In order to get the cat to run into the trap and not over or around it, cover the open space above the trap and to its side with a sheet. Also cover the top of the trap with a second sheet, making sure not to cover the rear door.

As mentioned, if it's possible, remove any other places in the room where the cat could hide. This way, when you shut the door to the space and the cat goes to hide, the only place he'll have to go will be under the board. Most times, he'll run right into the trap. If he doesn't, gently poke a broomstick or similarly long-handled object into the space under the board from the end opposite the trap. The cat will try to escape and run away from you and into the trap. If the cat manages to avoid the trap and runs elsewhere in the room, give him a minute to calm down before trying again.

If you can't remove all the other possible hiding spots and the cat runs to one of those first, then gently flush him out with the broomstick, keeping a safe distance. He'll go look for a new spot to hide, hopefully the one with the trap.

This method can also be tried by placing a set trap inside a dark closet. Turn on the lights in the rest of the room, making the closet the only dark space. Put something on top of the trap, like loose laundry or a flimsy box, which will discourage the cat when he enters the closet from jumping on top of the trap instead of running into it.

If none of this works or you're unsure how safe the method is to try in your circumstances, you can simply lure the cat into the room, close the door, set a trap normally with bait, cover the top and long sides with a sheet, and wait it out. It might take a few days, but eventually the cat will get so hungry, he'll go in. Leave water out near the trap at all times.

Cats Who Won't Step on the Trip Plate

Every now and then I come upon a cat who, even with the cardboard extender, still steps over the whole trip plate. If this happens to you, there are other tricks you can try. First thing though is to get the cat out of the trap before he fills up on the bait. To do this, don't go running up to the trap and scaring the cat badly. Such a frightening experience may mean the cat won't come back after you've made the needed adjustments. Instead, walk slowly and quietly towards the trap, letting the cat back out at her own pace as you approach. Many times, the cat will set off the trap on her way out. If she doesn't, she knows where the good stuff is and will likely return once you move away.

Once the cat has exited the trap, cover the entire trip plate mechanism – metal plate and cardboard extender – with a single sheet of newspaper. If it's windy, the paper can be held down with clothes pins at the corners. The idea is to hide the trip plate so the cat can't see what to step over. Then back away and wait for the cat to go back in.

If the cat still steps over the trip plate, even with the newspaper covering it, then again approach the trap slowly so the cat leaves. You can then try one of two things. (1) You can run a stick through both sides of the trap just in front of the trip plate and a few inches above the ground. This will force the cat to step over the stick in order to get to the bait, causing him to step on the trip plate. Keep the trip plate covered with the newspaper, as pictured:

(2) Another option for a cat that knows not to step on the trip plate is to bypass the trip plate mechanism altogether. Instead of setting the trap with the trigger, open the front door and prop a corner of it on a one liter water bottle with a string tied around the bottom. When the cat re-enters the trap, wait until he reaches the bait and then yank the string, pulling the bottle away and causing the front door to close. The bottle should be filled with water to give it weight and keep it in place before you pull the string.

You should also practice yanking the string and pulling the bottle away before you attempt to do it live. If you don't pull hard enough or if you haven't made the string taut enough, you may startle the cat and give him time to run out. So do it once or twice at home to get the right feel.

Picking One Out from the Crowd

A cat might be "hard-to-catch" not because he's trap-shy, but because he's the only one out of many that you're after in the colony. The way to catch him using a box trap is to bypass the trip plate/trigger mechanism and prop the front door on a bottle with a string, as just described in the previous section.

When you bait the trap, place a large plate of bait in the rear. You want to make sure there's enough food for a number of cats to go in and eat before your chosen one does the same. You don't want the bait to run out, forcing you to refill it and disrupt everyone.

As mentioned earlier, a drop trap is also an effective way to selectively trap one cat out of many.

Special Cases (Friendly Ferals)

Feral cats can act friendly, especially to their long-time caretakers. They may let themselves be petted while eating or rub against their feeder's legs. Despite these signs of affection, caution should always be exercised and traps utilized when trying to capture ferals. If you try to pick up a friendly feral and force her into a carrier, she may panic and try to bite your hand in an effort to escape. One good bite can result in a trip to the emergency room and a course of antibiotics. Be safe and always use traps. Besides, experienced clinics and veterinarians will require that cats being TNR'ed be brought to them in traps for the safety of their staff.

Special Cases (Kittens)

Whenever possible, kittens young enough to be easily socialized (eight weeks and younger) should be removed from the colony, fostered and put up for adoption. The ideal age for removing feral kittens is five to six weeks. At this age, they have gained much of the benefit of nursing and being with their mother and are eating on their own, but are young enough that in almost all cases they can be socialized quickly – sometimes within a matter of hours. They can usually be easily socialized up to eight weeks of age as well, but an extra couple of weeks in an outdoor setting can be very dangerous for them.

If the environment is extremely dangerous, you might consider trapping them as soon as they can eat on their own, which is between four to five weeks of age. At that age, if they haven't started eating on their own, they can learn quickly by letting them lick wet food off your finger, wiping a little on their nose and/or letting them muck about in a plate of soupy wet food. If you take in kittens younger than four to five weeks old, you may have to bottle feed and stimulate them to pass stool and urine, a labor-intensive process.

Because time is of the essence, you may need to trap the kittens before you're ready to capture any of the adults. Here are two ways to go about only catching the young ones:

1. Use a drop trap or set a regular trap manually by not using the trigger, but instead propping a corner of the front door on a water bottle with a string attached (*review "Picking one out from the crowd" under "Hard-to-catch cats," above*). Only pull the string if you've got a kitten or kittens inside. Young kittens often travel in bunches, so you can often catch more than one at a time. The trick is not to get greedy. If two of them are in the trap eating away and a third is hovering near the front door, then wait to see if the third goes in, too. But if the third kitten is off playing a few yards away, then go ahead and trap the two you've got, then re-set the trap. Otherwise, you're liable to miss your chance.

Adapt the trap so only kittens can reach the trip plate.

As in the photo, cut a piece of cardboard the same height and width as the interior of the trap. In the bottom corner of the cardboard, cut out a doorway large enough for a small kitten to pass through but not an adult (four inches by four inches.) Poke small holes using a pen through the four corners of the cardboard. Then place the cardboard inside the trap a couple of inches in front of the trip plate and attach it to the top, bottom, and sides of the trap with twist ties, using the holes in the corners of the cardboard. Now only a kitten will be able to get through and when he does, he'll step on the trip plate.

Next, do what's called "setting the trigger lightly." The trigger is shaped like a hook and normally you would rest the elbow of the hook under the cross-bar of the raised front door. With very young kittens, set the tip of the hook under the cross-bar instead. By doing this, less weight on the trip plate is required to make the front door shut.

2. Use a trap meant for a very small animal, like a chipmunk or a squirrel. The opening should be no more than 5" x 5" (otherwise, an adult could squeeze in).

Unless kittens are of bottle-feeding age and not moving around much, you should trap baby kittens and not try to pick them up with your hands. Even a little kitten has sharp enough fangs and a strong enough jaw to put a hole in your finger. Additonally, they're usually too quick to grab. If you do try to scoop up kittens, even of bottle-feeding age, use protective gloves, preferably made of Kevlar (call Animal Care & Equipment Services at 1-800-338-ACES for ordering info). Grab them by the scruff of the neck, which is how their mother carries them.

Special Cases (Nursing Mothers)

• Nursing mothers discovered after being trapped

Often it's not discovered that a female cat is lactating and may be nursing a litter of kittens until after she's trapped and seen by a veterinarian. Typically, in these situations, the age and location of the litter are unknown. Some caretakers will automatically release the cat as soon as possible without having her spayed. They believe immediate release is justified by the risk there may be kittens too young and vulnerable to survive in her absence.

While such a decision is driven by compassion, my recommendation is usually the opposite. Continue with the TNR, for feral kittens over two weeks old can survive a day without nursing (kittens at least four or five weeks old are eating on their own). If the lactating mother cat is released without being spayed, she may never be trapped again, continuing to produce litter after litter.

When faced with this situation – a nursing mother discovered after trapping – Neighborhood Cats typically will have the cat spayed as soon as possible and then release her the day after surgery if she appears alert and there are no signs of post-surgical complications. While this is 24 hours sooner than we would normally release a cat, the risk is justified by giving her kittens a better chance to survive. Contrary to popular belief, a spayed female can still nurse upon her return to the litter.

What may be determinative for you is the circumstance of your TNR project. On one extreme, you may be working in a remote industrial area or other location with a large number of feral cats who you likely will never see again after you release them. In that situation, if you release lactating females without spaying them, there's a good chance you won't succeed in getting the population under control -- and the project will fail. On the other extreme, if the nursing mom is a regular in a small backyard colony who is certain to be back and it won't be too hard to capture her again, then you might decide to let her go. When in doubt, my advice is to get the cat fixed.

• Nursing mothers known before the trapping

If it is known before the trapping takes place that a female cat has given birth and is likely nursing, then it's best to delay trapping her until the kittens start showing up at the food bowl and the whole family can be trapped at the same time.

Whether to delay trapping an entire colony because among them is a nursing female with baby kittens is a judgment call. It's better if you can wait, but if you can't, then avoid catching the mom: (1) feed her separately beforehand so that her lack of hunger may keep her out of any traps, (2) set up the traps so they are all within sight and try to shoo her away if she approaches, or (3) only use a drop trap or regular traps using the bottle and string method (see "Picking one out from the crowd" under "Hard-to-catch cats," above).

If you catch the nursing female anyway, let her go if you know the kittens are alive and less than a few weeks old. Do this immediately so she does not develop too much of a fear of the trap. If you're uncertain of the kittens' age or you know they are more than a few weeks old, my recommendation is to have her spayed right away and release her the day after the surgery, assuming she is alert and all appears well.

Special Cases (Pregnant Cats)

If a cat is clearly pregnant, the decision needs to be made whether to trap her and abort the litter. I believe the vast majority of animal welfare professionals would agree that abortion is the correct choice if it can be safely performed. They know that a kitten born and adopted into a home means that another cat somewhere else in the system did not get placed and was euthanized for lack of space. This is the harsh reality of feline overpopulation, the state of affairs in most communities.

Cats have an approximately two-month gestation period. A veterinarian who is experienced with feral spay/neuter may be comfortable aborting up until the very end. Another vet with less experience might believe he can perform the operation safely only if the female cat is more than two weeks away from giving birth. So one factor in deciding what to do may be your veterinarian's experience and comfort level.

If you decide not to abort for personal or veterinary reasons, then you need to decide whether to allow the cat to give birth outdoors or whether to trap her and keep her confined until she gives birth and raises her kittens to an adoptable age. A feral mom and her kittens can be kept for a couple of months in a cage with a carrier and litter box

inside. The mom does almost all the work when it comes to raising the kittens – you'll just need to feed everyone and play with the young ones so they're socialized.

To learn how to safely foster a feral cat, study the Feral Cat Setup pictured in the photo and described in the link provided in Lesson 8 under "Relocation."

Letting the cat give birth outdoors is often a dubious proposition, given the high mortality rate of feral kittens (50% or higher). They are exposed to parasites, disease, predation by other animals, being hit by cars, accidents when they start exploring and moving around, etc. Aborting the litter, if you're unable to foster the mom and kittens, is a better choice -- in my view.

Documentation

Keep good records of your work, including date trapped, colony, description, sex, spay/neuter date, vaccinations, whether eartipped or not, and the outcome (released on such and such a date, fostered, etc.). Carefully store veterinary records, including spay/neuter records and rabies vaccinations. Track the the colony over time as well – how many cats (including kittens) were present when you first arrived on the scene? How many after you finished the first round of trapping? How many a year later? What happened to the cats returned?

These records serve many purposes. They will prove what you've done and that you've acted in a responsible manner if local authorities, such as the health department, are ever concerned. Keeping records will also allow you to better manage your own colony, as it's easy to forget things over the years.

Documentation can help you in fundraising and community relations, if you decide to practice TNR beyond your own personal colony. When Neighborhood Cats began practicing TNR, we wrote a "progress report," which we periodically updated, for each colony we worked on. The reports included brief descriptions of the colony site, a history of the project, a description of the current situation and our plan of action going forward. These blurbs were followed by a log of the cats, including a list of the ones not yet trapped.

The progress reports were invaluable. A property owner at one of the sites started getting tired of seeing us around and openly wondered why we were there so often. When he saw the report and realized we had trapped close to 30 cats, he became much more understanding. At other times, when we were applying for grants or trying to persuade other organizations and city agencies to back our work, the progress reports spoke for themselves on the ability of TNR to reduce colony size and get crisis situations under control.

Additional Resources

Website

Imagine Humane's Innovation Bank: Neighborhood Cats Mass Trapping Program

http://www.aspca.org/site/PageServer?pagename=aspcaprosl_feral_neighborhood

Video & handbook

"How to Perform a Mass Trapping," a 32 minute instructional video that can be purchased with *The Neighborhood Cats TNR Handbook*

http://www.aspca.org/tnrkit

Lesson 6: CARING FOR TRAPPED CATS

Preparing the Holding Space

Before and after the spay/neuter surgery, the cats need to be kept confined in a holding space as described in Lesson 4.

To prepare the holding space, first cover the floor with a plastic drop cloth at least three millimeters thick. Plastic drop cloths are inexpensive and can be found at most hardware stores. The plastic protects the floor from urine, food and other waste that might escape the traps. When the plastic is rolled up and thrown away, any odor that develops over the course of the holding period goes away. One suggestion for keeping odor down is to roll up and replace the plastic not just at the end of the project, but also in the middle when the cats are taken out of the holding space for the spay/neuter.

Tables for placing the traps on are helpful, though not essential. The feeding and cleaning does tend to go faster when the traps are raised off the ground, plus it's easier on your back. However, placing the traps directly on a plastic-covered floor is perfectly acceptable. If you do use tables, cover them with thick plastic, too, and be sure they're strong enough to hold multiple traps with cats.

Line the traps up side by side on the tables or the floor (you don't need to leave space between them) and cover with bed sheets. If the cats all know each other, cover several traps with a single bed sheet and spare yourself some laundry

If your own animals are nearby, it's a good idea to keep them out of the holding space in order to eliminate the risk of any air-born diseases or parasites being transmitted.

A common concern is flea infestation of the holding space. In the years I've been practicing TNR, I have yet to see this happen, even though I'm sure most ferals do carry at least some fleas. It appears the fleas stay on their hosts for the most part. Keeping the tops of the traps covered with sheets probably helps keep them from spreading; applying flea medication during the spay/neuter surgery will also help. Most of all, cleaning up thoroughly afterwards is important. All the newspaper that was in

the traps, all the plastic lining the floors and tables, and any other waste should be quickly thrown away. The space should then be swept or vacuumed. If you're still worried, then purchase a flea bomb and fumigate the space (repeat the bombing in three weeks to kill any newly-hatched fleas).

Using Traps to Hold the Cats

The cats are confined in their traps during the entire holding period except for the spay/neuter surgery. They are not transferred into cages, dog crates, pens or the like. Occasionally, people's first reaction is that it's cruel to keep a cat in such a small space for days at a time. While understandable, this shows a lack of knowledge of a feral cat's nature.

When confined, ferals prefer to be in tight, dark spaces. If you were to transfer a feral cat into a large cage that had a small cardboard box or carrier inside, the cat would spend the entire time inside the box or carrier. If you did not give him that little hideaway, but left him only in the open space, he would be terrified.

Traps, when they're covered and the right size, are perfect for ferals – they feel secure and usually calm down and adjust to their confinement very quickly. If the traps are kept clean using the methods described below and the cats are fed regularly, they can be reasonably comfortable under the circumstances for at least several days. A cat who requires further confinement, such as one that's ill and needs a course of antibiotics, can be kept in a trap for as long as two weeks.

Transferring out of the trap and into a cage can risk escape and injury if not done very carefully. In addition, if you're working with a large number of cats, it's impractical to gather that many cages, carriers and litter boxes.

Stop and Consider

What is your initial reaction to the idea of confining a cat in a trap for several days? If you're uncomfortable with the notion, is this based on any actual experience you've had with feral cats? Are you assuming a feral cat would react badly because you know your own pet cat would be very unhappy? Is it worth trying to see if the cats will be ok?

Feeding and Cleaning

Here's a checklist of the equipment and supplies you'll need to care for confined ferals:

- Traps (36" long) with rear doors
- Trap dividers (in pairs)
- Newspaper
- Water dishes & water

- Food dishes & food
- Bed sheets
- Plastic drop cloth (3 mm)
- Garbage bags
- Latex gloves (optional)
- Long craft tables (optional)

For each trap, follow these steps:

One: Start at the front door end of the trap. Get the cat to move to the other end by folding back the sheet towards the rear of the trap. Ferals tend to move from light to dark and will retreat back to the part of the trap still covered by the sheet. If this doesn't work, tap the side of the trap lightly and shoo the cat. If he still won't move, insert one of the dividers from above and give a gentle shove.

Two: Once the cat has moved to the rear end, insert two trap dividers from above into the middle of the trap, one right behind the other. The cat is now sectioned off and cannot escape when you open the front door. **You should always use two trap dividers when you put them in vertically through the top of the trap.** If you only use one, the occasional cat will be strong enough to bend the outer tong of the divider and squeeze through or push the divider up and crawl out underneath. None of this can happen if you simply use two dividers back to back.

One divider at a time is safe only if you insert it horizontally through the sides of the trap. Make sure the divider has gone all the way through and is sticking well out the other side. Using two dividers vertically from above is preferable because it's faster and more practical if you have multiple traps lined up side by side in a tight holding space.

Three: While the cat is sectioned off in the rear end of the trap, open the front door and line the bottom with newspaper, first removing any dirty newspaper or debris. Be generous with the paper – it serves as both litter for the cat to eliminate on and padding from the metal floor.

Don't put in a small litter box with litter – the cats will have no idea what it is and will rarely use it in the manner intended. Instead, they'll lie in it, knock it over, get it in the water bowl and create an unmanageable mess! They're fine with the newspaper, which they'll often shred to cover their waste.

Four: Close the front door, making sure it's locked, and remove the dividers. Then fold the sheet back over the front half of the trap.

Five: Go to the rear end of the trap, now fold back the sheet towards the front of the trap, and get the cat to move away from you towards the front end. Insert two dividers from above, back to back, sectioning off the cat, and then open the rear door.

Six: Line the floor with ample newspaper, removing any dirty paper or debris. Near the rear door, place food on a plate and water in a low container with a flat bottom. Don't use cat food cans for water dishes – their edges can cause cuts. Small plastic snack containers work well. The best are stainless steel bird food cups which hook to the side of the trap.

Seven: Shut the rear door, making sure it's locked. Remove the dividers and cover the rear of the trap with the sheet.

Eight: Repeat this process twice a day.

When dealing with a large number of cats, it's helpful to work in an assembly-line manner. First, put enough newspaper on top of each trap. Then go down the row and clean all the front ends of the traps. Next, prepare all the food plates and water dishes and put them on top of the traps by the rear doors. Finally feed and clean through the rear ends of the traps.

Always start the feeding and cleaning at the front end of the trap. Otherwise, if you start at the rear, you'll end up backing the cat up into the food and water when you get to doing the front.

Stop and Consider

Consider the consequences of a serious cat bite – a visit to the emergency room or your doctor, a course of antibiotics, possible rabies treatment if the cat is not recaptured, temporary limitations in the use of your hand or arm. Is the risk of this happening worth the time and effort you would save by inserting only one trap divider vertically instead of the recommended two when caring for feral cats in traps?

What If a Cat Does Escape?

The most important thing you can do when a cat gets loose takes place before the escape – shut the door! Also check beforehand for any openings in the walls or ceiling and block them off. If a cat gets out of a trap but can't get out of the room, you will be able to recapture him.

Almost every time a cat escapes when the methods taught here are being generally followed, it's because the caretaker inserted only one trap divider vertically through the top of the trap instead of two. Most of the time, a single trap divider from above will work, but the one time it doesn't and the cat gets out becomes a nightmare. It's not worth it when all you need to do is use two. So don't get complacent.

If a cat does escape, whatever you do, don't try to grab him! That's another way to end up in a hospital. The cat will be very frightened and believe you are trying to harm him if you're unfortunate enough to get your hands on him. He will bite and scratch to get loose, and a scared feral can cause a lot of damage very quickly. Don't try to throw a blanket over the cat, either – if you don't get hurt grabbing him, you will when you try to figure out what to do next. With an escaped feral, the only safe method is to re-trap.

Review the section "Lure into a closed space" under "Hard-to-catch cats" in Lesson 5. If the holding space is not overly cluttered, the fastest method will be setting up a trap behind a board or inside a closet and running the cat into the trap. If there are too many hiding places or there isn't room to set up a trap behind a board, you'll have to wait it out. Place a set trap baited with food in a corner and cover the sides with a sheet. Naturally, the cat may be quite reluctant to re-enter a trap, so be patient. It may take overnight or as long as several days.

Suggested Activities

1. Before you use a space to hold feral cats, formulate a plan of action for how you would recapture an escaped cat, then adapt the holding space to your plan before any cats are brought in.

Additional Resources

Video & handbook

"How to Perform a Mass Trapping," a 32-minute instructional video, includes a live demonstration of feeding and cleaning a trap holding a feral cat. Can be purchased with *The Neighborhood Cats TNR Handbook*

http://www.aspca.org/tnrkit

Lesson 7: SPAY/NEUTER DATE AND RELEASE

The Night Before and Morning Of

A cat's stomach needs to be as empty as possible during the spay/neuter surgery. Food in the stomach leaves open the possibility of the cat reacting badly to the anesthesia, vomiting and then choking. In addition, too much water in the bladder can be dangerous. For these reasons, as a general rule, food and water should be completely removed from the cats' traps by 10 p.m. the night before the surgery and none provided that morning.

Kittens are the only exception to this general rule. Kittens, who can be spayed as early as two months, two lbs., need to eat closer in time to the surgery so they are not too

weak. How close in time depends on their age, so if you're dealing with kittens, check with your clinic or veterinarian for instructions on when to withdraw food and water.

When the cats are brought to the clinic, they should always be brought in traps – one cat per trap and each trap covered. Bringing ferals in traps is an important safety feature for veterinary staff. It's easy for staff to isolate the cat at one end of the trap and inject him with a sedative through the bars. If a feral is in a carrier, veterinary staff must open the door and reach in, a dangerous situation which commonly results in injuries. For this reason, a feral cat should never be brought to a clinic in anything but a trap. The traps should be covered at all times to help keep the cat calm.

Spay/neuter clinics and veterinarians tend to run on a tight schedule, so you should make a point of being on time for your appointment.

Standard Veterinary Treatment

Veterinary treatment for TNR normally includes the spay/neuter surgery, rabies vaccination and eartipping. Rabies vaccinations are mandatory in most jurisdictions. Eartipping is a way of marking the cat as having been neutered.

Recommended treatment, if it's available and affordable, includes flea medication (especially if a particular cat is infested), ear mite medication, worm medication and a basic dental. The idea is to do as much as you can for the cat while you've got him at the vet. However, in many cases, veterinary services beyond spay/neuter, rabies shot and eartipping will not be available or affordable.

If the issue is expense, then much might depend on how many cats you're dealing with. For example, if you're getting two cats fixed, then springing for flea and ear mite medication might not strain your budget. But if you're dealing with twenty cats, the additional cost could be prohibitive. The primary concern is to get the cats fixed – don't let the inability to provide treatment beyond the basic stop or delay a TNR project from going ahead.

Treatment that is not recommended includes vaccinations other than rabies and testing for Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) or feline leukemia (FeLV). When caretakers give ferals additional vaccinations, it's usually the so-called "3 in 1" shot – distemper, calici and rhinotracheitis. According to the manufacturers of these vaccines, they are ineffective without a booster shot a few weeks later, which is impractical in most cases involving ferals. The vaccines are unnecessary as well because most adult ferals will have already built up a natural immunity to common feline diseases, an immunity that will be maintained if they are provided with regular food and adequate shelter. Simply put, giving a feral a one-time "3 in 1" shot is a waste of funds.

Likewise, testing for the FIV or FeLV virus is also an inefficient use of limited resources. Studies show the incidence of FIV (the feline version of the HIV virus) and feline leukemia in the feral population is no more than a total of 4 to 6 percent – the same as

in the domestic population. This means that paying for the testing of 100 cats will typically result in no more than 4 to 6 being identified as positive for either virus. The money spent on testing those 100 cats could have been used instead to neuter more ferals. Neutering -- by eliminating sexual activity, reducing fighting, improving the cats' overall health and eliminating disease-prone kittens -- is a much more effective way to stop or slow the transmission of deadly viruses than picking out occasional cats who test positive. These economic considerations explain why most established TNR programs do not test.

Another problem is that the kind of test typically used – a "snap" test – is not 100 percent reliable. As a result, some cats who show up as false positives or who might re-test negative if given a little time to fight off the disease, are unnecessarily euthanized. For a detailed discussion of what tests are used on ferals and their possible faults, review paragraph number 2 on the page of the Neighborhood Cats site: http://www.neighborhoodcats.org/info/releasing.htm.

The occurrence of FIV and FeLV in feral colonies is directly related to the quality of caretaking. Colonies that are unneutered, have little shelter and inconsistent, poor quality food are much more likely to be struck with disease. Well managed colonies, by contrast, will infrequently show signs of ill health.

Note that foregoing FIV/FeLV testing only applies to feral cats being returned to their colonies. Any cat being considered for adoptive placement should be tested, as should any cat who is ill -- if the veterinarian believes a test would assist in diagnosing and treating the condition.

Stop and Consider

If you or your program has limited funds and your primary goal is to stop the overpopulation of feral cats, what is the most efficient way to spend those resources in terms of veterinary services?

Eartipping

"Eartipping" is the accepted method for marking a neutered feral cat. A quarter of an inch is removed from the tip of the left ear in a straight line cut. This is neither painful for the cat nor bloody if properly done. One technique is to clamp the tip of the ear off with a hemostat, slice the tip off with a razor blade, than cauterize the wound, applying the cauterizing solution with a Q-tip. It is a swift procedure requiring approximately one minute if done by an experienced technician.

Universally, the left ear is the one tipped. However, on the West Coast of the United States, the practice has developed of tipping the right ear.

Sometimes, when people are new to TNR, they initially view eartipping as a kind of mutilation and attempt to find other, seemingly less invasive means of identifying the cat as neutered. In fact, the eartipping procedure is far less severe a veterinary intervention than removing a female cat's uterus or a male's testicles. It is merely cosmetic, but potentially vital for protecting the cat. For example, an eartipped female will not be unnecessarily re-trapped, sedated and cut open. In some municipalities, feral cat groups are notified when an eartipped cat is turned into a local shelter and then have the opportunity to try to reunite the cat with his caretaker. Without the eartip, no one would know the cat came from a managed colony.

Other attempts at identifying neutered ferals have proven ineffective. A tattoo inside the ear is usually only visible after a cat is trapped and then only if someone thinks to look. Eartipping allows for the identification of a neutered feral from a distance and prevents unnecessary trapping. "Ear tags" are little metallic clips inserted in the ear that theoretically can't be removed. However, they too are difficult to see at a distance and can get caught on twigs or the like, tearing the ear and causing infections, and sometimes falling off. Relying on photos or memory does not alert animal control or anyone else that the cats are being cared for and are already fixed.

If your clinic or veterinarian is relatively new to TNR, you should print out a photo of an eartipped cat and show it to the staff. Don't rely on them to say, "Oh, we know what an eartip is." You may get your cat back with a V-notch cut out of the side of the ear, with too much of the ear removed, or with too little. Showing a photo takes away this risk.

As a caretaker, the eartipping will easily allow you to determine whether any cats still need to be caught. I find it easier to see the eartip by looking from behind the cat – in other words, looking at the back of the ear instead of from the front. Binoculars help, too. If you're trapping in a colony where some TNR has already been done, be sure to check the left ear of each cat trapped. Check the right ear, too, in case a mistake was made, which happens on occasion.

Stop and Consider

How will others know that your colony is being properly cared for if they cannot see from a distance that the cats are marked as fixed? Do you believe the cats need some type of protection in this way?

Stages of Anesthetic Withdrawal

Most caretakers will receive their cats back from the clinic or veterinarian after the cats are alert and have recovered from the anesthesia. There may be occasions when the cats are returned before full withdrawal has taken place, especially involving mobile spay/neuter vans with limited space. If this should happen to you, it's helpful to know what to expect – otherwise the experience can be alarming.

Different anesthetics have different symptoms of withdrawal. I observed one project where the cats all acted as if they were gently waking up from long naps. Most of the time, though, withdrawal from anesthesia has been marked by the following stages:

Unconsciousness

Right after the surgery, the cat is out cold and lying very still, eyes usually open. As long as the breathing is regular (observe the chest area), the cat is fine. Make sure the cat does not twist his neck into an awkward position that blocks off his breathing. If you're concerned about this, alert a qualified veterinary technician. If there's no veterinary personnel available, handle the cat and straighten his neck ONLY if you're wearing thick, protective gloves (Kevlar gloves are best) and you're certain the cat is unconscious. An alternative to handling is to insert a divider in the trap between you and the cat, then open the trap door and gently tug on the cat's tail until his body straightens.

Because of the danger of blocked breathing and the need to handle the cat if this should happen, clinics should not return cats to caretakers at this stage. If a clinic does attempt to return an unconscious cat to you without any veterinary technician remaining on hand, my advice would be to politely refuse to accept the animal, explaining why.

Tremors/Shivering

During the surgery, the anesthesia causes the cat to lose control of her body temperature and it drops. During anesthetic withdrawal, in an attempt to regain normal body temperature, the cat will shiver violently and tremble, sometimes paddling their paws in the air. Again, this is normal and lasts approximately 15 minutes to half an hour, in my observation.

Wobbliness and Agitation

After the shivering stage, the cat begins to wake up and regain consciousness. They try to stand up, but are still groggy and often will fall over or knock against the sides of the trap. They appear to be in a drunken state. At this point, they may become agitated, being awake but not in full control. This is a good time to cover the trap to calm them, if you haven't done so already.

Resting Quietly

The cat is still but alert, quietly resting and with no apparent signs of agitation.

When to Resume Feeding

Adult cats can be safely fed a few hours after they have regained consciousness. Feed them half the normal amount in case their stomachs are upset from the anesthesia. Water can be provided as soon as the cat is alert. Kittens should be fed sooner than

adults due to their higher nutritional needs. Consult with the veterinarian for exact times for resuming feeding and providing water.

Warning Signs

Post-surgical complications from spay/neuter are rare, so it's unlikely you'll ever encounter them unless you handle a large volume of cats. Nonetheless, it's helpful to know what to look for.

There are two "red flag" situations when you should seek immediate help – prolonged unconsciousness and excessive bleeding. If a cat remains unconscious more than an hour after the spay/neuter surgery, this could be a serious problem, and you should call your veterinarian. A large amount of blood -- even one-eighth of a cup -- is another reason to call the veterinarian, for it may indicate that the incision has opened. Urine tinged with blood or drops of blood near the incision site, however, are normal, even a couple days after the surgery.

Seriously Ill Cats

I've encountered situations when the veterinary staff reasonably refused to operate on a particular cat because the animal was too sick for surgery. If this happens to you, ask questions. Basically, you want to find out whether the cat's condition is potentially treatable or clearly terminal. If the cat is so sick that she's going to die in a matter of days, then the kind thing to do is euthanize, especially if the cat is already sedated. The presence of certain kinds of tumors, for example, could indicate advanced malignant cancer.

This situation might be one where an FIV/FeLV test would be useful. The test might help distinguish whether the cat is suffering a bad upper respiratory infection that a week or two of antibiotics would treat, or end-stage feline leukemia.

The point is to try to find out as much as you can. Don't assume the veterinary staff will tell you that they believe the cat is terminal and that euthanasia is appropriate. Some will, but others may be reluctant to do so if you don't request their opinion first.

The Release – When and How

Neighborhood Cats usually holds cats, male and female, for 48 hours before returning them to their territory, assuming they appear alert and recuperated. If there is no significant problem in doing so, we'll hold females for 72 hours to give them a little extra time because their surgeries are more serious. However, the extra day is a luxury and not at all a necessity. Sometimes caretakers like to make sure the cats are eating again before releasing them, but some ferals are too stressed by confinement to eat, so that's not always a good yardstick. As long as they appear alert and there's no bleeding or sign of other problems, it's best to let them go.

There are reputable feral cat groups that only hold the cats for 24 hours before release, believing that any additional confinement is too stressful for the animals and an unnecessary burden for the caretaker. In my experience, often the cats don't appear fully alert until the second day of recovery. One more day doesn't strike me as too demanding if it will improve their chances of a smooth recovery. The topography of their territory can also be a factor – if they have to climb and jump over fences, for example, it's best to give them a little more time to heal and be sure they're ready to resume the rigors of their daily routine.

One practice that I strongly reject as extremely unsafe is releasing the cats within hours after the surgery, as soon as they are alert and recovered from the anesthesia. This provides no opportunity to see if an incision opens or any other complication develops. It gives no chance for the cat to recuperate from the demands of surgery before facing the demands of the outdoors. Like people, not all cats handle anesthesia or surgery the same – some need more time before they're 100 percent. I have known of immediately released female cats who burst their sutures, exposing their internal organs. Releasing right away is all about the convenience of the people trapping the cats, not at all about the cats' well being.

Holding cats for too long is also not a sound practice. Confinement is stressful for ferals, especially when they're fully recovered and ready to go. Once they've recuperated, holding them may be doing more harm than good. Unless a cat is ill or there's some other unusual circumstance, ferals should not be held for more than a few days past the spay/neuter surgeries.

Stop and Consider

Will it be a great deal more trouble for you to hold the cats for 48 hours recovery time instead of 24? What would you do if one of the cats required a little extra time and attention prior to being released?

Weather conditions may be another factor in terms of the timing of the release. We try to avoid releasing them in very inclement weather, like snow or heavy rain. Better to wait a day if possible. If the weather is frigid, I like to release them in the late morning after the sun has had a chance to warm the air a bit, as opposed to a release at night when the temperature is dropping.

Always release the cats back into their own territory – never let them go somewhere new without doing a proper relocation (see Lesson 8.) Ferals are extremely territorial. If you put them somewhere new without going through the two to three week relocation process -- even some place you believe is far safer for them -- they are likely to run away and end up who knows where as they search for their old homes.

After being released, the cats may become reclusive for a few days. Continue to put out food and water as usual. Within a week or two (and often much sooner), the cats will return to their old routine and show you the same level of trust as before.

Suggested Activities

1. Print out a photo of an eartipped cat and distribute it to veterinarians and shelters in your area who might get involved with feral spay/neuter.

2. Talk to your veterinarian about the best way to prepare cats for surgery, taking into account their ages.

3. Find out beforehand at what stage of anesthetic withdrawal your clinic or veterinarian normally returns neutered cats to their caretaker.

Lesson 8: FERAL CAT ISSUES

Rabies

The public health concern most commonly expressed in relation to feral cats is rabies. It is possible for cats to carry rabies and transmit it to humans, so the concern is valid. However, the extent of the problem should be kept in perspective. There were 270 cases of rabies in cats in the United States in the year 2001, according to the most recent data available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There has been no report of a cat actually giving a person rabies since at least 1975, while only three cases of a rabid or possibly rabid cat seriously exposing a person to the disease were reported from 1990 through 1996. So while the risk of a rabid cat transmitting the disease to a person is real, historically it is also small.

Most cases of rabies occur in wild animals (93 percent in 2001), including -- in descending order -- raccoons, skunks, bats, foxes, and other wild animals, including rodents. The risk of feral cats catching rabies is highest when the cats share the same environment with a "vector species." Of the 270 cases of rabies in cats reported in 2001, 214 (79 percent) occurred in states where raccoon rabies also was present.

When feral cats are vaccinated against rabies as part of the TNR process, the danger of raccoon-to-cat and then cat-to-human transmission is reduced. Ineffectual attempts to eradicate feral cats, by contrast, leave an unvaccinated population in place, and the risk of transmission unaltered.

A common concern I've encountered among public health officials is the issue of re-vaccination of feral cats. They worry that caretakers will not keep the rabies vaccinations up to date and that the immunity will wear off. My response is two-fold: (1) by legalizing and supporting TNR, public health officials can require that reasonable efforts be made to try to re-trap and re-vaccinate feral cats; otherwise, by opposing TNR, the officials ensure that nothing gets done in this regard, and (2) it's better to have feral cats vaccinated at least once than not at all, which is the state of affairs in the absence of TNR. The topic is subject to debate, but veterinarians I've spoken with

who have studied the question tell me it is uncertain how long rabies vaccines confer immunity. Caretakers, especially in areas with serious rabies concerns among wildlife, should nonetheless try to re-vaccinate.

Another legitimate concern is that TNR involves close interaction between feral cats and humans during the initial phase of trapping and neutering, creating opportunities for bites and rabies transmission. This is why training in safe handling techniques is so important. One advantage to a municipally-approved TNR program is that access to TNR services, such as low cost spay/neuter, can be conditioned upon adequate training.

If you're thinking about getting a rabies vaccine for yourself, consider that the incidence of rabies in cats is low and that exposure to a bite is highly unlikely if proper techniques are followed. However, if you plan on handling a large volume of feral cats, and you live in an area where rabies is present, then you should consult with your doctor and animal control professionals on whether to get vaccinated.

If you or someone you know does suffer a feral cat bite, there's no need to panic. If the bite occurs when the cat is trapped or otherwise confined, he can be quarantined for 10 days in consultation with a veterinarian or public health authorities to observe whether he displays any symptoms of rabies infection or dies. It can take a trained, knowledgeable expert to judge whether a cat's behavior is symptomatic of rabies, so be sure to consult with professionals in this situation.

In the unlikely event the quarantined cat is judged by an expert to be rabid or potentially rabid, the animal should be euthanized and sent to public health officials for testing. Euthanasia and testing should also take place whenever a cat dies during the quarantine period. If the tests show the cat had rabies, then the person bitten must be treated. The shots required are no longer painful injections in the stomach, but consist of five shots of vaccine in the arm plus one shot of immune globulin over the course of a month.

If a feral cat bites you, but is loose and cannot be trapped and quarantined, then you need to decide whether to receive treatment and the series of shots as a preventative measure. This decision should be made in consultation with your doctor.

Stop and Consider

If there are rabies-carrying species in your area, such as raccoons, would you consider yourself safer if feral cats in your area were vaccinated against rabies? If efforts to remove feral cats in your town have failed, then would it be a wise public health effort to encourage getting the cats vaccinated?

Other Zoonotic Diseases

There is no credible evidence that feral cats pose a significant risk of transmission of other serious diseases besides rabies to humans. Toxoplasmosis is the disease most

often raised as a common health hazard created by ferals, but this is simply not true. The illness is caused by a parasite (toxoplasma) that is already present in more than 60 million people in the United States. Very few people show any ill effects from the parasite, the exception being pregnant women and people with compromised immune systems. While the parasite can be transmitted by accidental ingestion of contaminated cat feces, far more likely methods of transmission consist of eating or handling raw meat.

Feral cat caretakers or people gardening who may expose themselves to touching cat feces should thoroughly wash their hands before eating. Pregnant women and people with compromised immune systems should avoid cleaning the traps of confined cats during the TNR process. But in general, the presence of feral cats in an area is not associated with a higher risk of toxoplasmosis in the population at large.

Plague can be transmitted by feral cats who catch the disease from infected fleas, but this concern appears to be geographically limited to the southwestern United States. In these regions, flea control and care in handling feral cats with symptoms of pneumonia are recommended.

"Cat scratch fever," caused by the bartonella bacteria in a cat's saliva, is relatively common. There's no clear evidence the presence of bartonella is higher among ferals than in the domestic cat population. Furthermore, in light of most ferals' wariness towards humans and their tendency to keep a distance, presumably the risk of transmission is lower.

Transmission of ringworm, a fungus that causes sores on the skin, requires physical contact with an infected cat. It's a problem most often associated with fostering feral kittens or injured or ill feral or stray adults, not with TNR per se.

Transmission of roundworms to humans is another health risk associated with cats who spend time outdoors, but is not unique to ferals. Again, because of the limited contact between people and ferals, the risk is not particularly significant.

Rats

When it comes to rats and other rodents, feral cats are a definite plus on the side of public health. Farmers and stable owners have long used feral cats as a kind of natural rodent control, and their ability to hunt and deter rodents in an urban setting has been well documented. In my own work, I have come across situations where trap and remove efforts temporarily depressed the size of the local feral cat population, which in turn led to a dramatic rise in the number of rats. Balance returned when the feral cats eventually returned to their former population levels.

Stop and Consider

What do you think would happen to the rodent population where you live or work if the cats were suddenly removed and the rodents faced no natural predators?

Wildlife

The impact of feral cats on wildlife has created a great deal of controversy over the implementation of Trap-Neuter-Return programs. Many wildlife advocates view TNR as perpetuating feral cat colonies and their predation on wildlife, mainly ground rodents and songbirds.

There is no credible scientific evidence that feral cats have contributed to the decline of any other species, except in rare situations where wildlife is confined to islands or small areas resulting from habitat fragmentation. (Song bird populations are much more vulnerable to habitat destruction by humans.) However, ferals, like all cats, do have an instinct to hunt and will often prey on smaller wildlife if it is present in their territory. While this predation may not have a species-wide impact, it certainly has a negative effect on the individual wild animals, whose lives are deserving of equal consideration.

Predation by ferals should not simply be dismissed as part of the "natural" order in the same sense that it is natural for a mountain lion to hunt a rabbit. Having been domesticated for thousands of years, cats are not able to routinely establish long-term, self-sustaining populations independent of human support, as bobcats or mountain lions have done. This is why the vast majority of feral cats are not found in the middle of the woods, but rather near a food source provided by humans, whether a dumpster or a daily bowl of kibble left out by a caretaker.

As a domesticated species, cats belong in human homes. The vast presence of feral cats in this country is the consequence of neglect and abandonment, not natural development. The question becomes, then, how do we reverse this trend in a way that takes the ferals' welfare into account and yet is effective in reducing their presence?

Trap-neuter-return offers one possible long-term solution. Practiced properly, TNR can stop the reproduction of the cats, gradually reducing and eventually eliminating the colony through attrition. Fewer feral cats will mean less predation.

Relocation

Often when people first approach me about a feral cat situation that's in crisis, they want to know where there's a safer place to bring the cats. This reaction is a natural one – they care about the cats, fear for their well-being, and believe the best thing is to get them out of the area. The problem is there's usually no place for them to go.

As will be described, a proper relocation requires the cats to be confined in the new territory, with adequate food and shelter, for two to three weeks. Their new caretaker must also be diligent and attentive. These are not easy situations to find.

In addition, feral cats are intimately tied to their own territory where they were born and have lived their entire lives. They know every nook and cranny, notice every slight change, and their very beings identify with this one place. Removing them, even if done properly, should only be considered as an absolute last resort when there is no possibility of allowing them to stay. In most cases I've seen, once the cats are fixed and the neighborhood educated, hostile situations quickly calm down. TNR, not relocation, is the preferred solution in all but the most desperate situations.

Choosing a New Site

First you have to find a new site. You don't have to duplicate the original territory – cats in a warehouse can be moved to a backyard or from an abandoned building to a barn, etc. What the new territory does need are: (1) a reliable new caretaker who will strictly follow the guidelines for relocation and fully accept responsibility for the cats' long-term care, (2) a structure of some sort (barn, shed, garage) that will provide shelter and protection from the elements during the initial confinement and will then provide access to the new territory once the cats are released, and (3) an area safely away from construction or heavy traffic.

Whenever possible, relocate the entire colony together so they can maintain their strong bonds with one another. If that's not feasible, then at the very least relocate two members of the same colony together who you know are close. Before moving the cats, neuter any that are unaltered and nurse sick or injured cats back to health. You want these matters resolved in order to not add to the stress of adjusting to a new place.

Cats can be relocated into territory where there is already a colony, but it makes the process harder for the new cats and should be avoided if possible. To the extent you can, investigate potential dangers such as predatory wildlife (coyotes, wolves, dogs), hostile neighbors, proximity to land designated for hunting, etc. It's likely you won't find the perfect site and will have to make some compromises, but it's always good to have as much information as possible.

Always personally inspect the new site. Feral cats should never be sent off to a new location until their caretaker has gone to see it firsthand. Not all barns are idyllic, cozy places filled with soft, warm hay. A nice country home may sound perfect, but if it turns out the caretaker visits only on weekends, that won't work: newly relocated cats need supervision for two to three weeks, including food and water on a daily basis. There are also unsavory people who run scams, promising wonderful new homes (usually in exchange for a donation), then letting the cats out the back door, never to be seen again. So spend the extra time and effort to see the prospective new place and meet the caretaker in person, preferably before you move the cats. You place yourself in a difficult, highly pressured situation if you bring the cats along when you inspect the new site for the first time and have to decide immediately whether to leave them.

Moving the Cats

Trap the cats, then get them neutered and treated if necessary, and allow a few days for recovery. Be sure to tell the new caretaker-to-be details of the cats' past routine. If they're used to eating a certain type of food or at a particular time of day, try to continue with it. Each change they have to make will add to their stress.

Before you transport the cats, have everything set up at your destination. As mentioned, the cats must be kept inside a structure or space that is adequately sheltered from the elements. The cats also must have direct access from the structure to the rest of the new territory. In other words, they must be able to move under their own power from the spot where they are initially confined to the rest of the territory. It's no good to confine them in a basement for three weeks, then carry them up to the backyard and let them go. They must travel by themselves from the basement to the yard (through a window, for instance) or else they will have no sense of where they are when you release them. Unless the cats establish for themselves the route from the confinement area to the new territory, the relocation will fail as the cats run off to find some place that appears familiar.

Inside the structure or space where they will be confined, set up large playpens or cages in a quiet area, close to a spot where the cats can hide once the cage doors are opened and they're released. In a large barn, for example, the cages could be placed near bales of hay. Typically, newly released cats will be frightened and disappear for a day or two; they need some space within the larger area where they can feel safe. After a day or so, they'll come out for food and gradually become used to their new freedom and surroundings.

The playpens or cages should contain a box or carrier where the cats can hide, a litter box, and food bowls – similar to the Feral Cat Setup shown in this photo:

The way to safely place the cat into the Setup and then maintain him there is described on the Neighborhood Cats site: http://www.neighborhoodcats.org/info/fostering.htm

The environment should be temperate, neither too hot nor too cold. Avoid relocation to an unheated space during the coldest months of winter – the cats can't move around or huddle together, so the cold can pose a risk to their health. If you must relocate during the winter, make sure there are small insulated shelters inside the cages stuffed with hay or straw. Cover the cages with blankets.

No matter what the weather, the cats may try to escape, especially during the first few days. Be certain the caretaker is experienced in handling feral cats in cages. They must have fresh food and water twice a day and clean litter – so the cage door will be opened often, giving them lots of opportunities to make a run for it. In case of escape from the cage or playpen, set out food and water and sprinkle used litter (specifically feces) around the area. Most likely an escaped cat inside a structure like a barn or stable will stay inside and hide rather than seek the outdoors, especially if sufficient food is available close by.

Encourage the new caretaker to talk to the cats and try to bond with them. They need to adjust to new voices as well as everything else. If the cats bond with the caretaker and form a degree of trust, the relocation has a better chance of success. Keeping their feeding times on a schedule is also helpful, as is feeding tastier wet food during the period of confinement and for a few additional weeks after they're released.

Three weeks of confinement is optimal. This is how long it usually takes for feral cats to learn their food source has changed. If you release them sooner, they may run off in search of their old territory. Keeping the cats confined for longer than three weeks is not recommended, either. The idea is to acclimate the cats to their new surroundings so they won't panic upon release. Once this is done, the stress of confinement is unnecessary and can cause the cat to want to flee if carried on for too long.

When the time comes, open the cage doors and leave the space -- the cats will emerge at their own pace. Many will stay in the confinement space for a day or more before venturing outdoors. Continue to feed inside the structure near the cages. Only once it is clear that the cats are no longer using them should the cages be removed. Don't take them away too soon, for an abrupt change in the environment is too stressful.

Stay in touch with the new caretaker. You'll want to know how the cats are doing and be available to offer any help or advice you can based on your experience with them. If at any time the relocation space becomes unsafe or unsuitable for the cats, make sure the caretaker alerts you to the situation and knows you are willing to provide assistance. Whenever possible, have a backup plan – another site where the cats may go, even if temporarily.

Realize, too, that even if the relocation is performed perfectly, one or more of the cats may wander off at some point and not return. There is no way to ensure this won't happen, short of the new territory being closed in with cat-fencing. This is another reason why relocations should only be performed when absolutely necessary.

Remember to remove all evidence of feral life from the colony's old location, especially any food sources. Even if construction or renovation in the area is imminent, it's possible for new cats to move into the vacuum created by removing the original ones. You don't want to go through the TNR process all over again!

Stop and Consider

The next time someone suggests moving feral cats to a safer place, consider whether every effort to avoid the difficulty and uncertainty of relocation has been made.

Building a Community-Wide Program

Many caretakers, once they've gotten the cats in their own backyard fixed and under control with TNR, become interested in helping solve the greater community's feral cat problem. How best to do this will depend on a number of factors, including your available time, whether you have others to assist you, the size of your community, and

the attitude of the municipality and the local animal welfare community towards TNR and feral cats. But to help you get started, here are some of the methods used by Neighborhood Cats when we first started trying to spread TNR throughout New York City:

1. Educate

Nothing spreads TNR faster than teaching it to others. In doing so, you will no longer be the only one in your community with a feral cat problem, and many others will be eager to learn from your success. Schedule and instruct workshops on a regular basis and don't worry if only a few people come at first. Word will get out. Try to gain support from prominent local animal welfare organizations or municipal groups by asking them to provide the space and host the workshops.

For the first couple of years, Neighborhood Cats also held monthly open meetings at a local coffee shop. Anyone with questions about feral cats was welcome to come by during those couple of hours and meet with one of us, or join in whatever discussion was taking place. It was a relaxed, informal way to start building a network of activists.

Along the same lines, start an email list of interested people and caretakers, and keep everyone informed of developments and new resources.

2. Require Active Participation by Caretakers

TNR is a grassroots movement founded on the work of colony caretakers. In most communities, there are too many cats for one group to trap and neuter them all. Instead, the active participation of caretakers in the TNR process is essential if the approach is to spread. This is why Neighborhood Cats requires caretakers to take our workshops and become trained, be responsible for setting up spay/neuter appointments, find holding spaces, and then participate in the actual work. If you insist on this from the very beginning and don't try to do everything for everyone yourself, you will build a TNR movement caretaker by caretaker, and many of these new recruits will go on to train and help others.

You do need to be able to say "no" when someone asks for your help but expects you to do all the work. Remember, your time is better spent helping people who want to learn and participate – they are the ones who will help TNR grow.

3. Set Up Model Colonies

When starting to introduce TNR to a community, it's best to focus on one colony or a small number and manage them as well as you possibly can, tracking all the data. These model colonies will prove that TNR is effective when properly implemented, providing invaluable empirical data when you seek support from others in positions of authority.

4. Choose High-Profile or Precedent-Setting Projects

Once you've set up model colonies and a growing number of caretakers are learning and practicing TNR, then you will be presented with an increasing number of opportunities to implement the method. Choose projects that will have a beneficial impact beyond the immediate colony by generating favorable publicity or by helping gain broader acceptance in the community of TNR. Examples include working with municipal agencies, parks, police or fire departments, or well-known local institutions like hospitals, colleges, prisons or factories.

5. Form Your Own Organization

Turning a community into a feral-friendly place is a long-term commitment. You'll need a solid organization to back up your work and carry it on. Consider incorporating as a nonprofit – an essential aid to fundraising. Bring in like-minded people to share responsibility, being sure they are on the same page from the outset, but keep leadership to a manageable few.

6. Work with Animal Control and Other Local Animal Welfare Organizations

Always be looking out for opportunities to involve animal control and other local animal welfare groups in your work. This is the key to institutionalizing TNR and making it a part of the mainstream. Put aside past judgments and realize there most likely are people in these organizations, too, who want to help ferals. Make this easy for them and find ways they can back your work, whether by providing transportation during a project, referring callers or handing out your literature. Meet with local shelters and humane societies to keep them informed of your work. Even if they're not prepared to help you now, making a good impression could lead to support in the future.

In the end, whether you manage one colony in your own backyard or take on the whole town, you're playing an important role in spreading a new way of dealing with the millions of feral cats in this country. By fixing the cats, seeing to their long-term welfare, and working with your neighbors, you're setting an example for the compassionate treatment of these beautiful beings.

Suggested Activities

1. Find out if any groups in your area are practicing TNR on a community-wide basis and, if there is one, find out if you can help.
2. Once you have some experience performing TNR, hold a workshop for others so they can learn.
3. Hold a town hall meeting on feral cats.
4. Create an online email network or discussion group for feral cats in your area.
5. Approach your local shelter or animal control agency and see if they are interested in trying a pilot TNR project.

Additional Resources

Books:

Community Approaches to Feral Cats: Problems, Alternatives and Recommendations
by Dr. Margaret R. Slater (The Humane Society of the United States, 2002)

Websites:

Sample TNR Policy Presentation (for presentations to municipal and animal control officials) by Neighborhood Cats
Go to www.aspca.org/tnrkit, scroll down to bottom of page for free download

The Nuts & Bolts of Building a Community-wide TNR Program, a lecture by Bryan Kortis, Neighborhood Cats
Go to www.aspca.org/tnrkit, scroll down to bottom of page for free download

Sample TNR Workshop Outline by Neighborhood Cats
Go to www.aspca.org/tnrkit, scroll down to bottom of page for free download