



Shelter

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10th Edition: 2009

The Characteristics of Cats Entering Australian Animal Shelters

by Corinne Hanlon

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The situation is particularly true in the peak breeding season when there is a surplus of cats and a shortage of available homes.

Shelter staff work incredibly hard to re-home and reduce the number of cats entering shelters, which will, in turn, reduce euthanasia rates.

Nationally however, initiatives by shelters, government and the community to curb the number of unwanted cats entering shelters have had limited success. This is highlighted by the fact that euthanasia rates, for cats in RSPCA shelters, increased by 28% in the last year.

Aside from the obvious ethical dilemma of euthanising healthy animals, the management of 'unwanted' cats in the community has some very serious financial and emotional ramifications.

The most recent figures indicate that municipal councils spend approximately \$82 million annually on animal management services Australia wide, with \$30 million spent in Queensland alone. Income generated by registration fees and fines does not cover expenditure on animal management services (Australian Companion Animal Council, 2006).

Every year numerous cats are admitted to animal shelters and pounds around Australia. Unfortunately, a large proportion of these animals are euthanised as an outcome of that entry. The 2008 RSPCA national figures indicate that 62% of cats entering shelters are euthanised and 28% are re-homed.

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Corinne Hanlon, University of Queensland

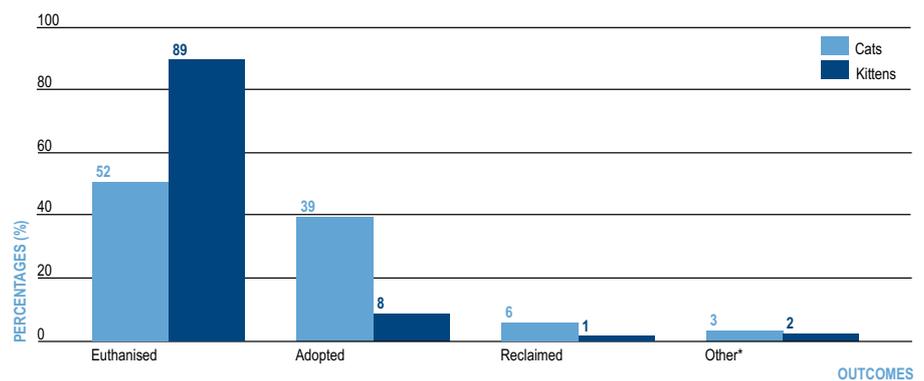
The Characteristics of Cats Entering Australian Animal Shelters cont.

Euthanising animals has some serious effects on the health of shelter and veterinary staff and other animal workers. For example, 50% of people who perform euthanasia as part of their employment, display symptoms of Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS) (Rohlf and Bennett, 2005). PITS results in high staff turn over, poor job satisfaction, and problems in maintaining relationships with other people.

To improve the existing situation, it is crucial to understand the problem. Where do cats entering shelters come from? Are there particular areas in the community that 'supply' more cats to shelters than others? What are the characteristics of the cats that enter shelters? Are some cats at a higher risk than others? Are there differences in cat admissions between Australian states? Do human social, environmental and legislative factors influence this?

University of Queensland PhD student at the Centre for Companion Animal Health, Corinne Hanlon, is working to develop a comprehensive understanding of these complex societal, environmental and demographic issues. Utilising data from Sheltermate, the RSPCA electronic database, Corinne is collecting national data for cats entering RSPCA shelters to investigate the factors associated with cat admissions and outcomes. These factors include: where the cats originate; the effects of the environment; human demographics and legislation; which cats are more likely to be euthanised after entry, and; shelter policies which influence outcome.

Figure 1
Outcomes of cat entry to QLD RSPCA shelters when separated by age groups (adult cats vs. kittens)



This is an important study that has not been undertaken on such a wide scale anywhere in the world, and represents a collaboration between The University of Queensland's Centre for Companion Animal Health, Monash University's Anthrozoology Research Group, and the RSPCA.

Preliminary results from a retrospective study of Queensland RSPCA shelters have revealed some very disheartening results.

Kittens (cats aged less than 6 months) were significantly more likely to be euthanised after shelter admission than older cats, with a staggering 89% euthanised compared to 52% of adults. In addition, only 8% of kittens entering Queensland shelters in 2006/2007 were adopted out to a new home (Figure 1).

It is not known if this finding is a result of overwhelming numbers of kittens entering shelters due to seasonal influx, or if a large number of kittens are too young to be re-homed or cared for. It is highly likely that the majority of these kittens enter shelters during the 'kitten season', producing an unmanageable influx into shelters, typically in the warmer months.

If the supply of kittens exceeds the demand, then shelters do not have the resources to care for and house kittens on a long term basis. Additionally, many shelters do not have the resources required to rear very young kittens i.e. those younger than three weeks of age. Although foster programs are often utilised very successfully, if very young kittens are admitted to shelters in peak periods, this may be a determining factor in whether they live or die.

Further studies are currently underway to identify whether there are seasonal trends or if there is a particular age group of kittens that are most at risk of entry into shelters and subsequent euthanasia.

It is expected that this research will provide a comprehensive view of the cats entering animal shelters and the subsequent euthanasia rates. This will enable development of evidence-based strategies, including possible legislative changes, to reduce unwanted cats and kittens entering shelters, and the numbers subsequently euthanised across Australia.

This research at The Centre for Companion Animal Health is not funded by the government, so to continue this vital work The Centre relies on supporters and donations. Ultimately we hope this research will result in a future where no cat or kitten will lose its life simply because there is no home for it to go to. If you feel you can contribute toward this vital project and help make a significant difference to the future lives of unborn kittens, please call the Centre for Companion Animal Health on 07 3365 2122 or contact us through our website: www.uq.edu.au/ccah.

Australian Companion Animal Council. 2006.

Contributions of the pet care industry to the Australian economy. BIS Shrapnel, Sydney.

Rohlf, V., and P. C. Bennett. 2005. Perpetration-induced traumatic stress in persons who euthanise nonhuman animals in surgeries, animal shelters, and laboratories. *Society & Animals* 13: 201 - 219.



Definition. Temperament: the particular mental and emotional character of a person or animal, particularly with regard to its effect on behaviour.

Adapted from Allen R (ed.)(2001)
The New Penguin English Dictionary,
Penguin Books, London.

Using feline temperament testing to find the perfect match

By Anne Fawcett

Most shelters implement some form of canine temperament testing to determine whether dogs are suitable for re-homing – and often to determine what sort of owners (experienced dog owners vs first-time owners; owners with children vs no children; physically fit vs less active owners) to match the dog with to minimise the risk of incompatibility and re-surrender. It is long established that a mismatch between an adopted dog's behaviour and the owner's expectations about that behaviour can impact on the owner's attachment and commitment to the dog, ultimately resulting in re-surrender.

It's the same with cats: in the US, one of the top reasons for surrendering a cat to a shelter is that they do not match the expectations or lifestyle of the adopting family. But despite evidence that feline temperament testing can be just as useful in predicting cat sociability and matching cats with owners, it is less commonly undertaken. This is unfortunately because sociability, the most important aspect of temperament, can be measured objectively using a sociability scale.

A study of 15,206 feline admissions to Melbourne shelters found that less than one fifth were surrendered by owners. The majority were semi-owned cats and those from colonies. After a 24 hour period, cats were assessed using a sociability scale. Most of the cats admitted were moderately to well socialised. Not surprisingly, colony cats were more likely to be actively antisocial, while the majority of owner-relinquished cats were highly sociable. But there were exceptions: some owner-relinquished cats were extremely antisocial.

As it turned out, of the factors that could determine whether a cat was euthanased or put up for adoption, including age, health status and sociability, performance in the sociability assessment was the strongest predictor of outcome. Antisocial cats were more likely to be euthanased, sociable cats were more likely to be re-homed.

What isn't known is how well the sociability scale predicts that these cats will behave at home. This is where the use of a valid feline temperament test is helpful.

One way of assessing feline temperament is to spend time observing each cat so that you can form an intimate knowledge of its behaviour under a variety of circumstances. But most shelter staff are time-poor, and the sheer volume of feline admissions means that this is simply unrealistic. On the other hand, a standardised temperament test is much quicker to perform, and yields results which can be easily analysed. The ideal temperament test needs to be both quick and easy to perform in a shelter environment, but it must also produce consistent and reliable results.

The reasons for the lack of implementation of feline temperament testing in Australia are unknown. It may be due to a lack of resources, or perceived limitations of the usefulness of feline temperament testing. For example, is the behaviour of a cat during a temperament test likely to help us predict how it will behave in the home of a new owner?

The answer is yes. In a study conducted by Michigan State University's Animal Behaviour and Welfare Group (Siegford et al 2003), laboratory cats underwent a temperament test which measured their responses to standardised interactions with an unfamiliar person. The test was originally developed in 1983 to assess cats before they were placed in nursing homes, and is similar to many canine temperament tests.

Key Points

- **Feline temperament testing provides an accurate predictor of cat sociability and is achievable in the shelter environment**
- **Temperament testing can be used to ensure that the most well-socialised animals are re-homed, reducing euthanasia of highly social cats and the re-surrender of 'anti-social' cats;**
- **Temperament testing can be used to match the right cat with the right owner, reducing re-surrender of cats which fail to meet owner expectations.**



Using feline temperament testing to find the perfect match cont.

It consists of ten different stages, ranging from calling the cat from across the room to more close encounters, such as holding the cat while patting it or gently pulling the cat's tail. The interactions are on a scale from least challenging to most challenging.

Each of the cat's responses are recorded as "acceptable" or "questionable". For example, cats that approached the tester and rolled, purred or bumped their head against the tester demonstrated "acceptable" responses while cats that retreated, hissed or growled demonstrated "questionable" behaviour.

These results were compared with observations of the cats over a longer period of time, and the behaviour of the cats after adoption, to see whether the temperament test results matched the behaviour of cats in different environments and interacting with different people.

They did. Cats that performed well in the temperament test were more likely to respond positively to both familiar and unfamiliar people in other environments. Furthermore, the temperament of cats was found to be stable over time once cats were mature. Thus, examination of temperament scores over an eight month period and across changing circumstances found that they remain fairly stable.

Feline temperament testing is not intended to condemn cats which don't score well. It can be used to match owners with suitable cats. For example, cats that had high acceptable and low questionable scores could be placed with a family, a first-time cat owner or someone seeking an affectionate pet. Cats in the middle might be better suited to experienced owners or perhaps those with older children. Cats in the low group (low acceptable scores, high questionable scores) – as long as they were not considered dangerous – could be re-homed with an experienced owner or someone who does not want a sociable, attention-seeking pet.

One of the limitations of this study is that it was performed on laboratory cats which have a similar genetic and social background – a scenario which does not reflect the more varied population of cats seen in Australian shelters. However, once temperament tests are implemented, shelters can easily ascertain the validity of the test by comparing test scores with outcomes.

For more information on cat temperament testing email Kate Mornement at Kate.Mornement@med.monash.edu.au

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Seigford JM, Walshaw SO, Brunner P and Zanella AJ (2003) Validation of a temperament test for domestic cats. *Anthrozoos* 16(4):332-351.

About Shelter Research

This publication is distributed to every major shelter and pound in Australia. Articles in Shelter Research are written to assist the work of shelters, and information contained therein is obtained from international scientific literature and research.

We welcome your feedback and suggestions:
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Kate and her dogs; Archie and Joseph

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