



Shelter

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Trap-Neuter-Return programs: do they work?

by Anne Fawcett

Editor:

Kate Mornement BSc (Hons), PhD student,
Anthrozoology Research Group, Monash University

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Few topics are as emotive as the management of unowned cats and their colonies. Raise this subject in conversation and you may find yourself in the middle of a heated debate about whether feral cats really kill wildlife, whether colonies should be managed, ignored or eliminated, and how the welfare of these animals can be evaluated. Given that such different viewpoints are held, then it is not surprising that agencies, including shelters have very different approaches to the management of feral cat colonies.

Such colonies can be problematic for many reasons. For example, feral cats can create a nuisance in residential areas due to noise and excretion, they can act as a reservoir for parasites including hookworms, roundworms, fleas and *Toxoplasma gondii* (the parasite responsible for toxoplasmosis), they can pose a threat to wildlife and domestic pets through hunting (although the degree to which this occurs is debated in the literature) and they are believed to be a continuous source of the stray animals, which contribute to shelter admissions. Anyone who works in a shelter knows that there is a higher rate of disease amongst colony cats. For example, they tend to have high external parasite burdens, ringworm, cat flu, cat fight abscesses, fractures and feline AIDS and their lifespan is greatly reduced in comparison to their owned counterparts. It is estimated that about 75% of feral kittens don't live past six months of age (Nutter et al 2004). When they are caught (usually in traps as many are timid and quite fractious when handled) they are often deemed to be temperamentally unsuitable for re-homing – and even experienced shelter staff can find these animals challenging and sometimes dangerous, to handle.

So how do we manage feral cat colonies?

Continued on the back page.



The Community Animal Welfare Scheme (CAWS).

By Ann-Margret Withers



The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) in New South Wales (NSW) has been running the Community Animal Welfare Scheme (CAWS) in regional NSW since July 2004. CAWS was developed as part of a humane solution to the large numbers of unwanted companion animals (UCA) (Lawrie, et al. 2006) impounded and often euthanased in regional areas.

CAWS evolved from the 'Kelso project' which was developed in Bathurst in May 2003, by Margaret Gaal who was the local council ranger and RSPCA branch president. Kelso is a housing commission area with many socioeconomic issues and a high number of roaming strays. On one day, 126 dogs and cats from Kelso were desexed, microchipped and registered, where possible. In the 12 months prior to the project, 124 animals were impounded from Kelso. By contrast, only 18 animals were impounded in the 12 months after the project and only 12 the following year. This was an 80% reduction in UCA's immediately after the program.

Since then, similar programs have been held in Bathurst, Bourke, Broken Hill, Coonamble, Coonabarrabran, Dubbo, Gilgandra, Griffith, Inverell, Leeton, Narrandera, Warren and Walgett. CAWS provides a targeted, subsidised desexing program for the pets of pensioners or low income earners, who may be unable to afford or easily access veterinary services. It is unlikely that these animals would be desexed otherwise. The program is limited to residents within the boundaries of the town, or 'hot spots' in the council region. All animals are desexed and microchipped and dogs are also vaccinated. Owners pay a small fee for the service, which is paid directly to participating veterinarians as part of their payment.

As education and public awareness is the key to long-term effective change, a humane education program in the local primary schools is an important component of CAWS. Educators from either the Australian Veterinary Association or RSPCA NSW deliver such education during the desexing program.

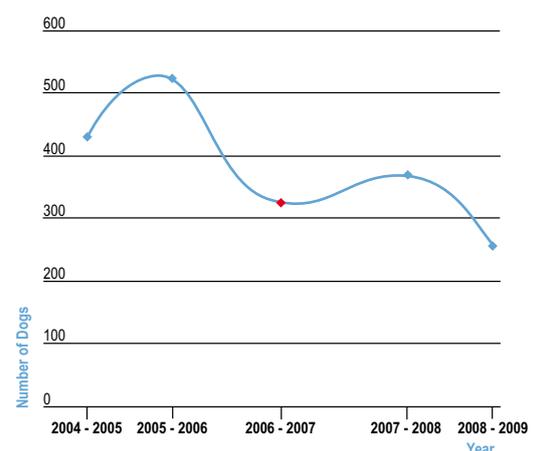
Originally, RSPCA veterinarians travelled to the regional centres to perform the surgery. However, the loss of significant external funding meant re-thinking the model. Now funding

is provided by the local shire council and the level of funding determines the maximum number of animals to be desexed. The program is delivered over a period of 1-3 weeks by local veterinary practices who are willing to participate. This model has proven to be a sustainable method of delivery, with the RSPCA providing the concept, branding and coordinating council and local veterinary practices. The RSPCA also organises education, provides vaccinations, advertising material and media for the event, and organises the payment of the participating veterinarians.

CAWS brings together many stake-holders in companion animal management in regional areas and provides an integrated approach to UCA management. Utilising local veterinary practices, rather than a mobile veterinary clinic, is cost effective reducing travel time for veterinarians and encourages the involvement of local veterinary practitioners. It is also more cost effective per animal due to large distances travelled in regional NSW.

The efficacy of the program is being assessed in a number of towns that have regularly undertaken the program. CAWS has been held annually in Walgett Shire since November 2006. Recent pound data (Bostock, 2009) has shown a reversal in the increasing trend of roaming dogs, and a 50% reduction in the impounding/ euthanasia rate

DOGS EUTHANASED IN WALGETT POUND 2004 - 2009



The level of funding and support from Walgett Shire Council has been very high which has led to this success.



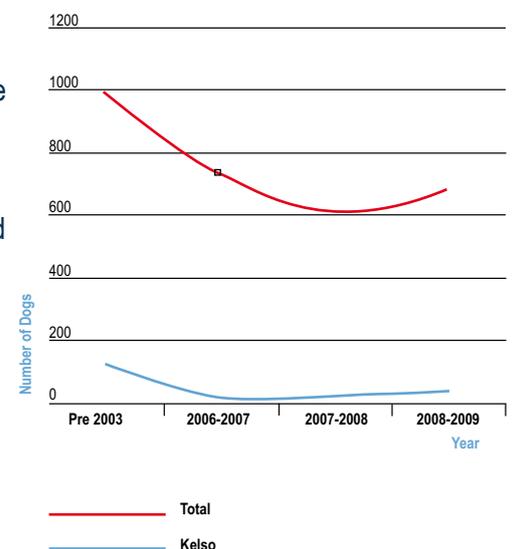
Whilst many factors might have contributed to this, the local council ranger considers the decrease is due mainly to CAWS. The level of funding and support from Walgett Shire Council has been very high which has led to this success.

Bathurst Regional Council (BRC) has supported two CAWS programs per year for the past 3 years, including one in Kelso. Due to a change of recording methods, exact impound numbers are not available for the period prior to 2006-2007. However, Gaal (2009) advises before 2004 the BRC had an impound rate in excess of 1000 animals p.a. Impoundment totals have dropped to 600-700 animals. The numbers impounded from Kelso have also stayed low.

Gaal also reports that litters of puppies are no longer handed in for euthanasia. Anecdotal reports from local veterinarians suggest that there are also reduced rates of Parvo-virus, leading to improved animal welfare.

Although these reports demonstrate the effectiveness of CAWS in reducing UCA's, further development and study is required to objectively determine the long-term efficacy of this strategy. The RSPCA NSW continues to support and promote CAWS as one strategy to decrease the oversupply of unwanted companion animals.

BATHURST REGIONAL COUNCIL POUND STATISTICS



References

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71-94% of cats in a given colony have to be neutered for the population to decline (Longcore et al 2009). Anyone who has trapped feral cats knows that this is a big ask – there are some cats who resist capture despite the best efforts of experienced trappers.

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:
Kate.Mornement@med.monash.edu.au



Kate and her dogs, Archie and Joseph

Trap-Neuter-Return programs: do they work? cont.

One approach is to systematically depopulate colonies by euthanasing all of the cats that can be caught. The perceived advantages of this approach are that a local reservoir of kittens and disease is eliminated, nuisance-related complaints are reduced and wildlife and nearby domestic animals are protected. Opponents of this approach argue that it involves distressing mass euthanasia, that feral cats in surrounding areas will move into the environmental niche occupied by the previous colony, and that managing the existing population is a more sustainable long-term solution. Thus over the past twenty to thirty years there has been huge interest in “trap-neuter-return” (TNR) programs as an alternative to mass euthanasia. The principle is simple: cats from feral colonies are trapped, desexed and returned to the colony. Some programs incorporate screening for diseases like FIV/FeLV, vaccination, worming and treatment for fleas/mites. If a large enough proportion of a colony is neutered, it will eventually die out. It has been argued that well-managed colonies resist invasion by new cats.

But do TNR programs work?

The answer is yes and no. Assuming no new cats join the colony, 71-94% of cats in a given colony have to be neutered for the population to decline (Longcore et al 2009). Anyone who has trapped feral cats knows that this is a big ask – there are some cats who resist capture despite the best efforts of experienced trappers.

TNR programs that incorporate intensive efforts to adopt out cats appear to be more successful. For example, 73 of 147 cats (47%) on a Florida University campus were removed for adoption, significantly reducing the colony population (Longcore et al 2009). For this strategy to be effective adoption rates must exceed immigration rates to the colonies. In another program, 270 out of 814 cats (33%) were captured and adopted out. Had they not been, the number of cats in the study colonies would have actually increased, due to 87 new cats who moved in over a three year period while only 50 cats died (Longcore et al 2009). Longcore speculates that up to 50% of cats in a colony must be adopted out, even with the benefit of desexing, to make a difference (Longcore et al 2009). But in many cases the temperament and health status of the animal renders adoption unsuitable.

When adoption is not a major component of a TNR program the figures are less promising. For example, a countywide TNR program run for ten years in San Diego did not result in reduction of the feral cat population, and in Florida the feral cat population actually increased despite seven years of TNR (Longcore et al 2009). A London colony population hovered between 17 and 19 despite four years of TNR, while two colonies subject to TNR in Florida increased in size due to dumping of cats (Longcore et al 2009). A decade of TNR in Rome resulted in population decreases of between 16-32 % across 103 colonies, but the authors concluded that programs were a waste of resources when the abandonment of owned cats could not be stopped.

It is also possible that only the cats with the shortest flight distance will be caught, resulting in flightier animals surviving and breeding and possibly making the long-term problem more problematic. Existing evidence suggests that to be successful, TNR programs need to be long-term, incorporate re-homing strategies and focus some resources upon the prevention of dumping owned cats. All of which is a big burden on shelters. Also raising public funds for management of feral cat colonies is difficult because the issue tends to polarise people.

If your shelter does run TNR programs, awareness of the target cat population can be helpful in managing resources. For example, desexing pregnant females requires more time therefore scheduling desexing initiatives during autumn and winter, when pregnancy is unlikely, may enable more animals to be desexed during a given period (Wallace and Levy 2006). In addition, any disease-free animals suitable for re-homing should be adopted out rather than returned to the colony.

CAVEAT: TNR programs must not be carried out in States or Territories in which returning a cat to a colony is illegal.

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