

Feral Cats and Our Community

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“National Feral Cat Day” is October 16, 2009

There are millions of feral cats living outside homes in the United States. Feral cats, unlike stray cats, are not accustomed to contact with humans and are too fearful and wild to be handled. Feral cats are offspring of lost or abandoned pet cats or other feral cats who are not spayed and neutered. They typically live in a group of related cats known as a colony. The colony occupies and defends a specific territory where food and shelter are available.

A colony of unneutered/unspayed feral cats can produce a number of problems, including: a growing population of cats, frequent and loud noise from fighting and mating behavior, foul odors from unneutered male cats spraying urine, flea infestations and visible suffering from dying kittens and injured adults. Some people feel sorry for feral cats due to their dangerous and difficult life; others are annoyed by the cats’ behaviors and want the cats removed. So how can a community solve this problem?

Simply removing the cats and relocating them to a different area has proven to be very ineffective. Not only is trapping all the cats in a colony and relocating difficult logistically, studies have shown the highly territorial nature of cats makes it difficult to keep them from returning to the area. Even if you can remove and relocate a colony, unless the food and shelter are not removed, new feral cats would occupy the vacant area. The same outcome is true for colonies that are removed and euthanized – a new feral colony usually moves in, creating an endless cycle.

Animal shelters that receive feral cats are likely to euthanize the cat after a mandatory holding period. It is difficult to safely care for a feral cat in a shelter cage, and extremely stressful for the cat. Feral cats rarely become comfortable enough with humans to become a suitable pet.

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is a strategy for improving the lives of feral cats while reducing their numbers. Cats who are TNR’d can no longer reproduce, and are ear-tipped as the universal symbol of a spayed or neutered feral cat. They are returned to their territory, and a colony caretaker removes and/or TNR’s any newly arrived cats, so the colony stabilizes and gradually decreases over time. Many of the nuisance behaviors are reduced with altered cats, and the colony is a healthier population.

Heart of the Valley is working toward reducing feral cat numbers in our community by offering spay/neuter assistance for feral colonies that have a caretaker committed to the TNR philosophy. It is estimated that the HOV Spay Neuter Assistance Program has altered 150 feral cats this year alone. If you are interested in volunteering for the Spay Neuter Assistance Program, please contact HOV for more information.