Animal Protection League of NEW JERSEY

Promoting Respect | Ending Abuse
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THE PHILOSOPHY OF TNR – and why RETURN is a vital key of success

We're with you, we really are, when you dream of a day when all community cats are safe, and indoors and loved and cared for. Perhaps this fantasy will become a reality once the sheer numbers of community cats falls to a level where this is achievable – which is after all, our goal. But we are not there today, and as such, the RETURN part of the formula is vital and should not be eliminated. Please consider the essence of TNR and how its success as a protocol can be clearly and indisputably demonstrated, and hopefully, universally adopted only when RETURN remains an integral part of the formula.

Return means exactly that -return the cat to exactly where she was trapped. Not removed elsewhere, not adopted, put back in the exact same place. If you have a way to place and adopt friendly cats and kittens quickly, so that doing so does not interfere with your TNR activity please take those opportunities, knowing the potential consequences of this action. If you do not have resources to place and adopt them though, we applaud you for continuing to TNR all of the cats, true to the TNR philosophy.

The TNR philosophy is not about finding the best solution for each individual cat. It is about achieving that 75% or more sterilization rate so that we can be successful with reducing the population sizes of cats being born into outdoor communities. If anything prevents you from continuing to move towards that goal, then it is impeding the success of TNR as a management protocol.

The TNR philosophy also includes a requirement of a caregiver – someone to look out for these cats and provide food, water and shelter for the rest of their lives. It has never been about sterilizing and abandoning cats. The return does inherently mean return to where they have been living with the same resources they have had access to up until this point.

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But what if there is no caregiver? What if they cannot be returned? Aren't there some instances where relocation is demanded? Let's look at some examples.

1/ A caregiver dies and leaves several cats behind they had been caring for.

2/ A caregiver is moving away and cannot take cats with them.

3/ The cats live in a dangerous area – they are threatened by traffic or dangerous environments or by people who intend to harm them

4/ There is a dog who will attack cats, so they need to be removed to protect the cats

5/ The cats will kill birds, so they need to be removed to protect birds

6/ There are too many cats, and the feeder cannot afford to feed them

7/ The cats do not belong to anyone, no one is responsible for the cats

8/ The township has laws against feeding cats or free roaming cats

NONE of the examples above can be successfully addressed by removing cats.

The only example where removal and dislocation of cats is an acceptable risk is if they face CERTAIN death otherwise. None of the examples above are situations where the cats face certain death. Certain death means they are sitting at a shelter perhaps on a 7 day hold and will be killed if they are not removed.

The above examples are all not great situations and involve a lot of work to address, but we are asking that you look at putting in that required work before choosing to dislocate cats.

Why do we choose the word dislocate over relocate?

* Because moving to a new area is never what a community cat would choose for themselves – they are territorial at heart and prefer to stick to their territory. As a true cat advocate, we aim to honor the cat's wishes and to acknowledge their right to exist in the environment.

* Because moving a community cat to a new area, even when following recommended guidelines, has at best a 25% success rate meaning that 75% of the time, it fails, and the outcome for these cats is unknown and possibly worse than their fate had they stayed where they were despite whatever challenges arose there.

* Because most community cats find being moved to a new area highly stressful and unpleasant.

To suffer this dislocation, the cat really needs to be facing a fate worse than the dislocation – and we feel death is the only thing worse. The exception to this is only if the cat is being moved to a permanently enclosed space, with no chance of escape. Resources for such an enclosure are scarce. Most rescues or "sanctuaries" that accept feral cats do not have permanent enclosures for cats after the dislocation period (anywhere from 2 – 6 weeks usually) is over. Removal to an enclosure still ignores what the cat would choose and ignores the right of the cat to exist on their environment, and still will not successfully address most of the problem examples given above however it should be an option that is better than death.

The other very important thing to remember is that as TNR advocates, we can't have our cake and eat it too when it comes to the vacuum effect. Understand and acknowledge that every time you remove a cat from the environment that has been sustaining this cat, you are making room for a new cat to fill this space.

"I thought you said cats were territorial so how does the vacuum effect work?"

Intact cats can have a much larger territory than you suspect. Studies have shown intact cats roam daily up to a 2.5 sq mile radius. Think about how that looks around your home or feeding location. It's a wide area. Sterilized cats have a much smaller territory – it becomes closer to ¼ sq mile (1500ft) for males and 1/10 sq mile (750 ft) for females. If your entire town was proactive with TNR then the chances of the vacuum effect resulting in new cats showing up would be very small. However, if you are just pro-active with managing this one colony at one location, then you can imagine all of the places where other cats may roam from on a daily basis and may decide to "move in" should there be better access to resources at one location over another within their territory.

The vacuum effect has been scientifically proven in many different species of animal. An environment can support a certain number of an animal. If that magic number is lower than what the environment can support, animals will trickle in from surrounding areas and take advantage of this. Another thing that happens is that the number of births per pregnancy increases when the environment has resources to support more animals than are currently there. For example, after a culling of deer, research has shown that the number of births per pregnancy increases. When resources are scarce or the environment is filled to capacity with the number of animals it can support, the number of births per pregnancy goes down. The vacuum effect is a real and observable phenomenon and any form of removal of community cats for adoption or dislocation may very well result, within 6 months, of either a higher birth rate of kittens, and/or with new cats moving in from surrounding areas to fill that vacuum.

We ask that you fully understand and acknowledge all the above before you consider dislocation of a community cat for any reason other than medical care or to avoid certain death. If you have done your due diligence and reluctantly need to move ahead with dislocation – please see our Dis-Location guide.