



THE CAT FANCIERS' ASSOCIATION, INC.

World's Largest Registry of Pedigreed Cats

## "PERCEPTIONS, MYTHS AND MISPERCEPTIONS" CAT ISSUES

**Based on a presentation at the National Animal Interest Alliance Conference  
August 9 – 10, 2008, Windsor, Connecticut**

I was honored to be asked to participate in a panel discussion of animal issues at the NAIA 2008 Conference. The theme of the conference was exploring how to create pet friendly communities, learning about animal care and control programs that work and better understanding various animal problems. Conference objectives included building awareness of perceptions, improving ability to frame positions or messages and learning how to lobby effectively. Experts presented ways to utilize the media to advocate for pets and their owners. The majority of attendees were experienced with dog legislation and issues but not as aware of attitudes about cats. I covered three “perceptions and misperceptions” regarding cats and cat people’s views.

### **“It’s impossible to herd cat people”.**

Surprisingly individuals who love cats are consistently united in their attitudes – they are independent and persistent. Those who breed and value pedigreed cats will fight fiercely for the humane treatment of feral cats. Most shelter professionals and rescuers who care for stray cats also admire the pedigreed breeds. Cat people are like their cats - responsive to suggestion and encouragement and resistant to coercion. Cat fanciers are aligned in their skepticism of government regulation as a means to solve all problems. They understand the broad diversity of lifestyles of cats and realize millions of cats have no owners to comply with laws.<sup>1</sup> Limits on numbers, mandatory spay/neuter, or mandated microchipping laws may be detrimental for dogs but they are devastating for cats, both pedigreed and the homeless random-bred populations. Approximately 60% of all owned dogs are purebred but less than 4% of owned cats are pedigreed.<sup>2</sup> The loss of a few bloodlines caused by intrusive breeder permits or mandated sterilization can mean the extinction of rare breeds.<sup>3</sup>

Limit laws or mandated sterilization laws do not benefit the free-roaming/unowned cat situation either. Among the thousands of free-roaming cats in every community some are “loosely owned” strays who have been abandoned and are fed but have no real home. Others are feral and cannot be touched. These cats may be fed but are rarely sterilized or cared for mainly due to lack of help with

<sup>1</sup> The Domestic Cat: Perspective on the Nature and Diversity. Joan Miller, JAVMA, Vol 208, No 4, Feb 15, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> John McGonagle, author of Breeding Pedigreed Cats; unpublished data analysis shows in all US Households the percentage of pedigreed cats, both altered pets and those owned by breeders, has fallen from 4.2% in 1994 to 3.7% in 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Many breeds have such small gene pools that removal of breeding cats would be devastating to the genetic health of the breeds. In 2007, the most recent year available, a total of 563 Manx kittens and 798 Scottish Fold kittens were born worldwide, to cats registered by CFA. Source: The Cat Fanciers’ Association, Inc., Birth Statistics by Breed.

trapping or access to low cost spay/neuter services. With feral cats the option of waiting a month for an opening in a veterinary clinic or a low cost event day is unrealistic. Punitive laws merely deter those who would like to trap/neuter/return feral cats or take in stray cats.

There is a greater mistrust of animal control among cat people than dog owners. The functioning of “animal control” depends upon the concept that every animal must have an owner who is accountable and the assumption that every animal can be under complete control. The reality with cats is that not all are “pets” and few will come when called. Cat people fear animal control in some communities where trap and kill of ferals is practiced. Households in America generally have multiple cats with 44% owning more than 2 cats (3.4 cats is average).<sup>4</sup> Often limit laws, based on concern for barking dogs, allow only 3 pets in a home putting cat owners in jeopardy especially if they are caretakers for several doorstep feral cats in addition to their pets.

The main objects of cat people are to PRESERVE the cherished pedigreed breeds, PROMOTE the value of all cats whether pedigreed, random-bred or feral and to PROTECT both cats and cat ownership. There is no quick or easy way to achieve change in cat population dynamics. We are encouraged that more cats are gradually living safely indoors and many more are gradually sterilized thanks to trap/neuter/return (TNR) programs for the feral cats.

### **“Cat owners are irresponsible”.**

Why do cat owners “let their cats go outside and roam the neighborhood”? Some believe a leash law for cats would take care of perceived nuisance. It is important to realize that only sixty years ago almost ALL cats were strictly working cats to keep rodents in check and they have lived outdoors in American barns since the pilgrims arrived. Owners with pet cats often had a pile of sand outdoors and filled boxes so their cats could be indoors at least on cold rainy days. The last chore before turning out the lights at night was to “put the cat out”. It wasn’t until 1947 with the discovery of clay as a good “kitty litter”, which was first marketed in the mid 1950’s, that cats’ lives started to change in America. When the promotion of cats being safer indoors caused public attitudes to evolve the personal bond with cats started to develop. Fewer owned pet cats now remain outdoors all the time (only 9% in 2006 whereas 18% of owners kept their cat outdoors in 1998). Cat owners keep their cats indoors at night (70%) and indoors during the day (63%).<sup>5</sup> Cats still have genetically determined predatory instincts that create a strong desire to hunt. If kittens develop the hunting habit some cannot ever tolerate indoor-only living. Pedigreed cats have diminished predatory desires through generations of restricted hunting opportunity and therefore more easily adapt to indoor-only living. Random-bred cats can transition to indoor-only living but this often requires considerable effort to make the indoor or confined life challenging and attractive for the cats.

Cat owners are conscientious and do spay/neuter their cats. Numerous studies show the rate is extremely high with 87% to 94% of owned cats now altered. For example, the latest APPMA National Pet Owners Survey 2007-2008 indicates 87% of owned cats altered and the Massachusetts Dorr Research Report of 2006 shows 94% of cats altered. Unlike dogs it is impractical to keep an intact cat as an indoor pet – the males spray urine and the females, if not bred, come in heat howling non-stop often leading to health problems like uterine infections. There are still too many accidental litters mainly because of procrastination with spay/neuter but very little purposeful mating of cats. Raising and selling cats is not a profitable venture and finding homes for kittens is difficult when there are still many strays available on the streets.

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<sup>4</sup> APPMA National Pet Owners Survey – 2007-2008

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In spite of the high rate of owned cat sterilization, shelters take in thousands of cats and kittens and euthanize far too many. Approximately 60% to 70% of the cats euthanized in most shelters are feral or their unweaned offspring. Many adult cats are relinquished for numerous reasons not related to irresponsibility. Most are there because of human personal troubles like illness or divorce, too many cats, allergies, housing/pet bans and unresolved behavior problems.

**“Dogs are licensed, why not cats? – Cat people don’t pay their fair share”.**

Originally laws were written only for dogs and dog licensing was considered necessary to identify an animal in case of rabies threat or for livestock protection. Eventually the purpose shifted and now this is a major source of revenue for animal control budgets. When cat licensing is suggested cat people view this as the pet owner taxation it has become. Pet licensing is the basis for tracking owners and the foundation for enforcement of limits on the number of pets allowed and other laws punitive toward pet owners. Cat licensing is a deterrent to those who will take in stray cats or trap/neuter/return feral cats. In reality only about 20% of dog owners comply with licensing laws even with aggressive enforcement. Cat owners are generally willing to voluntarily identify their cats with a collar/tag or microchip and routinely rabies vaccinate any cats at risk as protection for their animals but they reject paying a surtax or fee believing community animal problems, including the unowned cat population, should be funded by everyone similar to police or fire services through the general fund. Cat clubs, organizations and individuals contribute to shelters, rescue programs, health studies, feral cat TNR and many cat related events that directly help cats.

Cat people do pay their fair share and more. The high rate of sterilization of owned cats is an impressive example of the concern most cat owners have for reducing the numbers of homeless cats. The volunteers who trap cats, pay for spay/neuter and care for thousands of feral cats provide a tremendous service for their communities. Along with dog fanciers, cat fanciers have established rescue programs across the country. There has been progress made over the past 50 to 60 years regarding cat ownership attitudes. Cat people are taking responsibility for cats by moving from “I just feed this cat” to “I own my cat”. As more cats are considered members of the family rather than independent aloof working animals their future is bound to improve.

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