

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep432_Rand_211130.mp3

Kristen Petrie [00:00:03]

You've tuned in to the Community Cats Podcast ready. Ready? Let's go.

Stacy LeBaron [00:00:13]

Welcome to the Community Cats Podcast. I am your host. Stacy LeBaron. I have been involved helping homeless cats for over 20 years with the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society. The goal of this podcast is to expose you to amazing people who are improving the lives of cats. I hope these interviews will help you learn how you can turn your passion for cats into action. Today, we are speaking with Dr. Jacquie Rand. Dr. Rand is the executive director and chief scientist at the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation Emeritus Professor of Companion Animal Health School of Veterinary Science at the University of Queensland. She's the Emeritus Professor. Rand graduated with a Bachelor of Veterinary Science from Melbourne University in 1975, and is a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Medicine in Internal Medicine. She was appointed Professor of Companion Animal Health at the University of Queensland in 2001 and while at UQ, taught amongst other things, urban animal management. Oh boy, that sounds like a wonderful course. I would love that. She retired at the end of 2015 to head the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, which is dedicated to saving pets lives through research, education and advocacy. She has published over 117 journal articles, authored 43 book chapters, and is author or editor of three books. Currently she's involved in research programs aimed at strategies to achieve zero euthanasia of healthy and treatable dogs and cats and shelters and pounds. And in the last six years has published 21 papers in this area. A key focus of her research is the Australian community cat program. Dr. Rand, I would like to welcome you to the show. And thank you so much for joining us from Australia.

Jacquie Rand [00:01:56]

Thank you very much, Stacy.

Stacy LeBaron [00:01:59]

I have to say, I went to University for rban planning, so that course urban animal management just looks phenomenally interesting to me. So thank you for doing that.

It just looks like a great course, but before we jump into the details from your professional experience and the work that you're doing in Australia, if you could share with our listeners, first and foremost, you know, how you became passionate about cats and so interested in community cat programs,

Jacquie Rand [00:02:28]

Well Stacy, I guess some, as a youngster. I had a temper, like, can't go blackie, but I've always kind of had an interest in feline medicine throughout my career. I did a doctorate in feline urological disease at the Ontario Veterinary College and it was actually there that I developed an interest in feline diabetes, which I have spent 30 years researching and publishing in, and back then we knew not nearly, didn't know much about cats, so different from dogs. And I clearly remember one cat that we had in the clinic and we spent several weeks trying to stabilize it and then it was no longer a diabetic and we send it home with this bill for 100 blood glucose measurements and the owner was really nice about it, but he said, did you really need to measure blood glucose that number of times because it's not diabetic and back then we just didn't know the answer. The answer is now, well the tighter they are at control, the more likely, they are to go into remission, but I had that interest in diabetes and then came back to Australia and took up the position at the University of Queensland and researchers about asking a question and answering that to do things differently. And we said, you know, how come cats are type 2 diabetics, like humans, where genes and obesity are the major issues, but unlike humans, 90% of them need insulin lifelong and they only lived about 17 months after diagnosis. So we asked, is there a better way to treat them? And I designed a project to test a new long-acting insulin that had been just released in a very low carbohydrate diet and showed we could get more of insulin within about six to eight weeks; get, 90% of them off and we more than doubled their lifespan. And that, Stacy went around the world in four years and changed management of diabetic cats. And it showed me the power of research to get change. And at the same time, I was asked to teach this course in urban animal management and it was in the final year of the vet course, which is a five-year course at UQ. So I was teaching it to students, who just spent four and a half years learning how to diagnose and treat diseases, and was saying to them, being homeless for a dog or cat, kills more of them than any disease that you've just learned about in your last four and a half years. And that was pretty shocking and confronting to some students. But you know, because I had a research background, I, you know, it was obvious we didn't understand much about the problem, and yet the euthanasia rate at the time for cats in Australia was about 70% as it was in U.S. And the two biggest shelters taking in cats were admitting 12 to 16,000 cats and killing 90% of them. And it was having a terrible effect on the mental health of staff. And so your research is about, asking the question, can we do things differently to get a better outcome? And it's designing a study to identify better methods and then disseminating that information as we do with the diabetes research by talking at conferences, writing articles, publishing it. So we started off analyzing the data for 191,000 cats coming into RSPCA shelters, Royal Society of

Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Australia and found you know, cause we didn't understand where they're coming from, but **found** that most of them astray, we also are able to show that mandatory sterilization didn't lead to more cats being sterilized and that most of the cats were not microchipped. But those that were microchipped, 37 percent of them, the contact details were all out of date. So, it was clear that strategies were needed to decrease intake and to improve return to owner and adoption rates, and at the same time, back in the 70's, well it back in the 2014, just more recently there was data and a bit before that data coming out of USA that showed that high-intensity sterilization programs, targeted to the locations of highest intake were really effective in reducing intake and euthanasia and Julie Levy's, Dr. Julie Levy's work in this area is so compelling. The problem is, TNR is illegal across Australia. And for example, the state that I live in, unowned cats are classed as three four and six, restricted matter. They can't be fed. They can't be moved. They can't be re-homed or sold. And in fact, in Brisbane, veterinary practices are being threatened with breaches of the Biosecurity Act. If they accept a stray kitten from a public, sterilizing them, rehome them at their expense and the CTV cameras in Brisbane that are monitoring colonies and the carers are being routinely fight. Even given a suspended jail sentence. But no one's later and I was to go get in your life we found out that there was a legal possibility to get a restricted matter permit for research purposes to allow a research trial of TNR. So I got a steering group together with RSPA and Animal Welfare League and also Department of Agriculture and Fisheries representatives. We met for about a year and a half and then I applied for a permit, but they, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries declined it, on the basis that sterilizing cats was a biosecurity risk. So, we argue that the cats and that they're there now and Green Cross, which is a big veterinary group in Australia, had very kindly agreed to sterilize 3,000 cats for free for us. And I said to the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, they're not gonna kill 3,000 cats. It's not very good for their public image. So the cats are either there producing kittens or they're there not producing kittens. What do you want? Well, they turned us down again. So never one to take no for a no, we appeal to the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal and the Executive Director for the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries was representing them, and he then for the session, mediation session. He had to read what we submitted, which was about 700 pages of documentation, including all the research papers that have been published and not just what his policy officer had gave him, and they can send it to you as permit. So now we have a permit. We have a good working relationship and we started the project about August last year.

Stacy LeBaron [00:10:10]

Wow, that's fantastic information. And we obviously with COVID has impacted Australia as much. So, have you been able to get those surgeries accomplished, or have you been put on hold for any part of the year?

Jacquie Rand [00:10:26]

It's impacted us. So this is a big, Stacy, it because we have a permit that's a research permit. There's a lot of research around this whole project. It's really aimed

at negating all those arguments that ecologists have and local government people have about disease spread by cats and numbers of cats, and wildlife predation. So some of that has been impacted. We're doing your knocking, for community surveys about attitudes of community to cats and what their preferences were for managing cats. And that was totally stopped at with COVID and we had to then get a team of volunteers together to do, telephone, calling and get ethics approval for that change. And we have had a number of lockdowns that have been relatively short in Queensland, luckily. Which has meant that we've had to reschedule sessions. So that's and we've been very lucky that the RSPCA, they've got a hospital there and they have been doing with being done sterilizing cats and doing about, we try and do about 50 in a session once a week, or once every two weeks, but COVID, certainly impacted Green Cross and their ability to help us with those 3,000 cats and also lack of veterinarians, which I think you mentioned is also impacting veterinary practices in North America.

Stacy LeBaron [00:12:01]

Before we hit the record button, we were talking a little bit about how you were surveying the public and how you might have had some preconceived notions beforehand. And that the information that was coming out of the surveys, might be a little bit different. Do you want to share some snippets about that?

Jacquie Rand [00:12:22]

This is so part of what we wanted to show with this research was that sterilizing cats in these low, socioeconomic areas led to a stronger bond and where the projects involves owned cats, semi owned cats, those cats that are fed by people who don't perceive that the cat set property, but they perceive themselves as a guardian and also unowned cats and colony cats. And what we wanted to show to local governments was that after these cats were sterilized, that people would have a stronger bond with them and they would undertake more care, you know, risk in inverted commas. This responsible cat caring behaviors. And what blew us away when we surveyed these people and about 85% of them are people who just, you know, they perceived they owned the cat but couldn't afford to have it de-sexed. And sorry I use I'll slip into using de-sexing, which is what we use instead of sterilization. So they just give you a heads up there. And about 15% of them are these people

that didn't consider the cat their property before they heard about the program, but took were happy to take ownership if they were offered free sterilization, microchipping, and where relevant, top council registration. And what we found is that these people are actually not what we hypothesize would be rather laissez-faire. The carers of the cats that are really actually trying to do the best they can with the resources. 90% of them, agreed, or strongly agreed that the cat helped them through tough times they're buying them healthcare products, flea control. They're directly trying to keep them on their property, although when we asked them have the cat left the property in the last two weeks, less successful, but knowing that a lot of these people are in rental properties, and if you've got a door dash cat. So really the strength of the bond with the cat, what they were trying to do in terms of helping their cat, made us realize that the hypothesis that governments make legislation based on the premise that you know, it's irresponsible pet owners and carers that are responsible for the stray cat problem. What it made us realize is that in fact, the paradigm should be that these people are trying to do the best they can and if you help them do better, like having the cat sterilized and help them, perhaps with strategies to keep a door dasher cat in at least at night with strategic feeding, then your, they enacting laws that sort of mandating doing this don't work. But if you help them, you get a much better outcome. So, yeah, it was. So it's quite eye-opening for me.

Kristen Petrie [00:15:38]

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Stacy LeBaron [00:17:14]

One of the comments that I still get on quite a regular basis is the comment about how there are so many people out there that don't want to spay or neuter their cats. And I personally don't necessarily agree with that. I feel like if there's an opportunity and conversation that a majority of the population is going to want to get their cat spayed or neutered. How do you think about that concept?

Jacquie Rand [00:17:40]

Yes, Stacy after having worked in the community with boots on the ground and we've got two community liaison officers part-time, who are working there. I think your understanding of it's correct that, you know, these people have got that are in these low socio-economic areas. And you know, we're talking about, Stacy, in suburbs that we're working in, that twenty to thirty percent of the people on their clusters low income which is a household of 2.4 people living on less than \$650 a week and to have a female cat sterilized, it's 300, it's about \$300 in Australia and microchipped. If it's pregnant at might be fifty to a hundred dollars more, vaccinations and count the local government registration so, you know, to vaccinated, sterilize a female can be over \$400 and what we know from our research, people are feeding and have the need to have on average two cats sterilized. So, on an income of, household income of six hundred, less than six hundred and fifty dollars a week, how the hell do you afford to have two cats sterilized, that might be eight hundred, nine hundred dollars, including local government registration, and it's so it's just not a priority. But, you

know, they care for the cats. And if you can help them with having a free. And, you know, they may not have transport, they may not have enough money for petrol. They, maybe you're not able to take time off from a casual job to take them to the clinic to get them sterilized, as all these sorts of challenges that you and I don't face on a daily life. We can just book in and drive a cat to the clinic. So, I absolutely believe the people caring for those cats want the best from them. They don't always understand the implications of a cat having kittens and I, you know, I clearly remember when I was in Hawaii, actually, talking to the hotel receptionist you saying, oh, yeah, oh, yeah, we always had cats and they had kittens and the other kittens just went off and he didn't see a problem. But then I said to him but those kittens end up coming into shelters and they're just overwhelmed with kittens and someone has to kill them and that has a terrible effect on people's mental health and it was then that he realized the implication of a cat having kittens. So sometimes they do need information coupled with the opportunity to have affordable sterilization for their cats.

Stacy LeBaron [00:20:31]

In your research, is it necessary that these spay/Neuter costs be at free? Or is there a certain level where you think folks could afford to pay partially. And the reason I ask this question, is at least in the United States, we're faced with that extreme veterinary shortage. And for our high-volume high quality, spay neuter clinics, many of them have lost veterinarians or cannot grow their capacity to hire more veterinarians because there's a shortage, therefore, obviously we're talking about having to pay higher salaries for the veterinarians in the clinics, to be able to grow the program or maintain a program. And so, there's a balancing act there in terms of the dollars serving the community, as well as being able to operate as a viable business. Do you have those kinds of challenges and any sort of analysis of figures of like, what could the community afford?

Jacquie Rand [00:21:29]

That's a good question, Stacy. And we are having those conversations as well. And obviously, they're, you know, there's a range of capacities to pay for sterilization services and it depends on what the goal is, too. Accepting cats into a government shelter or to our welfare agency, it costs money. It costs money if you want to try and rehome them, you've got to keep them, you've got to sterilize them, find a home for them. So, where you've got locations that are really contributing excess cats to your

shelter or municipal facility, then it can just make good financial sense to go in there with programs that you get your virtually 100% of the cats sterilized because that will really reduce your intake. But, you can offer at the same time other programs that where people do contribute something or you can go in with sequential programs. So initially, the vets might offer 20% off and have an advertising program, which they do here for RSPCA. And then go in with lower ones. And then for the one, the people that still haven't had their cats sterilized, to go in, and you might have to help with transport and that sort of thing. So I don't think there's a one answer, but certainly making it free, we get good uptake from the community.

Stacy LeBaron [00:23:11]

I know, that Brian Cordis has been a great advocate of focusing on targeted areas, and I know you've touched upon the fact that you've looked at certain areas where they are low-income, twenty to thirty percent are classified as low-income families. Do you also overlay that with the number of cats that are getting surrendered into the shelters and using that information to try and create targeted projects?

Jacquie Rand [00:23:39]

Absolutely. So the Australian Community Cat program is going in 4 States, but the main research area is in Queensland and we chose a low socio-economic suburbs, but the ones we chose to start the program in, had the highest cat intakes per thousand residents. So between 20 and 25 cats per thousand residents, which is high in the average for that city of over 200,000 people is generally lowish socio-economic and they have, I think about 15 cats per thousand residents coming in as an average to be RSPCA shelter, whereas, the average for the whole of Queensland's about seven and a half. So, you know, we know with 25 cats per thousand residents, they've got a cat problem. And so that's what we've started targeting. And just mentioning Brian Cordis and the neighborhood cats, Brian and Susie Richmond, have been unbelievable in their support of our project and his wealth of advice is just phenomenal. And in fact, we have an operations meeting every two weeks and I don't think Suzie, they've hardly missed any for the last year and two years, year and a half. So, we have to thank them a lot for how we've moved forward with this project.

Stacy LeBaron [00:25:10]

It's great and Brian and the Community Cats Podcast and the Neighborhood Cats and the Community Cats Podcast, do collaborate together on a trapper certification workshop, and we do a whole range of other webinars, all throughout the year, focusing on colony caretaking, trappers tips and tricks, but we do a monthly trapper certification webinar for folks that want to learn how to trap cats in their communities efficiently, effectively, safely, calmly. If you know what you're doing it's much better for trapping cats in the community, so it's best to learn ahead of time. I don't know about you, Dr. Rand, but if a person goes in and starts trapping cats, and they don't know what they're doing. it can cause a lot of trouble.

Jacque Rand [00:25:56]

Yes, and that's where Brian has been so, Brian and Susie, and their videos, and the resources that they've got on their website is just phenomenal. And the courses that they run and we couldn't have done it without their help. It's just, we're so grateful to them and we've had help from a lot of other areas as well. And you talked about the difficulty of getting vets and funding for these. And we had, we actually applied for some grants from the Australian Research Council, which is a big granting body. And we applied twice, and, and didn't get the grant. And one of the reviewers said, I do not wish to see any TNR trial endorsed through the Australian Research Council. As our lead organization responsible for setting the standards of Australian research quality, this project should not be supported. We've already lost 10% of our native mammal species and a further 20 percent of threatened with predation by feral cats and foxes and is identified as a principal agent of this law. So, you know, we have those sorts of challenges in the demonization of cats in Australia that your effects are funding, but we've been very, very grateful, the Brigitte Bardot Foundation, stepped up, and put some funding in, the Bissell Foundation, put some funding in. Brian and Susie Cortis and Susie Richmond helped us with a little bit of funding for trap cages. So, I think that where there's a will, there's a way and certainly part of this research is to do a cost-benefit analysis, including a social benefit. And I think when you I think that that's really, really important because for local governments that have to do animal control and animal management. I think if we can show your credible cost benefits from investing in stopping kittens and it makes more sense that they'll put money into the budgets and that will then help fund these clinics.

Stacy LeBaron [00:28:03]

I agree with you 100%. I, you know, as an advocate for your programs, you try to find you know, what's the angle that I need to take in order to convince the funders that you know, this is the best way to go and it's unfortunate that we have to do that. But you know and some situations in the United States will say well, it's so that we can get every cat to get a rabies vaccine. In other situations, it's to reduce the number of kittens that are found as roadkill on the roads. I mean, that's very compelling to say, you know, we don't want to see the bodies of cats and kittens on the roads and therefore we want to reduce that number. So you have to find out what are the phrases, the lines that are going to move the needle so that you get support from the from the community, from the stakeholders, you know, whatever is impacting them, whatever problem, they have, that you can solve. Solve it even if it is, you know, a cat on somebody's car and you have to figure out how to prevent that cat from getting on that person's car. And that's the only thing they care about, but yet, then they'll become your supporter and help you in other ways. It's very strange, how that happens. But it's the way the world works. It seems to be. So you have to learn how to be a strategic advocate, I think.

Jacquie Rand [00:29:22]

Absolutely. And I think there hasn't been enough focus on the impact on the mental health of staff in shelters. I mean, it's well documented that killing animals are causes post-traumatic stress, increases the risk of suicide in North America. The animal rescue sector has a suicide rate that's number one along with emergency responders, police and fire. And that's pretty shocking and we haven't costed that impact in. And the number, it's increasingly becoming evident to me that particularly in regional towns, a lot of veterinary practices are being asked to do local government work in terms of euthanizing cats and some of them have regular bookings to just take in cats and euthanize them and that's damaging people's lives. And it's just not recognized and I think we need to do, talk about that more because we're losing veterinarians so much from the profession and killing healthy and treatable animals is just awful for someone who's dedicating their lives to saving them.

Stacy LeBaron [00:30:37]

I can't agree with you more from that standpoint. There are so many situations, you know over almost 30 years that I've been involved in animal welfare, where I will see or hear about certain situations and, you know, I was, I guess I called myself being raised in an environment where luckily I did not have to push away from a euthanasia decision because we were taught to always look for other alternatives. So I was, I was born and raised with trap neuter return being the first option, always. And so I feel lucky and blessed to be able to be in that position, but I have seen and been involved with from the sidelines with organizations where there has been a lot of euthanasia and I've seen the wear and tear that that has done on the folks that have worked in those facilities. And it is really, really brutal and not to say that there aren't stresses and worries working in an environment where you're not euthanizing for space because they're still lives on the line. There's stresses involved and there's a phrase called moral distress too, as well as compassion fatigue, and I think we wear both of those hats in this industry and it's just, we have a lot of work to do if we want to take care of our folks and we want to really encourage folks to be part of helping animals rather than burning them out in two years and then having them move on to something else.

Jacquie Rand [00:32:09]

Listen, and Stacey that reminds me of a conversation I had with Jenny Cottrill, who is absolutely inspiring animal management officer in the city of Band, New Orleans. She talked about sitting in the car with a little kitten. It was a pre weaned kitten that had been found on a business by building site, and she was with her animal management colleague and they spent an hour sitting outside the shelter that was their service provider, calling people begging them to take this kitten and she couldn't find anyone to take it and they took it in. And their shelter, like most shelters in those days, had a policy of just euthanizing pre-weaned kittens on entry, and she vowed to do something differently in the future, and she actually got her local government to put in funding for free sterilizations, and that ties back to that targeting, Stacy, because she came to me after several years of doing it and saying, look, we're still getting complaints from some of the areas and we looked at her all the suburbs contributing to her city. And then we sorted them on what's called a Sofia code, a code of advantage and disadvantage. So it's really a sort of shows, the level of socio-economic level. And it was interesting that the three lowest suburbs had by far

the highest numbers of complaint calls and calls about stray cats, and they'll sometimes 10 times higher than some of the other suburbs. And then she started to do, really targeted, sterilizations and door knocking, and she just rang me quite excitedly, a few days ago with her most recent data, and in the city of now 130,000 people, her total intakes going to be about 125 cats, which is less than one cat per thousand residents and then euthanasia is a very low. So, and she's got cost figures now on the benefit to the local government for investing in that, but it's also, the impact because when you lose stuff, it costs you money to replace some and those people also have their mental health damaged as well.

Stacy LeBaron [00:34:28]

That story is music to my ears. I always think of it as being like, the aha moment. I had a situation where there were a dumpster with, you know, thirty to thirty-five kittens, all with eyes that needed to be removed and that kind of thing. And, you know, you have these visions. And so she had a moment and I'm like, we're not going to see this again. You know with this is not going to happen again, we're going to do what we need to do so that this is not going to be part of our regular lives and you know, that one little kitten convinced her to make a change and to try and rethink the situation. And so, next time you talk to her, please pass along my best regards, and thank her for everything that she's doing and congratulate her on a tremendously good job and well, done job. And I just, I love those stories. They're just fantastically great. Jacquie, if folks are interested in finding out more about the research and the work that you're doing, how would they do that?

Jacquie Rand [00:35:29]

Well, the website is the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation and we've got material there on that. But if they're particularly interested in specific areas they can also email us and the contact details are on the website too and we're happy to help them with information if it were done help them.

Stacy LeBaron [00:35:44]

And is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners today?

Jacquie Rand [00:35:48]

No, I guess some, just your many thanks to the many people who have helped and we just had a, so we've got some research associated with showing that hoping to show that the cat, free-roaming cats numbers decrease over time because that's what the wildlife people want to see. And for example, last week we had people from the Smithsonian Institute come into a Zoom meeting to help us with advice and the Humane Animal Alliance in North America, there have been so many people who have helped us. Lisa Labrecque with information on anesthetics. It's just so many people have reached out and we've reached out to them and they've been so generous in helping share knowledge and that's what we want to do now to help other people and so the outcomes better for cats in shelters. We know that it improves the outcome for dogs in shelters and we decrease this exposure to this terrible effect on mental health and having to kill animals. So, thank you, Stacy for inviting me to share a little bit about what we're doing here in Australia,

Stacy LeBaron [00:36:57]

Dr. Rand, I want to thank you so much for agreeing to be a guest on my show today and I hope we'll be able to have you on in the future.

Jacquie Rand [00:37:05]

Thank you Stacey. It's been a pleasure.

Kristen Petrie [00:37:07]

That's it for this week. Please head over to Apple Podcasts and leave a review. We love to hear what you think, and a five-star review really helps others find the show. You can also join the conversation with listeners, cat caretakers, and me, on Facebook, and Instagram. And don't forget to hit follow or subscribe on Spotify, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast YouTube, Stitcher or wherever you listen to podcasts, so you don't miss a single show. Thanks for listening, and thank you for everything that you do to help create a safe and healthy world for cats.

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