

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep442_Kortis_220207.mp3

Kristen Petrie [00:00:03]

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

Stacy LeBaron [00:00:13]

Welcome to the Community Cats Podcast. I am your host, Stacey LeBaron. I've 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. And today we are listening to the second part of our educational session from the folks at Neighborhood Cats with Brian Kortis and Susie Richmond. It is focusing on Return-To-Field & Targeting: The Community Cat Program. This is our second part of a two-part series. If you missed the first part, I would highly recommend you go back to Communitycatspodcast.com, to the website, or go back into your podcast feed, whichever place you happen to subscribe to the show. Go back and listen to Part One, and then hop right in and join us for this second learning session with the folks at Neighborhood Cats. If you are interested in learning more about how to do Trap-Neuter-Return and how to do it strategically, feel free to join us to get certified in TNR at one of our TNR workshops that we have the first Saturday of every month, except for in January and July. You can sign up for those programs also via the Community Cats Podcast website. And I hope you'll turn your passion for cats into action. Join us and make lives better for cats in your community. Thank you again. See you next week.

Bryan Kortis [00:01:43]

So what are some of the common fears, besides that everybody's going to freak out? Number one fear is that people will harm the cats. You know, they brought them in because they don't want them there--you put them back exactly where they came from, you're inviting abuse. A common fear, but not one that--and a risk for sure, and this is part of why you need to have good processes in place. If you have a return-to-field program, you need to thoroughly interview the people who bring the cats in. You need to get as much background as possible, so that, you know...Look, most people are not violent, they are not going to harm an animal, even if they're angry about your policy. Now, every once in a while there is somebody with a couple of screws

loose, and you need to have processes in place that will allow you to pick that person out. But you need to base that on objective data like “there’s been abuse in the area before,” “this guy’s been a problem before,” or whatever it might be, um, “there’s been some mysterious deaths in the area.” Something objective. But the general fear that people will be unhappy enough to the point where they’re going to harm the animals is not something that has been reported. And this is, now we’re 13 years in, we’re not seeing widespread abuse as a result of this program. And that’s because most people are decent and, again, are not going to go to the point of actually physically harming another creature.

Bryan [00:03:06]

So another fear is, you know, are the people who are used to dropping off cats at the shelter, problem solved, at least for a few months—are they going to complain, especially if you’re receiving any type of government funding, or if the shelter has a government contract. And the answer to that is yes, they will. They absolutely will complain. And that’s why, before you launch a return-field-program, it’s very important to educate the government officials and the policy makers in your area about what you’re doing and why you’re doing it. It doesn’t mean, if you don’t have to, that you need to ask their permission, but you need to inoculate them, you need to let them know the policy behind it, you need to know what you’re trying to accomplish, what your benchmarks are. And you need to let them know, “Be prepared, some people are going to call you up and complain about what we’re doing.” So at least you’ve inoculated and it’s not a surprise, because that’s when you get into trouble, when people start calling their council members and complaining and they don’t know anything about it—all of a sudden, because they’re getting all the information from the person who’s complaining, they don’t know anything about why what you’re doing, and they may just take their constituent’s side without knowing that they’re doing that, and without any countervailing information. So be smart about it and lay the groundwork, and you won’t run into serious problems with government officials. And if there is really a serious problem, then you’ll know about it *before* you launch the program instead of after.

Bryan [00:04:30]

There's also a fear that, since the cats--Return-To-Field cats tend to cycle through quickly, that cat owners won't have an opportunity to find their cats, to go to the shelter and to reclaim them. Well, the reality is, sadly, that the national number of cats who are reclaimed is only 2%. So many studies have shown that if you take a pet cat and you put that cat back in their own territory, they have a far greater chance of returning home than if they sit at the shelter waiting for their owner to come to them.

Bryan [00:05:05]

So let's touch on that controversial subject, which is "friendly cats." And as I say, the problems Return-To-Field programs have run into have not been the general public saying, "Oh, how could you put these cats back out here?" It's come from rescuers who think that the shelters are using Return-To-Field programs as a way of bolstering their live release rate numbers, and are taking adoptable cats and dumping them on the street. That's the stereotype. Now, some of this criticism has been caused by the animal welfare field, by the Return-To-Field programs themselves, because they have not messaged well. When the criticism comes, there's a tendency to be opaque and not to explain what you're doing or why. There's also been, the field has become too ideologically, too rigid in their thinking about friendly cats and Return-To-Field, and it's become this kind of black-or-white issue. And that's what, at the bottom there, when I say, "Avoid an autopilot approach." So some shelters have policies where every cat who's above a certain age, like, say, over the age of four months, whatever their temperament is, whatever their circumstances are, unless it's a very very dangerous situation, they're going to fix the cat and put the cat back and they don't care whether the cat's friendly or not. And then you have shelters who are just the opposite extreme--any cat that's friendly and potentially adoptable is never going to return. And when you have that kind of a black-or-white approach, that's when you get into trouble, because you miss all the nuances, you, every situation—you know, having been involved in two Return-To-Field programs myself, one in which I drove, Susie and I drove the cats back, we were the drivers, and another program where we're the deciders, we make the decisions about which cats go back--every cat is a different situation, every circumstances are unique.

Bryan [00:06:58]

So what we advise in order to avoid this controversy is to take, first of all, to be transparent. Let the community know what your decision-making protocol is, and don't go on autopilot. Consider each cat, and the factors that you have to take into account include these. So what's the capacity for care? Right? If you're in the middle of kitten season, and you're 120% capacity, and your foster homes are all filled, and you've got a friendly cat who looks like he could, you know, might belong to someone or has done quite well in his community outdoors, that may be your best option for that cat. On the other hand, if you don't know the cat's situation or you think it might be risky, and you've got plenty of open cages and a high, good adoption rate, then it may be better to keep the cat in. What's the cat's history? So when you do Return-To-Field, as I've said before, there should be a vigorous interviewing process of the person who brings the cat in, and you should find out how long has the cat been seen in the area, what were the circumstances. And that kind of information, if you're knowledgeable about outdoor cats, can really tell you what's going on. So, for example, we had a cat who had never been seen before, appeared on somebody's porch, wouldn't leave the porch for two weeks, but just stayed there, would cry, and then the person starts to feed them and they just would never leave the porch and was very friendly. That's not a cat who belongs, who--that's probably a cat who was abandoned or was lost. And then they just took refuge and were frightened and just stayed there. On the other hand, we've had cats where they've been known to be in the area for years, and people actually complained when somebody brought the cat in and started calling the shelter, like, "What did you do with our cat?" So that's a friendly cat, too, but that cat's doing great, and it can, it's thriving and is wanted there, and that's a good time to return them. So that's why you need that history.

Bryan [00:08:54]

Keep in mind, too, that with trap-neuter-return programs in general, there's a goal of reducing the free roaming population. So we--this is our own bias at Neighborhood Cats, but if all things are equal, we're going to place the cat in a home because that's one less cat on the street. If we don't have information that leads us to believe the cat would do well. So we recommend an individual assessment of what is the best

available outcome, considering everything that is involved in your shelter, in your community, and with that particular cat. And don't do a black or white, that's--when you start automatically putting friendly cats back, you're going to end up with some really upset rescuers, and sometimes rightfully so.

Bryan [00:09:38]

I mean, I've seen some of the cases that have led to lawsuits over friendly cats being put back--well, I shouldn't say lawsuits. I don't want to over dramatize it. There's one that's going on right now that I'm aware of. And when you look at the facts of that case, it was pretty questionable putting that cat back. And I think they did it because they just went on autopilot. "The cat came from outside, the cat goes back outside." So don't do that, and we'll stay out of trouble.

Bryan [00:10:01]

So if you're interested in Return-to-Field and the mechanics of it, like the interview process, like how to house them, what are all the factors that go into assessing the eligibility of a cat, including age and temperament and health and things like that? HSUS, Alley Cat Advocates, and Neighborhood Cats, we all got together and decided that, you know, we kept seeing Return-To-Field programs starting and people having no resources. Everybody had to start from scratch or word of mouth. So we put together a handbook that is very much meant as a reference material that goes over all the different mechanical aspects of Return-To-Field, including messaging to the community. Again: lists, checklists for before you return the cat—you know, a lot of real practical, hands-on information. You can either download a free PDF copy of this handbook or you can buy a print copy.

Stacy [00:10:57]

Brian, do you have a couple of minutes for some quick, some questions out there?

Bryan [00:11:01]

Oh, yeah, absolutely.

Stacy [00:11:03]

There were definitely a lot of questions out there, more about predation, the bird situation, and that kind of stuff, and you may be covering that in the second part, so if

I am touching upon things for the second half, just say, "We're gonna talk about that." But I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about your transition from going from New York--which has more seasonal, it's got the cold winter, we were just talking before we hit the recording about the fact that there's fewer kittens to deal with--and then going to Maui, and your experience with you and Susie going to Maui, what you thought you were going to run into with regards to Trap-Neuter-Return, and, you know, how were you received there?

Bryan [00:11:43]

Well, we expected, you know, especially the island of Maui was always known as "Meow-y" in the cat animal welfare world because of the extreme overpopulation of free-roaming cats. And what you hear if you listen to national media is a lot of propaganda from the conservation community, about how the cats are wiping out all the endangered species. And they actually run, used to run TV ads, like the cats on local television stations and radio spots. So we expected to walk into a very hostile environment when it came to Trap-Neuter-Return. And we thought it would take probably at least a year or two before we really ever got going with the hands-on work. And what we found was the exact opposite. We found people so eager for help that when we would offer to, because the Maui Humane Society opened a free community cat spay/neuter program, and we would do a lot of the trapping. And when we offered to people like, "Hey, it's not gonna cost you anything, you just gotta work with us, we'll get your cats trapped and fixed and bring them back," they were falling over themselves to get that service. And in fact, like, right now, we're not doing all that much trapping because the clinics are all full without us. They're doing thousands and thousands community cats a year. So we discovered that it was really people on the ground, people who care about the cats, people who feed them are the same everywhere. They really care about their animals. The vast majority of them understand that spay/neuter is a good thing. They don't want more cats to feed. They don't want a lot of cats preying on wildlife, but they don't want to kill the cats either. So really, you know, trap-neuter-return throughout Hawaii has grown explosively, not just because of us, but when we first got here, except for Maui which had just changed, all the shelters on the Islands had extremely high euthanasia--like 80% or higher cat euthanasia rates. And that's completely turned around now. And

there are TNR programs available on all the Islands. So we've seen a tremendous amount of progress.

Stacy [00:13:50]

Excellent, excellent. All right. Well, I'm going to let you continue on, and then we'll have plenty, a little more time at the end for Q&A, we'll cover all that.

Bryan [00:14:00]

Okay, great. Thanks, Stacey.

Bryan [00:14:01]

Hey, everybody, let's get back into the subject at hand. So we've talked about Return-To-Field, but I also want to talk about "targeting" and how it can be combined with Return-To-Field to make a full, the fullest possible cat program. Because Return-To-Field on its own, from a population reduction view—and that is, remember, you know I see Return-To-Field as a part of the TNR program. Now, that's something that's a separate thing all by itself, it came out of TNR, it's complimentary to it. And as I said before, one of the main goals of trap-neuter-return programs on a community level is to have fewer unowned free roaming cats on the streets. So when you only do Return-To-Field, that can be a problem.

Bryan [00:14:47]

So here's our Return-To-Field Kitty. Remember, we returned him to Main Street. Well, this is the backyard that he comes from. And the red circle in these graphics signifies that he's a fixed Return-To-Field cat. So you put him back on Main Street. Now, if he's, or she, is the only cat in that area, then you're fine, right? This kitty is not going to contribute to any more reproduction, and you've done that. But if this cat's part of a colony of cats, ten cats--and as we said before, when citizens do trapping, they tend to do it anecdotally. They don't know how many there are, they only have one trap, they put it out, whoever goes in first gets caught, you end up with very low sterilization rates for that area. And now we have this one cat out of ten who's fixed. That's not going to lead to population reduction. Those nine cats that are unaltered--and it could be seven cats, or even six cats. If the person continues to trap and gets a few more, their reproduction is going to outpace the loss of reproductive capacity, they're going to have more litters of kittens, they're going to be

able to reproduce enough to maintain the carrying capacity of that environment. So if that environment can only handle ten cats, fixing this one cat is not going to change that. Fixing two or three of these cats is not going to change that. You will continue to have ten cats in this neighborhood, and the Return-To-Field spay/neuter in this situation will have contributed nothing to population control. Now, on the other hand, if we said, hey, where there's one, there's many, and we took this Return-To-Field cat to be what we would call “a red flag” or “a scout” or a sign that there are cats in this community, and then we not only return this cat, we send a trapping team out to that neighborhood, and they talk to the feeders and they discovered where all the other cats are, and they all got fixed, and that would be, the blue circles would be the TNR'd cats. Now we have population control. Now, we've integrated on the colony level, which is just talking about this particular group of cats, we've integrated Return-To-Field with TNR in a way that does lead to population reduction.

Bryan [00:17:03]

Now, if we look at this--and here we are in Feralville, for those of you who haven't been here for a while, it's a city somewhere in the Midwest in it looks like the state of Iowa. This is what Return-To-Field--if you're only doing Return-To-Feld, this is what it looks like, right? You've got random individual cats throughout the community that have been brought in and then returned back to where they came from. Great for those cats, great for the shelter, has all those benefits, but does nothing to actually reduce the overall population of cats, because the sterilization rates within any colony or any area are too low, unless that's the only cat that's there. Now, when we combine Return-To-Field with colony-level targeting--so we use the cats as a red flag, and wherever we return a cat, we also trap in that neighborhood--then that's what this looks like. You have, the red circles are the Return-To-Field cats, and blue circles are the TNR cats. And within each colony that we deal with, we're getting high sterilization rates--not necessarily 100%, but we're getting high enough that there's a good chance that over time these numbers will go down. So this is one way to combine Return-To-Field with TNR, with targeted TNR, by basically what you're doing is--we call it the “red flag approach,” where the RTF cats are a red flag that there are other cats in the area.

Bryan [00:18:26]

When you're talking about, if you're measuring the impact of your Return-To-Field and overall what I would call community cat program, where Return-To-Field is a component, and you're measuring its effectiveness by your cat intake, this approach is going to be, could be very powerful at lowering intake, because you're basically micro-targeting the specific locations where your impounded cats are coming from. Because these tend to be people who don't want the cats around, and are active when they see cats, and they try to trap them—you know, usually not very efficiently, but enough to fill your shelters. And then if you go to those exact locations, that street, that backyard, and you get all the cats fixed and you get the reduction in nuisance behavior and you get, there's no more kitten, and you get attrition over time, you will have eliminated a lot of the sources of your intake, the specific sources. So it can be very powerful when it comes to reducing intake. However--and it can help with population reduction, but there is a problem with this approach when just talking about population reduction--not talking about intake lowering, talking about the number of cats that are in the community. And I wonder if--I'll give you just a moment, does anybody know, anybody spot why this is not the most efficient way to reduce the population of cats, as opposed to lowering intake? Give you just a moment to think about that. Because this is definitely a viable approach, this is definitely a viable policy for a community cat program, but there's another one that might emphasize population reduction over intake reduction.

Bryan [00:20:03]

Okay, so, let me, let me explain it. In order to understand this, let's go back to our grocery store. And the cats were not removed, those initial cats, let's say they were not removed, but instead somebody at the grocery store, you know, who worked there put out a trap, they caught one cat, brought them to the shelter, and now the shelter's got a Return-To-Field program, and that cat come back. Okay. But now we've combined our Return-To-Field program, we don't just put the one cat back. We say, "Ah, well, if this cat came from a grocery store with a dumpster in the back, there must be other cats there. So we'll send our trappers, or our nonprofit partners, or our good volunteers, whoever it might be to go to the grocery store, get the rest of the cats TNR'd." And they do that, right? And now we've got a colony that's 100% fixed. So time goes by, there's ten cats, enough food for ten, it's a stable situation,

but then over time, the population declines, which is what we wanted to do. Now, you can see they're all ear tipped. And maybe a couple of years go by, hopefully a lot longer, and we're down to five cats. What's the problem? More cats will come in-- there's still food for ten, exactly! You guys are really good. You're still surrounded. You know, you still got colonies all over the place, and community cats all over the place, and it's great that you've targeted the grocery store, but if you haven't targeted the entire area, well, you've got these colonies of cats that are reaching their carrying capacity, that need more food sources if more of them are going to survive. And you've got five cats at the grocery store with enough food for ten, well, guess what happens? Eventually, some of those cats from adjoining neighborhoods are going to come in, and you know, that old maxim, everybody's probably heard it, that one of the advantages of TNR is that old cats keep the new cats away, right? They guard the territory. Well, that's not true. If there's more than enough food for newcomers, then they don't have that motivation. If there's ten cats and enough food for ten, they will fight like hell to keep number eleven away. But if there's five of them and there's enough cats, for ten, they don't much care whether six, seven, and eight come and share, okay? So you end up reversing some of the gains, from a population point of view, that you got. So that, remember that ten went down to five, but now that you've created, inadvertently created a vacuum, that five maybe go back up to six, seven, and some of the population reduction is lost.

Bryan [00:22:34]

So how do we, how do we avoid that? Well, this is where community-level targeting comes in. And we don't just stop at the grocery store. We identify this neighborhood as a high intake area, as a high need area, and we try to focus our TNR resources on the area, and not just on the colony. And, so, we begin to distinguish, we don't try to--we can't do the area for every single Return-To-Field colony, right? Every time we send a Return-To-Field cat, we can't do the entire zip code where they returned. So we have to start to try to identify what, where they came from, right? And what areas are of particular need, and where we should focus our resources. And we spend our TNR time in that region. So it looks like this on a community level: you do Return-To-Field, combined with community-level targeting, and not only colony-level targeting. So you'll see in Zip Code One, Two, and Four, we're sending the cats back, we're

RTF'ing them, but we're not following up. And the reason is because we've identified Zip Code Number Three as a "high need zip code." And you can see that there's a disproportionately large number of cats in Zip Code Number Three compared to the rest of Feralville.

Bryan [00:24:05]

So that is the area where we want the most spay/neuter, we want to focus our spay/neuter. So you can see that we use the RTF cats as red flags, and we go into those colonies and try to get high sterilization rates, but we're also working in colonies where there were no Return-To-Field cats because they're in Zip Code Number Three. And this is going to get us, because, when all the colonies in Zip Code Number Three are fixed, you have almost virtually eliminated the vacuum effect. There are no cats to migrate, other than lost and abandoned cats, and the occasional litter of kitten, and if you're on top of it, intervene pretty quickly. But you don't have a population of unaltered community cats who might be migrating in colonies and filling in vacuum. So as that colony in the middle of Zip Code Number Three is going down in size, ideally, so are all the other colonies in Zip Code Number Three, and you've eliminated the vacuum effect. And we have seen this play out in the real world. Newburyport, Massachusetts, was the first community-wide TNR program in the country, and--that was back in the 1990s--and they had about 300 cats living along the riverfront, which was a high tourist area. And over the course of time, they either adopted out or spayed and neutered every single cat. And the population just kept going down over time, until eventually there was literally one 18-year-old cat left who had 34 feeders signed up to take care of him. When he passed away, there were no more cats. And the reason that new cats didn't come in as the older cats died was because there were no new cats. They had eliminated all the sources of reproduction.

Bryan [00:25:52]

And another real-life example of how Return-To-Field can be combined with targeted TNR to have a really effective community cat program is, I mentioned earlier the city of Albuquerque. So here's the progression that took place in that community: on their own, in 2011, the Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department, which is the municipal shelter and municipal animal control agency, they launched their own Return-To-

Field program in 2011. And that's all they did for that year, only Return-To-Field, there was no follow up TNR at all. In 2012, colony-level targeting--through a grant, Best Friends and PetSmart charities--colony-level targeting was added to the Return-To-Field program. So they started to use the red flag approach. And every time a Return-To-Field cat was brought back, trappers would enter the neighborhood, locate the additional cats, and catch them and get them fixed, too. That launched in April of 2012. Now, simultaneously in another part of Albuquerque, there were a couple of private organizations--there's, a private shelter, Animal Humane New Mexico, and they had a rescue partner in New Mexico, Animal Friends. And they targeted seven zip codes that were high intake to *their* shelter, not so much the city shelter. That launched in July 2010, and grew more vigorous over the next, I think it went on for about five or six years, where they were targeting. So you have all aspects of what we've been talking about today going on in the city of Albuquerque.

Bryan [00:27:23]

So 2010, you can see intake to the municipal shelter was just below 10,000. In 2011, Return-To-Field was introduced, and these numbers are just so interesting. So you can see that the Return-To-Field program immediately started to drop euthanasia from about 5,000 to about 3,700, roughly correlating to the number of cats that were Return-To-Field, the green bar. However, you don't see intake--and intake actually goes slightly up, not down. So you see the Return-To-Field program, when it's the only thing going on, having a pretty strong impact on euthanasia, but nothing on intake. 2012, we introduced colony-level targeting as part of the RTF strategy. Well, we continue to see dramatic reductions in euthanasia, but now we start to see intake going down, from close to 10,000 to just over 8,000. And then in the ensuing years, with all the, both the colony-level targeting and the community-level targeting likely starting to kick in, we see a steady decline in intake year after year after year, along with the bottoming out of euthanasia rates.

Bryan [00:28:33]

Now, this was not unique to Albuquerque, because this same kind of project, which was an experiment at the time, this Return-To-Field and targeted TNR had never really been combined in this way before. It was also carried out in six cities, five other

cities in addition to Albuquerque. And for the most part, you see very similar results. And you could see that, overall--this is over three years, I followed several years, but this was the first three years of the program, the numbers you're seeing here--you could see feline intake going down, other than the city of An Antonio, San Antonio, which had a kind of unique situation where their intake was artificially low when the program started. Of a number of policies, when all of a sudden they were perceived as "cat friendly," people started bringing lots of cats and kittens, especially kittens to them. So that first year the program actually saw intake jump, but thereafter it went down pretty steadily. You see kitten intake dropping, and you can see the euthanasia numbers on average were down 83% for, across six different facilities, but also average lower intake of 32%. When you break it down to kittens, 40% fewer. So this is just over the course of three years in a variety of different types of, different locations in the south, in the west, in the northeast. You can read about, this chart is taken from the article you see on the bottom there, by Dan Spehar and Peter Wolf, and that's available online if you want to dig deeper into the numbers, but this has now become kind of the gold standard community cat program, because it has such a powerful impact.

Stacy [00:30:14]

We interrupt this podcast for a quick trivia question. Where is the single place with answers to all of your animal welfare questions? Yes, even the one that kept you awake until 2 in the morning? Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? It's Maddie's Pet Forum! Maddie's Pet Forum is the only dedicated forum for our industry where you can find answers from colleagues, fast and free. Stop doom scrolling and join today. Visit forum.maddiesfund.org/cats.

Stacy [00:30:42]

Could your animal welfare organization use a tune up? Humane Network can help. You can get a free 30 minute consultation to talk through your challenges and get ideas on how your organization can be more successful with less stress. From board development and fundraising to strategic planning and operations, Humane Network has got you covered. Whether you are a large or small, nonprofit or government, it's a live and thriving program led by a certified animal behavior consultant, features specially designed training for shelter and clinic staff on enrichment, stress reduction,

safe animal handling and behavior modification. With Humane Network, you receive individualized advice and support customized to meet your organization's unique needs, and Humane Network can lighten your load by taking on fundraising, communications, and other tasks you struggle with. Contact Humane Network today for a free 30 minutes consultation. Visit humanenetwork.org, that's humanenetwork.org.

Stacy [00:31:37]

Team Doobert is at it again and now they have an amazing companion case management module that once again revolutionizes how you rescue animals. Doobert partnered with Dallas Pets Alive and the Spay Neuter Network to build a powerful solution that allows you to manage cases of any kind. Whether owner surrender calls or emails, community cat tracking and reporting, Doobert is the only system that integrates two-way text messaging, automatic follow-ups, and even a rehoming solution that every organization can use. No more trying to manage ten different technologies when everything is all in one place and tightly integrated. From fostering to transport, fundraising to e-commerce, supply and demand to case management, Doobert has everything you need to streamline your operations so you can focus on saving more animals. Check out the new companion case management module at www.doobert.com/ccm and get signed up today.

Bryan [00:32:32]

So just a couple of points I want to highlight about the mechanics of identifying, if you want to do community-level targeting, how do you identify where the high need areas are? So here's a few ways you can do that. You can take your intake, if you are tracking it by whatever, hopefully by street address, but even if it's only zip code, whatever it might be, you can map it and see where most of the cats are coming from. And that gives you a very good clue as to where to put your TNR resources. You could be RTFing cats throughout New York City--that's what it's a map of--but then focusing your TNR resources within specific areas. So you can identify these areas by intake, you can also map complaint calls. If you're a rescue group or a private shelter, you can track requests for assistance. Whatever's coming in, you want to get an address associated with that.

Bryan [00:33:25]

There's also what I call "tribal knowledge," which is just groups and humane law enforcement officers and directors of agencies who have been in the community for some time. They just know through experience where the hot spots are, and if their knowledge correlates to some kind of objective data, you've got a pretty good idea of where you need to go.

Bryan [00:33:47]

Another clue has to do with the socioeconomic situation in particular areas. And this is a study that was done by Dr. Gary Patronek, 2010, and his map, what he created is the one on the right, and that's a, that maps intake by neighborhood in Boston, in the city of Boston. And the orange is the highest cat intake areas. You can see there's that band in the middle, Roxbury and the other sections of Boston, where the most cats are coming from. So I took that and I looked at a map of income levels in Boston around the same time that Gary's research was done. And that's on the left. And the lower income areas are the darker red, the red and the darker orange. And you can see how that band of cat intake corresponds almost exactly to the lower income areas of Boston. So what a lot of people who are experienced on the ground already know through just their own personal experience: poorer areas are associated, are correlated to higher free-roaming cat populations. So that's a really good hint about where you need to go if you're looking to have them impact, in terms of targeting TNR, is look to those poorer areas, those lower income areas, the ones without. And it makes a lot of sense. Spay/neuter is not high on the list of priorities when you're just struggling to get enough to feed your kids every day, or to get to work, or whatever it might be. There also tends to be veterinary deserts, where there isn't easy access to veterinary services. So spay/neuter of pet cats in lower income areas, households, is much lower than in higher income, for obvious reasons. So between the data you can generate on intake, complaint calls, tribal knowledge, and your understanding of the socioeconomic make up of your community, allows you to zero in on those areas that are of high need.

Bryan [00:35:47]

So got another book for you. This is "Community TNR Tactics and Tools," which is published by PetSmart Charities. This goes into the mechanics of targeting and a lot more. I've just touched on a couple of the highlights, but this goes into the kind of,

how to do outreach, what kind of personnel resources, where to hold the cats, things like, the, kind of the nuts-and-bolts of targeting, as well as some discussion about Return-To-Field, and what I call “grassroots mobilization,” which is just getting the general public to contribute a lot of resources and do a lot of the hands on-work. So this is still, I wrote this in 2014, but you can still buy a copy of it on Amazon, download the PDF file and click on this link, or just go to Amazon and put my last name: “K-O-R-T-I-S” and “cats” or “TNR.” I'm sorry, I put “Kortis TNR,” it'll come up. If you prefer a PDF file, then shoot me an e-mail and I'll see what I can do. It's Bryan, B-R-Y-A-N, at neighborhood cats dot O-R-G.

Bryan [00:36:47]

So it's great, we have lots of time for questions. I just want to highlight a couple of other events that are coming up before we get there. As Stacey mentioned, we offer TNR certification workshops every month, Neighborhood Cats in partnership with the Community Cats Podcast. It's \$10, and it's basically an A-to-Z on the colony-level trapping, you know, how to get high percentages of the cats in a particular area fixed. So check that out or present that to your community if you want people to be trained, which is, in my experience, always a very good idea before you allocate surgical slots to them.

Stacy [00:37:24]

We have a lot of questions, and one of the times when we were sort of talking about doing this Return-To-Field presentation, we talked a little bit about advocacy also, as another component. And I know you have, even, a handout or a brochure on how to talk to public officials about TNR and community cats. And there are lots of questions about cats and birds out there. And I think there was one question, sort of covered it a bit. So this person is talking about a local society, bird society, that's very vocal about colony cats eating birds, spreading toxoplasmosis and other disease. How can we advocate with our public officials as well as with our bird conservancy groups to share, I mean, where Newburyport is, that's like, piping plover central. So we're like in birders heaven. And luckily we seem to have kept the peace with everybody there. But other parts of the country, it's not that way.

Bryan [00:38:20]

So when you're dealing with conservationists, or people who are concerned about wildlife, the most important thing to focus on is that we, as an animal welfare field, and other people, as part of the conservation, we want the exact same thing. Now, we have different reasons, but we want fewer cats roaming around. I mean, I didn't get into TNR because I enjoyed feeding a colony of cats twice a day, every day, or because I enjoyed spending my time and my money. I mean, some of us do enjoy the trapping part of it, but you know, it wasn't--we would prefer to have a world in which cats were well cared for, that they were provided for, they were not living on their own, on the streets. That is not what most people consider to be a natural, so we want there to be fewer of them. I've said a couple of times in the presentation that one of the overarching goals of a community TNR program is to have fewer free-roaming cats. Well, that's what the wildlife people want too. We may be more motivated by the welfare of the animals, and they may be more motivated by having less predation. Bottom line is: we want fewer cats. So the discussion, if you want it to be productive, has to focus on how do we achieve that goal? How do we get to fewer cats? If the discussion stays stuck on like, "Oh, the cats are killing the birds and the cats are spreading toxoplasmosis and the cats are the worst things since Satan visited in 1722, and the cats are responsible for killing the seals, and the cats are responsible for this, and the cats—" Well, that doesn't get you to fewer cats. That's just playing the blame game, right? If you can get past that and say, "Look, whatever, let's not argue about how many birds are being--let's not argue about whether you're exaggerating the spread of toxoplasmosis, let's talk about how we get to fewer cats." And when you get to there, there aren't a whole lot of options, you know, there's no--I like to say, the first thing I say to a group, to an audience that's mostly interested in wildlife is, "Hey, I haven't got a magic wand in my bag here. I can't just wave it and make all the cats go away. So let's look at what's been tried in the past, and let's look at what's worked, and let's do that." And when you do that, you get to like, "You can't just kill them all." You can't just pick them all up one day and make them disappear. It doesn't work for all the reasons we discussed today. On the other hand, we have seen situations where trap-neuter-return was done in an intensive, targeted way, where the community, through Return-To-Field programs and other policies, were educated to pursue to, spay/neuter as a way of population control, and we've seen these dramatic improvements. And that's what this discussion needs to be on. Now,

you may not sway all the bird people, but it's the policymakers that you're trying to sway. And in the end, they care more about having fewer cats than they care about how many birds. I mean, they want fewer birds killed, but they don't really care whether it's a thousand or 10,000. They just want fewer cats. Because if you have fewer cats, you're going to have fewer deaths. So that's my big lesson when I teach advocates, is "Don't get stuck in arguing about all the potential ills that cats have." You'll get a long, like, if you read a typical conservation article about free roaming cats, the first 19 out of the 20 paragraphs are going to be about how horrible the cats are and all the disease they spread and all the species they've wiped out, the threat that they are to biodiversity and all that. And then you'll get to paragraph number 20, which will have a throwaway line about what you're supposed to do about it. Or it might just say, "And so they shouldn't be there.: But when you really press them, like, what do you mean? Then you start getting really silly answers, like, "Well, they should be fenced in in empty suburban lots." Or "If we educate people enough, all-- despite all the public surveys, they'll want to kill them, they'll want to get rid of them." So they're still, the conservation field is still a little bit in la-la-land when it comes to how do you actually reduce cat populations? Policymakers are not. They want results. So stick to the facts, stick to talking about solutions. Just concede that there are problems, avoid debating about the extent of them.

Stacy [00:42:28]

So would you advocate I don't know, approaching, working with, creating a good, solid relationship, more with your Board of Health folks, your Animal Control, like, spend more of your time and energy on that battle than maybe some of the more public other stuff?

Bryan [00:42:44]

Yes, Yes. The birds-versus-cats battle is a very media attractive one. They love to play that up. They love the cats and the birds fight. It's really just a piece of propaganda that came out from the Smithsonian Institution, like, I don't know, seven, eight, nine years ago, and it was like, "The cats are killing, you know, x-billions of birds a year in North America." It's an incredibly flawed study. It wasn't meant to be a scientific study. It was meant to be a piece of propaganda that got a lot of media attention, and it worked, it did. And people were coming to me and saying, "What are we going to do? How are we going to respond to this?" And my reaction was, "We're

not going to respond to this.” We're going to carry on with our work, and in a month or two, no one's going to be talking about this anymore. And there's still going to be a lot of cats out there, and there's still going to be a problem to solve because all this distraction about the cats and the birds doesn't help anyone—doesn't help the cats, doesn't help. And we encounter the same thing here in Hawaii. When they get to a point where, if they're trying to pass legislation that would limit the practice of Trap-Neuter-Return, or limit the ability to spay/neuter cats, then we're going to fight them tooth and nail. But if they're just spouting propaganda and stuff, we're just going ahead. We're just working. We're just fixing cats. And you can not like it if you don't want to. The door is always open to work together. One of the things that we do is we try to be responsible. Now, we've tried to have talks, and sometimes they've been successful, with conservationists about, “All right, like, you know, we don't want to put cats in a bird sanctuary.” I don't think that's a good idea, especially if they're endangered. So we don't. We'll relocate them. At times, when there was no relocation resources available, I've been open to euthanasia. We're talking less than a handful of cats. But when there was absolutely nowhere for them to go except back in the middle of a sanctuary where there were endangered ground nesting birds, then I couldn't agree to that. I couldn't do that to the birds. So we, on our own, without cooperation with the wildlife people, try to be sensitive to these areas that are set aside for wildlife, set aside for species that could be harmed by cats. And like I say, I could pound on one or two times where we just didn't have any other alternatives. Most of the time there are non-lethal ways of working things out. So be responsible, be respectful of wildlife, but if the wildlife people won't work with you, just plow ahead, just go about it and continue in a responsible way. Keep the door open for discussions, because eventually things change. More reasonable people hopefully will step in.

Stacy [00:45:15]

One person was asking questions about, how have you tracked complaints, or is there like a standard format for tracking complaints? If you've asked your animal control officer, is that something that they do on a regular basis, that they have to track their complaint calls? And are we able to ask for that?

Bryan [00:45:31]

You're certainly able to ask for that information. So different agencies will have different data collection policies, but your better agencies, yeah, they track everything. They track what kind of complaint, they track when it came in, they track where it came from, they break it into spreadsheets that can be sorted so you can identify zip codes. That kind of data is available. Always better to take a cooperative approach, because you want to work with agencies. If they are funded by the government, you may be able to submit a Freedom of Information Act request to get that kind of information. But try to go the cooperative route, because you're going to need to work together in the future. Look, I always say that if the data collection is not where you need it to be and you don't have street addresses and you don't have any idea where calls are coming from or cats are coming from, then start. And you can do that as a rescue group. You can be a small rescue group. And when people call up and they want help with a cat, you can ask them where are you? Put it down on a spreadsheet, and after a year, you'll have enough data to be able to identify what parts of your city the most.

Stacy [00:46:31]

If your local spay/neuter clinic or rescue group doesn't really have a specific program or anything for the TNR certificate that we do on a monthly basis, why would somebody want to get certified through our program?

Bryan [00:46:46]

Yeah, I think there's a lot of advantages to it. If you're running, if you're a spay/neuter clinic, if you're allocating spay/neuter surgeries, having people train means that they're going to be more efficient. They're going to fill the slots, they're going to know how much time to take. Certification was introduced in New York City because the ASPCA was offering free spay/neuter on their mobile clinics, and they would give out 25 spots and somebody would show up with 10 cats and 15 slots would be wasted. So they started to require people to be certified and trained, and then they found that percentage went way up. So you got more efficient trappers. If you're working on your own, you're not a clinic, the advantages are, well, first of all, just, you'll know, better. You'll be a better trapper, you'll be more efficient, use your resources more wisely, but also it gives you credibility. So part of being an effective TNR worker is knowing why TNR is a good thing, is understanding the long-term process and being able to explain it to other people. And if you can show that you've been trained, then

you've got more credibility. It'd be like the same with anything. If I've taken accounting classes and I'm starting to tell you what this financial statement says, I have more credibility because I'm trained, I've looked at these things as opposed to somebody who just picked it up for the first time and has no, there's no objective way of judging. So for your own knowledge and for, to boost your own credibility. You mentioned that group in Long Island where everybody needs to be certified because they want to know that they're working with people who are trained, who are speaking the same language. So that \$10 goes an awful long way.

Stacy [00:48:22]

Going sort of on that same theme: you are out there and you're trapping on your own and you would like to have some support, get to know other trappers in your area that are doing TNR, that support, you know, how can they find each other?

Bryan [00:48:36]

Good question. I mean, maybe you want to throw that slide up about the different social media networks that are available through Neighborhood Cats and through the Community Cats Podcast. You can join one of those Facebook groups and immediately link in. I'm finding that in more and more, like on Maui, there's a Facebook group that's now called the Cat Network of Maui, something like the Good Cat Network. Anyway, it started off like maybe a couple of years ago, and now it's got close to 2000 and they're problem solving all the time. Somebody needs a microchip scanner, somebody found a cat, whatever problem it is. In New York City, we have an online discussion group where, again, there's hundreds of people on it and they work with each other to communicate. Somebody needs a slot for a pregnant cat, somebody needs somebody to feed their colony for a couple of days and to connect. So if you don't have that, then you can start it, you know, start a Facebook group and make it specifically for the cats in your area. Look to the national groups, I'm sure Alley Cat Allies probably has a pretty vigorous Facebook or some type of online discussion group. There's the Feral Friends Network that are basic research, and you'll find these online communities.

Stacy [00:49:48]

And there's also a Community Cats United, and they have regional sections. They have a lot of different segmented Facebook groups, and I travel around in that

network, and we have an online cat conference group. If you want to get connected, you can always feel free to email me at Stacy@communitycatspodcast.com and I'll do everything to try and get you connected through to somebody in your area.

There's a Pittsburgh Feral Cat group that's coming through here, and Donna is here from Long Island, which started this spay/neuter appointment swap group. Thankful for the shout out, so it's good.

Bryan [00:50:23]

And I encourage people to get connected in some way because the hands-on work can be something that it's very, you're doing very much alone. You're trapping, you're alone with the cats, you're taking care of them. And it can start to feel very isolating, especially if you're in a community where these programs are new and there may not be a lot of understanding and there may be some hostility. It's very important understand that you're far from alone, that there are literally millions of people in this country in the same, and get yourself connected. Take advantage of the Internet.

Stacy [00:50:54]

Yep, for sure. And also, I'll just mention if you want to, you can even check out like some of the low-cost spay/neuter clinics and their social media. So you can go to the United States Alliance's website and search on your state. We're trying to get the spay/neuter clinic listings up there, and search for the clinics near you and join their social media. And I would think that they would also have folks that you can connect in with, so a variety of different angles. But sometimes it does take a little bit of work. For those of you who don't like Facebook groups, I respect your social media desires and all of that. It is really challenging, for sure. Someone was trying to convince me the other day to have a Clubhouse, do Clubhouse for all of us, and all that kind of stuff. So there are some other avenues that probably will be developing. So we may be talking about other things maybe in the years to come.

Bryan [00:51:46]

Let me throw up one other thing, which was, we're talking about a post-pandemic world, you know, or a highly vaccinated world. But when we started Neighborhood Cats in New York City, it was just a few volunteers and very little, very few resources. But what we were doing was very much new to most of our community. And we just let it be known through the grapevine, that on the first, I think, Tuesday evening of

every month, we would be at Starbucks, and anybody could come and ask us questions and have a discussion about community cats. And that went on for the first couple of years. And every, the first Tuesday of every month, we would have people coming from all over the city, and they would have advanced questions or they would have beginning questions, and that discussion group became the foundation of what is now thousands and thousands of people throughout New York City who are doing this. So just something as simple as that can go a long way.

Stacy [00:52:39]

Yeah, and I'm happy to help anybody if they want to do some outreach in their local areas and have ideas and support. Many hands make light work. And it also takes a village, too. So I'm happy to help anybody with trying to create another group, another organization, or just a neighborhood. Oh, my goodness, look at that face.

Bryan [00:53:00]

My 19-year-old, he crawled into my lap. Very first colony that I took care of, he came running up one day going "meow meow meow meow meow" and I was like, "What are you doing here?" I ended up taking him home. Bruce, 19 years later.

Stacy [00:53:12]

So, that happened to me, I was walking back from having ice cream in Newburyport. I was walking back to my apartment and this little voice, "mrow mrow," big barking voice. And it was a little eight-week-old kitten, and ended up being Steffy, and we checked the whole neighborhood, nobody owned her or anything. And that was back in 1992. She lived to be 20. Deaf as a doornail at the end, you could do whatever you wanted, and she wouldn't hear a thing. But anyway, so, everybody, I want to thank you so much. Thank you, Brian, Susie, thank you so much for a great presentation. Susie was in the background answering tons of questions, she makes these events so easy. If we missed any questions, we will be reviewing them. And I want to thank all of you for attending, for joining us. And thank you all for turning your passion for cats into action. And check out the Community Cats Podcast. I'm grateful for everything that you do.

Stacy [00:54:07]

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.

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Kristen [00:54:36]

Did you attend the online cat conference in January? If you did, we hope you enjoyed the incredible content provided by our expert presenters, and hope their information—and encouragement—will help you turn your passion for cats into action. Events like the online cat conference would not be possible without the support of our generous sponsors. Our premiere sponsor was Maddie's Fund. Leadership sponsors include Best Friends, TICA, Dr. Elsey's Cat Products, and CARE. Sustaining sponsors included Vetz Petz Antinol, Humane Network, the MSPCA, and the Vermont Humane Federation. If your business or organization would like to support content that makes a difference for cats in communities worldwide, visit communitycatspodcast.com/eventsponsorship.