

Opinion

Humane methods are the way to go in managing feral cat population: Dan Spehar

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By Guest columnist, cleveland.com

Guest columnist Dan Spehar is an independent researcher whose work is focused on community cat management. He has co-authored a number of published papers on the subject, and has presented findings at national and regional conferences. He is co-founder of the Together Initiative for Ohio's Community Cats. He has served as a senior district leader volunteer for the Humane Society of the United States since 2013. Dan holds a master's degree in animal policy and lives in Parma.

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The call for the mass trapping and “euthanasia” of America’s feral cats (whom along with stray felines are commonly known as community cats) in the

along with stray felines are commonly known as community cats) in the commentary entitled "The problem with house cats" by Dr. Michael Melampy is little more than a tired, recycled espousal of the failed status quo.

The author's criticisms of a popular humane alternative to the systematic killing of community cats, known as trap-neuter-return (TNR) -- whereby such cats are humanely trapped, sterilized and vaccinated before being returned to their outdoor homes -- are ill-informed. The alarmist tone of the essay also rings hollow.

The management of community cats has been an issue in many locations for nearly a century. Experience has shown that the traditional approaches of trapping and killing or starving outdoor cats in an attempt to reduce their numbers is ineffective, as is illustrated by the persistence of the problem in many locales despite the employment of lethal efforts for many decades. Of course, lethal management is also widely considered to be inhumane.

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Research indicates that feeding bans are often ignored by the public, which is overwhelmingly opposed to the killing of otherwise healthy outdoor cats. In fact, a survey conducted by a researcher at The Ohio State University revealed that 77 percent of Ohioans support the non-lethal management of community cats. National surveys have produced similar results.

Nevertheless, Melampy advocates that the feeding of community cats should be outlawed, while doubling down on failed trap-and-kill campaigns as a prescription for the way forward.

Since the 1990s, the practice of TNR has proliferated in the U.S. because it has proven to be more effective than lethal methods of community cat management. An assertion that, despite Melampy's claims to the contrary, is supported by science.

Recently published results of sophisticated simulation modeling suggest that TNR of sufficient intensity offers significant advantages in terms of reducing population size and improving animal welfare when compared to lethal methods or taking no action.

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And a growing body of field research supports these conclusions. In fact, the results of five case studies, each published since 2017, indicate that intensive TNR is capable of producing significant and sustainable long-term reductions in community cat populations across a variety of contexts.

In addition to reducing the number of community cats over time, TNR offers other benefits, including greatly reduced nuisance behaviors (fighting, spraying, yowling and roaming) associated with mating; improved welfare of the cats themselves because they are fixed, fed and vaccinated; fewer public health concerns as the cats are vaccinated for rabies; reduced predation on wildlife due to declining community cat numbers and the regular provision of food; and an end to the perpetual spending of limited public funds on trap-and-euthanize campaigns and/or the enforcement of feeding bans.

We must ignore the types of scaremongering presented in "The problem with house cats" and embrace the only evidence-based approach to community cat

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