



Background

The location of the two TNR programs detailed in this report is a long lane between Pigdon & Park Sts, adjacent to Lygon St Carlton North Melbourne Victoria-an inner city suburb. The programs began in January 2002 and continued until August 2008, running simultaneously, when the last desexed colony cat died.

Animal Active's initial contact with the colony of cats involved in our first pilot program was via their feeders, two sisters, international students from Singapore, who had been feeding the cats for approximately 3 years in the basement bin area of the apartment block in which they lived. There were exit points to the lane from the feeding area. One of the sisters had fostered rescue dogs through Animal Active's companion animal program and made contact, revealing the existence of the cats, when the time had come for their return to Singapore. No desexing had taken place. From information provided by the feeders most of the apartment residents liked the cats and they had experienced no adverse attitudes from their immediate neighbours.

We were introduced to 14 cats in January 2002 including 7 adult females 3 adult males, plus 4 juveniles (approximately 4-8 months) as well as 5 kittens under 4 months old which were removed from their habitat and, following a brief time in foster care, successfully re-homed at the start of the

TNR program. The cats had clearly developed a trust-based relationship with the original feeders, responding to their voices by emerging from hiding spots and expressing no fear to their physical proximity as the cats gathered and ate. Both feeders remained involved until they departed Melbourne two months later which facilitated our early encounters with the colony, allowing us to pick up some of the younger/friendlier cats for desexing rather than alarm the group with the use of traps.



Some of the cats in the bin area of the apartment block at our first encounter with the colony



Several months after initiating our first pilot program we had a call from a local resident alerting us to a second free-living colony two blocks north of the original site, in the same lane. We discovered a smaller satellite colony that included 5 adults (3 females, 2 males plus 4 female kittens, under 4 months old). From the appearance of the cats in this colony we assumed they were a breakaway group from the original colony, sharing genetics. They became the focus of our second pilot program.

In total there were 28 cats across both colonies at the start of the our TNR program.

Procedure

Volunteers

Apart from Animal Active volunteers 2 independent feeders from the immediate neighbourhood, who were already feeding and taking an interest in the welfare of the satellite colony, joined our efforts. One of the local residents eventually adopted two of the young females after we had desexed them. "Whiteface" and "Mumma" continue to live with the family and although the cats regularly did rounds of their lane territory, keeping new cats at away, they settled into a cosy domestic life within twelve months of adoption. The cats have recently moved house with their adoptive family without any problems settling into their new environment.



"Whiteface"& "Mumma" at home



Volunteer involvement

Six Animal Active volunteers were involved at the start of the TNR programs; their roles included conducting face-to-face surveys to gauge immediate community attitudes, feeding and catching cats, fostering cats post-neuter, releasing and monitoring their well-being post-release; feeders were also responsible for ongoing appraisal of the cats' general health, and checking for wounds and injuries.

Veterinary assistance

The desexing was undertaken by a vet with past experience in working with A TNR program, and who was willing to hold cats overnight until they were fully recovered from the desexing procedure; they were fostered for a further 24 hours by volunteers before release back to habitat. The vet identified desexed cats by a small clip on the tip of one ear for ease of future identification.

Catching cats

Initially a regular feeding program was established-same time and place daily providing enough food but no more than the cats could finish in one sitting. We fed on sheets of clean paper and no scraps were left behind. Once the cats became comfortable with our presence-over a period of three weeks-we began picking up the younger, friendlier cats manually. They were desexed, fostered and eventually re-homed.

Maintaining a regular feeding time and the presence of familiar feeders encouraged trust and familiarity but also positively changed the cats' behaviour; they tended to remain hidden until it was time for a feed and bin raiding at the apartment block and surrounding properties subsided, making the cats less likely to be targets of nuisance reports to the local council authorities.

In catching the less sociable cats we used treadle traps; we targeted the females first in order to reduce kitten numbers in the forthcoming breeding season. Under no circumstances did we leave a trap unattended as we felt this would potentially expose trapped cats to unnecessary stress, danger and cruelty. All desexing was completed in the first 12 months of the program.

Our methods were based on the success of an extensive South Australian TNR program run by C.A.T.S.(Cats Assistance To Sterilise Inc. <https://catassist.org.au/humane-control.html>). Coordinated by Christine Pierson, this trailblazing project of over 30 years' duration is still going strong and holds several South Australia council stray cat management contracts.

Tackling attitudes

Community

We made a decision to tackle community attitudes at the outset by identifying the main sources of local opposition and constant complaints to Council about the cats' presence. We wanted to establish whether negative attitudes were generalized in the immediate community or simply represented an irate few. Consultation also presented an opportunity to discuss and educate about the TNR option before we began the desexing process.

We identified two main communities as targets for consultation.

i) all residents in the apartment block comprising the cats' main habitat and feeding site, numbering about 200, mainly students but also including families with young children

ii) The wider community including residents whose houses backed onto the lane, who were aware of the cats' presence as they drove in and out of their garages. At least 3 households in the immediate vicinity of the primary colony had expressed hostility to the cats' presence and did so to our volunteers subsequent to our involvement. We assumed this was most likely the group pressuring Council to trap and kill the cats.

Our methods included survey questions such as: were they aware of the cats, had the cats interfered with their lifestyles in any way, did they enjoy/dislike the cats presence, did they know about TNR. We kept the survey brief as it was conducted in face to face encounters, door to door, and was used mostly as a device for starting the conversation about the cats' presence, allowing attitudes to emerge and hopefully appeased. Literature on TNR, in the form of a simple dot point flyer, was left with each respondent, with an invitation to call us with further questions or if they wished to be involved in the program.

All residents of the apartment block plus all whose houses backed on the lane where the original colony lived were surveyed. At this stage we were not aware of the existence of a satellite colony.

iii) Apart from the two communities consulted, we also met more formally with the onsite representative of the apartment block's Body Corporate for permission to access the bin area and to suggest a few changes such as provision of tight fitting lids for bins and keeping the site food scrap free. Cooperation from the Body Corporate resulted in lasting improvements to the bin area.

At the outset we did experience some aggressive behaviour from members of the wider community. One of the residents from the houses backing onto the lane discovered the time of our arrival and would systematically greet us with angry outbursts and accusations that, as a pregnant woman, we were exposing her and her unborn child to disease from the cats we were supporting. Our reasonable responses to her comments and copious amounts of literature proved useless in the early stages. Indeed, she organised her immediate neighbours turn up and harass our volunteers on the evenings when she could not be present, admitting proudly of being the main complainant to authorities regarding the cats.

However, as cat numbers diminished and their presence became less evident-gathering only at evening feeding times due to our regular feeding pattern, no more bin raids as they were no longer starving and bins were now tightly lidded and no more kittens since completion of the desexing stage of the program-the voices against the cats calmed down. We were able to enter dialogue over time, even with our most vocal opponent, who actually gave birth to two healthy babies in the duration of our program and witnessed, first-hand, evidence of TNR's effectiveness.

Local Council

It was 14 months after the onset of our TNR program before Council took a public stance, and only after Animal Active issued a media release stating that we had finished desexing the cats at both colonies, rehoming the re-homeable and had in place a dedicated volunteer team that would continue to feed and monitor the health of the cats. The Council's position as expressed in the local media was that under *"local law we could fine the group if they continue feeding the cats, but we were hoping to come to a sensible conclusion without having to do that"*.

As threatened Council did send in their stray animal contractor with traps several months after this media comment. Two cats were trapped but we were able to recover and adopt them before they

were put down; we made the decision to foster and re-home them as they did not appear trap shy and were likely to be caught again.

We subsequently had several constructive face to face meetings with the local council' compliance officers, an opportunity to put the case for TNR; the Council eventually left us alone, the threat of a fine was never actualised. We continued feeding and monitoring the cats at both sites until the last free-living cat died in August 2008. Compliance officers admitted that since our involvement nuisance cat complaints had diminished to almost nil from the area. One measure of our success with Council was that in 2006 one of the compliance officers approached us to work with them on a TNR project in another nearby suburb. A woman who had been feeding a colony of cats living under bushes in an adjacent small park threatened to "kill" any officers who tried to remove the cats. We were able to set up a group of feeders/trappers from the immediate vicinity who were trusted by the woman, thus achieving a humane solution both for the cats involved and the elderly resident who cared for them so deeply. So even though Local Laws have not changed, we were able to shift Council attitudes and allow compliance officers to see TNR as another option in the suite of management approaches.

Conclusion

Both pilot programs involved a mix of rehoming and TNR; they were successful on a number of fronts:

They brought about awareness of the feasibility of TNR as a feline population management approach that is humane and practical, with long term outcomes.

Behaviour of both humans and cats in the immediate environment changed positively. Attitudes to both the presence of free living cats in the urban environment and TNR were altered.

Above all, ten years on from the death of our last free-living cat the inner city lane in which we piloted TNR remains stray cat free.

Rheya Linden, campaign director

Animal Active Australia

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