

Will Work for Food

**INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS
GIVE FERAL CATS JOBS
AND PROVE THEIR
VALUE TO SOCIETY.**

FERAL CATS ARE domestic cats that were born without human contact or handling. If these cats do not receive human contact within their first 8 weeks, humans will have a hard time taming them. According to the ASPCA, there are tens of millions of feral cats in the United States. For decades, these cats were seen as pests by some, and many were caught and killed.

But in the 1990s, a movement began. Advocates such as Alley Cat Allies, the Feral Cat Coalition and Alley Cat Rescue (who also feed feral cats) began using trap-neuter-return (TNR), which stops the growth of a colony's size and allows the cats to live out their lives in dignity.

Feral Cats Go To Work

In 1999, Voice for the Animals Foundation (VFTA) in Venice, Calif., took another bold step. It realized that feral cats are part of our ecosystem and play an important role in controlling rodent populations and stopping the spread of diseases carried by rodents. If VFTA could find areas that needed rodent control, it could provide that area with feral cats, which would save the cats' lives and protect humans from rodents.

VFTA's first project was the Flower Market in Los Angeles, where it offered to provide feral cats as a way of taking care of the market's rodent problem. It worked.

"A lot of people who worked at the flower market didn't like cats," says Melya Kaplan, founder and executive director of VFTA. "The flower market has a big aisle down the center leading into the loading dock. One day there was a huge cat which we had put in, and he was chasing a rat right down the center aisle. Everyone started applauding. It has actually changed peoples' views of both ferals and cats in general."

By taking ferals out of shelters, VFTA both unburdens the shelters and saves cats' lives.

"When we hear about a colony we always try to keep that colony intact where it is," Kaplan says. "I don't believe in uprooting a colony."

Kaplan explains that re-colonizing the ferals is a very meticulous process. Staff members go to shelters and pick healthy ferals. Then they have them neutered, make sure they get all of



Feral cats have helped decrease the rodent population in Los Angeles flower markets.

their shots and have them microchipped. Then they take the cats to the new location and keep them in a large holding cage for a month, feeding them in these cages so the cats can get used to the smells, sounds and sights of the area. This way, when they are released they will view the area as their new territory and remain there.

Currently VFTA has 175 ferals working in 20 sites to eliminate rodents. By giving the feral cats jobs they are giving them security and saving them from extermination. They do not charge for the cats; they only require that the organization receiving the cats signs an agreement that it will feed the cats for life.

COULD FERAL CATS HELP PREVENT A NATIONWIDE PANDEMIC?

An outbreak of the Hantavirus occurred in the southwestern United States in May 1993, infecting 53 people, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The virus is one of the most deadly in the world, and there is no known vaccine, cure or treatment. It can kill up to 35 percent of all those infected.

In 1993, unusually heavy rains swelled the deer mouse population, which carries the virus. People are easily infected by the Hantavirus because it is an airborne virus, and it can

be contracted by breathing it in. The CDC reports that 90 percent of cats are immune to the Hantavirus and the other 10 percent cannot pass it on to any other animal.

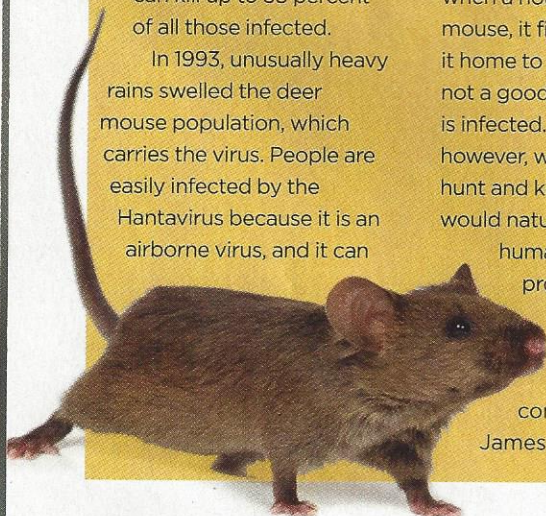
Cats, as rodent hunters, would seem a good defense from this virus. However, the CDC also points out that when a house cat kills a mouse, it first wants to bring it home to show its owner — not a good idea if the mouse is infected. Feral cats, however, would be able to hunt and kill the mice and would naturally avoid

humans, helping to protect people from contracting the disease.

CAT FANCY consulted with James N. Mills, Ph.D., an

expert on the Hantavirus working at the CDC. Mills agreed that the idea of feral cats killing mice infected with the Hantavirus would work to protect people from an outbreak, because feral cats would not bring the mice back to people since they traditionally avoid humans.

So far, the Hantavirus has resulted in roughly 450 cases in the United States, 35 percent of them leading to death. Hopefully, it will not appear in large numbers again. If it does, feral cats may become extremely important to all people in the United States, both lifelong cat lovers and people who didn't like cats, but now realize their importance to our ecosystem and lives.



Cat Cops Catching Rats

One of the more interesting sites using working cats is at two Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) stations, where the cats are catching a different kind of criminal.

"The commanding officer at one LAPD station called me and said, 'Bring in the cats,'" Kaplan says. "He told me the rats were eating the criminal files, and in a couple of police stations they were running across officers' desks."

By preventing the destruction of criminal files these cat cops are helping to

bring human criminals to justice. How are these cat cops doing?

"Well, I haven't seen any rodents around yet," says Officer Sandra Magdaleno, one of the cat coordinators at the LAPD. "They were only doing it at two stations, and now they are going to implement it at all police stations."

Helping the Private Sector

At one development site, the ferals are helping businesses, both residential and retail, making the community livable for everyone.

"Everyone was complaining about the rats," says Josh Elwell, a developer in Southern California.

"There is an alley behind our building, which is the only access to the underground parking, and that alley had hundreds of rats. So we turned to VFTA to set up a program, and within 24 hours of having the cats there the rats were gone and never came back."

The tenants and nearby properties love the cats.

"People have donated cat toys, food, litterboxes, even a carpeted cat tree," Elwell says. "I have recommended the program to other

To learn more about Voice for the Animals Foundation and working feral cats, visit <http://vfta.foundation.org>.

By keeping the rodent population down, feral cats help make common areas more pleasant.



Feral cats were called in to LAPD stations when rodents began eating criminal files.

property management companies, and a lot of them were thrilled about it." He says that many of his tenants who previously did not like cats have changed their tune. "Many people changed their attitudes toward the cats, seeing that they had a function and worth."

The Next Step

Kaplan encourages other feral cat organizations to implement this type of program.

"I would love to get a grant and train other organizations because we have the whole system down," Kaplan says. "There are so many parts of this program to protect the cats and to make it a success. You need to be thorough in the way you implement the program. It is a meticulous process."

Kaplan would also like to expand their program.

"The more funding we get, the more we could spread this program out all over Los Angeles," she says. 🐾

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