



Maddie's Institute

How to Bust Myths about Community Cats with Science **Live Webcast Audience Q&A**

By Peter Wolf
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1) Q: Do you recommend placing signs or alerting residents when cats are returned to the field?

A: I think it's actually better not to post signs – generally speaking, the less attention the cats get, the better. That said, some groups do put signs out when trapping – to let people know what's going (e.g., TNR is humane, the cats will be returned, etc.).

2) Q: What about TVHR? It appears the population control is even more effective at 35% of live trappings. I know the concern is yowling and fighting still, but if depopulation is a priority...

A: For those who might not be aware, TVHR refers to trap-vasectomy-hysterectomy-release, which was proposed in a [2013 paper](#) published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*.

I think this would be practical only in certain contexts (e.g., islands). The nuisance complaints might easily offset any population reductions. I worry that the mating-related behaviors that would remain (e.g., fighting, yowling, spraying, etc.) would test the patience of many people (including some caregivers). It's also likely that the reduction in FIV that comes from neutering male cats would be lost under the TVHR model.

One final point: researchers at the Alliance for Contraception in Cats and Dogs expressed skepticism about the purported advantage of TVHR. I encourage people to read their [position statement](#).

3) Q: How does one counteract those who pull out that 'garbage in garbage out' research? Especially when attached to one's MA thesis?"

A: I presume we're talking about an academic context here, in which case you probably have the luxury of in-depth discussion (and even debate). If this is true, then I'd recommend you take advantage of the detailed information I've compiled via my blog, Vox Felina (www.voxfelina.com), and challenge skeptics point by point.

As an alternative, you might start by challenging the findings of the 2013 *Nature Communications* I highlighted in the webcast. Ask these skeptics to explain how, if the authors' estimates were even remotely accurately, there are still so many birds in the U.S. (with the populations of some species actually increasing)? This point cannot be easily dismissed, so their response should give you a clear indication of whether these folks are truly interested in weighing the scientific evidence or not. (If it's the latter, you're likely wasting your time trying to engage with them.)

I'm not sure my response is particularly helpful. Feel free to contact me at peterw@bestfriends.org if you'd like to discuss this further.

4) **Q: Our Audubon group is already very influential with the Board of Supervisors in our county; how do we counteract their influence?**

A: This, I think, is a great opportunity to employ the tactics Bryan Kortis (of PetSmart Charities) outlines in his presentation *Persuading Municipal Officials to Go With TNR* (which is now posted on the [page](#) for this webcast under "Related Items"). In a nutshell, the argument is this: Even if we assume all the claims of wildlife impacts, public health threats, etc. were true, TNR is simply the best option available from a public policy perspective.

5) **Q: What type of TNR ordinance do you recommend? Sponsor-based, caretaker based or other?**

A: Sponsor-based ordinances had their place – when elected officials needed assurances that TNR programs would have sufficient oversight. These days, though, the trend seems to be away from sponsors and registered colonies, in part because many municipalities are becoming involved directly with TNR and return-to-field programs. In addition, the success or failure of a sponsor-based program often rests on just one or two individuals, despite broad community support.

To be clear: there's no easy answer when it comes to ordinance language. Some are very detailed, with page after page of definitions and provisions, while others are "agnostic" – offering very few protections, but also very few restrictions. Either style can work well or work poorly, depending on the language (and its implementation). For a more thorough discussion, I would recommend the "[Key Legal Issues to Consider](#)" section of Best Friends' recently released Community Cat Program Toolkit.

6) **Q: When the FL Health Department goes around to schools and businesses and says to get rid of TNR'd colonies with caregivers that have been at those sites for years due to public health issues, we have no place to relocate these cats. What to do?**

A: The Florida Department of Health's own data show that rabies cases in cats and *Toxoplasma gondii* infection in humans have actually declined in recent years. That said, it's not surprising to hear that some DOH staff are intent on having colonies removed. My best advise in such cases is to establish strong relationships with the schools and businesses. I don't know if DOH has the authority to remove cats (or have them removed) without permission from the property owner or relevant government agency (e.g., school district). In any case, strong relationships are likely to reduce the likelihood that DOH would become involved in the first place.

7) **Q: Do you feel that 2% is still an accurate estimate of the number of community cats that are sterilized?**

A: Good question. This, of course, requires that we know how many community cats are really out there. And we don't have the kind of population estimate that would allow us to make this sort of calculation. I think it's more important to focus on colonies, neighborhoods, as Bryan Kortis suggests in "PetSmart Charities Community TNR: Tactics and Tools" ([free PDF download](#)).

8) **Q: Is there one “go to” resource that speaks to the facts and if so, where can it be found. Do you have a fact sheet for talking points?**

A: Many resources are available on the [Best Friends website](#), including our [Community Cat Programs Toolkit](#) and our [Frequently Asked Questions document](#). You might also be interested in the [Fact Sheets](#) (which, admittedly, need updating) I have (as downloadable PDFs) on my Vox Felina site.

9) **Q: Is there a slide presentation that exists that covers all the bases to be used when educating/meeting with local Government, property owners, etc.? To help them welcome the thought of TNR policy being implemented.**

A: Two resources come to mind: (1) Bryan Kortis’s *Persuading Municipal Officials to Go With TNR* (which is now posted on the [page](#) for this webcast under “Related Items”), and (2) [Best Friends’ TNR Action Kit](#).

10) **Q: Where can a small rural community get support for a TNR effort with minimal community support?**

A: I don’t know much about PetSmart Charities or Petco Foundation grant requirements, but Best Friends does offer small grants to registered non-profits through our [Network Partner](#) program. Of course, funders have to know that the resources available to do the trapping, transport, surgeries, etc., are available.

In terms of community support, I would be surprised if more residents didn’t get on board after some initial success was demonstrated. By starting small – perhaps with a single neighborhood or industrial park – and showing what TNR can do, you might attract support from folks who are still on the fence.

11) **Q: Is there funding by national TNR advocates to back studies to support these “mythbusters?”**

A: There has been talk for years about doing more TNR research, and it looks like that’s now in the works. Even without this additional work, though, the case for TNR is still quite strong; after all, there’s no evidence whatsoever that the “traditional” approach (i.e., complaint-driven impoundment, often followed by lethal injection) is effective. (This, don’t forget, is the baseline.) And, as I pointed out in my webcast, there’s plenty of legitimate science to challenge the myths. (Also: if you contact me at peterw@bestfriends.org I’ll share a list of “TNR success stories.”)

The bottom line is this: while the case for TNR would be *strengthened* with more research, we already have science on our side.

12) **Q: What is your experience in educating and eventually implementing local shelters (animal control) to not impound ear-tipped cats?**

A: This can be tricky, in part because we’re asking enforcement officers to make a radical shift in the way they do their job. Some communities have ordinances specifying that healthy ear-tipped cats will not be impounded – although even here, compliance is not guaranteed. I think it’s critical

that enforcement officers (not just shelter staff) be on board with a TNR and/or return-to-field program even before the program is implemented. Again, it's a massive cultural shift for these folks; this kind of thing doesn't happen overnight. As a starting point, it might help for these folks to know that the National Animal Care & Control Association is [supportive](#) of TNR efforts.

For a more general discussion, I would recommend the "[Working with Enforcement and Dispatch Staff](#)" section of Best Friends' recently released Community Cat Program Toolkit.

13) Q: What is your response to people who are worried about the potential of feral cats spreading intestinal parasites?

A: Two points: (1) the risks are generally overstated, and (2) managed colonies have been shown to be roughly as healthy as pet cats who go outdoors. The best thing we can do from a public health standpoint is sterilize and vaccinate as many community cats as possible.

14) Q: Can toxins from cat feces remain in soil for years?

A: I assume this is a reference to the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, which can be passed in the feces of cats. Studies do show that it can remain in soil for up to 18 months under the right conditions. Keep in mind, though, what I mentioned in my webcast: this sounds far scarier than it actually is. Infection rates in the U.S. have fallen dramatically in recent years, and basic hand washing goes a long way toward reducing the likelihood of infection.

15) Q: There is a recommendation to release cats back to field without requiring management of "colony." Your comment?

A: We at Best Friends go to great lengths to locate caregivers in the communities where we have return-to-field programs. However, returning a cat does not *depend* on locating a caregiver. Any cat who's going to be returned has already been determined to be healthy and in good body condition—a clear indication that the cat has figured out how to live as a community cat. In fact, this assumption has been confirmed by careful research.

Of the 2,366 cats admitted to a [two-year, high-impact TNVR program in one Alachua County, Florida, zip code](#) for example, only 16 (0.7%) were ineligible for the program due to health issues. In San José, California, where more than 10,000 community cats were sterilized and returned over a four-year period as part of a shelter-based community cat program, [it was observed that](#) "impounded feral cats are surprisingly healthy and have good bodyweight."

To [quote](#) Jon Cicirelli, Deputy Director for San José Animal Care and Services, "Most of these cats are healthy. They're vibrant. They don't need us. All we really need to do is control their population."

16) Q: Are you hearing public shelter health concerns about Typhus? This came up in the past month.

A: I'm afraid I don't have a very good answer for this one. Murine typhus (transmitted by fleas) is a legitimate concern in Southern California and parts of Texas. However, like the public health concerns I addressed in my webcast (rabies and *Toxoplasma gondii*) the concerns over typhus are

very often overblown. That said, fleas *can* become a problem where a large number of cats congregate—but this depends on a variety of factors (e.g., weather, overall health of cats, etc.).

I'm not aware of any situation in which murine typhus has been linked definitively to colony cats, but that doesn't mean it doesn't happen. I imagine the only non-lethal course of action in such a case (and, to be clear, I'm making an educated guess here) is to have the cats (re)trapped and treated for fleas and then treat the environment, too. One obvious challenge, of course, is how to treat the environment in such a way that's not harmful to the cats. (I'm afraid I don't know what the options are.)

I'm told by one public health official that murine typhus is a particular concern with large colonies, so it's best to keep colony size as small as possible. It's sensible advice, but of course it's generally the case that a colony was established well before any human intervention – making it too late to do much to reduce their numbers in the short-term.

- 17) **Q: This was a lot of great information and very helpful. Would you have any feedback on managing the nuisance and property owner rights complaints? Those seem to be the biggest issues that we are faced with now that TNR has become legalized and utilized.**

A: First of all, I think it's important to remember that, however noisy, the complainants are greatly outnumbered by folks happy with, or indifferent to, TNR. It's also true that some people are simply determined to find something to complain about no matter what; if not the cats, then it will be the road construction, library hours, recycling program, etc.

That said, we should not ignore or dismiss legitimate complaints. Humane deterrents (see [video](#)) can be effective not just at reducing complaints but also at building relationships with residents unhappy with the cats (who, remember, have never really had the issue addressed before). For some useful online resources, I would recommend two Best Friends resources: "[How to Address Various Complaints](#)" (part of our recently released Community Cat Program Toolkit) and "[Solutions to Cat-Related Issues](#)."

- 18) **Q: People in our community want to get rid of the cats in their neighborhood because they mess up the flowerbeds, etc., how do you respond to this?**

A: Humane deterrents (see [video](#)) can be effective at reducing such complaints. In addition, one of the most immediate results of a targeted TNR program – fewer litters of kittens – can go a long way toward convincing complainants that TNR is the best option available. They might still be upset about the cats getting into their gardens, on their cars, and so forth, but will also likely recognize the promise of TNR (which, unlike lethal roundups, can provide a long-term solution).

For some useful online resources, I would recommend two Best Friends resources: "[How to Address Various Complaints](#)" (part of our recently released Community Cat Program Toolkit) and "[Solutions to Cat-Related Issues](#)."

- 19) **Q: Is there any research showing statistics regarding how humans with toxoplasmosis contracted it? What percentage of exposures are from eating undercooked meat vs. gardening vs. scooping cat litter, etc.? Is there any scientific data available along these lines?**

A: I'm aware of only one [study](#) that addresses (somewhat) this issue (though there might be more recent work I haven't seen yet) and it involved mothers of congenitally infected infants. Given the methods involved, though, I would be surprised if other researchers aren't investigating the various possible sources of infection as a percentage of total infections. (Thanks for the great question! Now I'm going to have to do some "homework" to learn about what, if any, additional research has been done in the last couple of years.)

20) Q: What about people who are against TNR in northern climates because they feel releasing cats back into winter weather is inhumane?

A: Return-to-field programs will generally evaluate any cat who's going to be returned; each cat must be deemed healthy and in good body condition, a clear indication that the cats has figured out how to live as a community cat. This is true in northern climates as well as in the desert southwest, where temperatures routinely exceed 100 degrees. Generally speaking, these cats "have figured it out." (And in some cases at least, the people expressing such concerns are clearly not *truly* concerned for the cats' welfare; it's just another argument against TNR.)

21) Q: From my personal experience, USFWS refuses to accept that they use (over and over) bad data to support and promote killing of cats, rationalizing it as cats being exotics killing native fauna). How can we address USFWS anti-TNVR agenda?

A: You're exactly right! (If you're familiar with my blog, [Vox Felina](#), you know that I've been railing against USFWS's witch-hunt for years now.) As far as how to address the opposition from USFWS, a few thoughts come to mind: (1) whenever possible, submit comments to USFWS proposals that can affect outdoor cats (see, for example, [my comments](#) in response to the agency's Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges Complex Integrated Predator Management Plan/Draft Environmental Assessment), (2) participate in any public meetings concerning USFWS policies and practices that can affect outdoor cats, and (3) use Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to expose anything underhanded that's being done behind the scenes.

FOIA requests can be pretty tedious, sometimes requiring one or more appeals to get the information you're after. And then maybe you receive hundreds of pages you need to sift through. That said, I think this is a very important tool for advocates—one of the few methods we have available to help level the playing field. And if your request turns up evidence of inappropriate activity, consider taking that to the media and/or elected officials.

For more information about using FOIA requests as an animal advocacy tool:
<https://yesbiscuit.wordpress.com/2013/02/07/foia-requests-samples-and-links/>

22) Q: Much of the veterinary community is opposed to TNR. I can't wrap my head around this. Please help me understand and how to overcome.

A: This one caught me off-guard as well, since my veterinarian is a great supporter of TNR. I think there are two factors at play here:

(1) Some veterinarians have adopted PETA's "better-off-dead" philosophy, arguing that unless cats can live indoors they should be "euthanized." While it's true that the outdoors can be a dangerous place, there's also good evidence to suggest that the vast majority of community cats are very

healthy (see, for example, [this study](#) conducted in San Jose, CA, and [this one](#) conducted in Alachua County, FL). In any case, I think most of us (and at least one survey supports this—see Alley Cat Allies’ [U.S. Public Opinion on Humane Treatment of Stray Cats](#)) disagree with the idea of killing to prevent a cat’s eventual death from an unknown cause at some unknown future date.

(2) Some veterinarians believe that the low-cost spay/neuter clinics serving the TNR community are a threat to their business. In fact, a [2007 paper published in *Ecological Economics*](#) provides compelling evidence that this is not the case:

“...there are a number of people who have argued that low-cost spay/neuter programs merely cannibalize regular spay/neuter procedures rather than increasing total spay/neuter levels as well as a number of people who have argued that aggressive no-kill/adoption guarantee organization adoption programs primarily cannibalize from animal control programs rather than increasing total adoptions. The results of this study present strong evidence that neither of these cannibalization or substitution effects take place, or at least if they occur, they are more than compensated for by positive spillover effects (i.e., a complement effect) in adoption and spay/neuter efforts. The evidence is particularly strong in the case of spay/neuter procedures, where discount programs appear to significantly promote regular spay/neuter procedures.”

As for how to overcome veterinarian’s opposition to TNR, I think the best approach is to “vote” with our money. I support only those vets who support TNR, and I encourage others to do the same. (Wouldn’t it be great if there were an online directory?)

23) Q: How would you counter the argument that TNR does not reduce population numbers since some believe that a colony will always breed to capacity aka “the vacuum effect”?

A: There’s actually something to this, in that a particular environment will support a certain number of cats according to how much food, water and shelter are available. But of course, the same is true if the cats were removed. Eventually, the area will likely be home to the same number of cats (assuming the same amount food, water, and shelter are available). For this reason, I rarely talk about the vacuum effect. Instead, I like to point out how managed colonies offer long-term monitoring. As soon as a new cat shows up, the cat can be identified and (as soon as possible) trapped, sterilized, and vaccinated (and, if friendly, perhaps rehomed).

Under the trap-and-remove model, by contrast, there’s rarely any sort of monitoring. So, new arrivals (e.g., strays, abandoned pets, etc.) remain unidentified – and therefore unsterilized and unvaccinated. So, the vacuum effect exists in either case; with managed colonies, though, the vacuum can actually be used to our advantage.