

I have received two letters recently that deal with the same subject material. I would first like to apologize to the senders, Carol and Stacey, for not responding sooner. I do however have a reason that I hope to make clear in a moment.

Both Carol and Stacey are cat lovers and each have two cats that live predominately indoors. Stacey has a well-enclosed back yard that she allows her two felines to visit, otherwise they spend their time inside. All four cats are fully vaccinated according to their caretakers and are in excellent health. The problem Carol and Stacey are concerned about is not directly with any of their cats. Instead, it involves the problem of stray cats in their neighborhoods. Stacey was a bit more detailed in her description of just how bad this problem has become. She describes a mushrooming population of cats, existing by eating whatever they might find, including food provided for companion cats. Many of these strays appear ill, although it is hard for her to get a really close look at many of these individuals, owing to their very shy nature. Both Erin and Gladys express deep concern about these stray (or feral cats as they are termed), as well as concern for their own cats' welfare.

There is no question that Modesto has a significant problem with feral cats in many of its neighborhoods. These cats scratch out an existence and continue to reproduce relatively unchecked, other than by death caused from disease or trauma.

The beginnings of these populations were most probably companion cats that were not spayed or neutered and, as a result, began reproducing offspring. These offspring were left to fend for themselves, and in many cases they were quite successful. Cats can be prolific breeders and quickly overwhelm a neighborhood.

There are several problems associated with feral cats. One is the spread of disease. These "wild" felines can harbor several communicable diseases, many of which can prove to be fatal. Even casual contact between a feral cat and a beloved companion cat can spread some of these diseases, putting our companions at obvious risk. There is also the risk of injury as cats can be very territorial, both those that are feral and those that are companions. The encounters between these individuals can lead to injuries associated with fighting.

Another problem with feral cats is their detrimental effects on populations of birds in our community. These cats are unnatural predators and can cause a high mortality among various species of birds. This bird destruction is not only from feral cats. They are routinely killed by companion cats as well. This is one good reason why cats are best kept indoors. Another is that they are less likely to become feral if not allowed outside.

What is the solution to the feral cat (over) population? Without question a key component to eliminating this problem is responsible companion caretaking, which should always include spaying and neutering. Obviously, this will eliminate indiscriminate overpopulation of cats. The veterinary community in this area, along with generous funding from many organizations, has made spaying and neutering affordable, thereby allowing almost anyone to keep from contributing to this feral cat problem.

We also need to deal with the cats that are already out there. This is a complex problem that does not appear to have a single solution. One solution put forth and tried on and off for many years is the trapping of feral cats and then having them neutered and

vaccinated as well. These cats are then released back to the areas where they were captured. While this does little to immediately address the feral populations, it does allow for decline in these populations, as these cats pass away over time without the possibility of reproducing.

There are communities that have dealt quite successfully with feral cat problems and perhaps we should call upon their expertise to help us here in Modesto. Obviously there is no simple single solution to this problem. It will likely require a coordinated effort involving the entire community, including us as veterinarians, as well as appropriate government entities to help with the funding needed, in order to address and ultimately eliminate this problem.