

NACA NEWS

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Cat-tastrophe! Solving Cat Overpopulation Sites

By NACA Member Beth Gammie

One of the most challenging situations for animal control agencies to deal with is the one that almost everyone has: outdoor sites where the cat population is growing out of control.

Behind restaurant dumpsters, around businesses, in city parks, or on private property, you have all seen these situations with increasing numbers of kittens running around, adult cats hunkered down, and clearly sick cats suffering. Complaint calls to your agency to “Do something!” are regular.

Sometimes these situations seem hopeless. Simply removing and euthanizing the cats – no easy feat in itself – doesn’t work because other cats will simply move into the territory and begin multiplying. Doing this almost ensures the uproar from animal-lovers, rescue groups, and the general public, and can paint your agency as anti-cat or hostile to animals.

Doing nothing isn’t a viable option either. Complaint calls continue, people get more upset, cats reproduce, and pretty soon a problem site of 30 cats reaches 100, and then even more.

So, what can you do?

Here’s what worked in a seemingly impossible situation in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in which approximately 500 cats were living and breeding in a county park. Local and national animal welfare groups worked together to humanely create a solution that immediately reduced the population in the park by two thirds, get the park on track (with natural attrition) for zero cats in 5-7 years, and create tremendous goodwill between the county, cat rescue groups, the wildlife community, and animal control.

Core Creek Park, in Bucks County, is a beautiful county park of approximately 1,200 acres. It is a prime spot for recreation in the county, and includes hiking trails, walking paths, a lake, forested areas, and a dog park. It was clear for many years that the cat population was out of control – cats lay on the bike paths preventing people from using them, a foul smell came from the colony areas, and the park was littered with junk housing for the cats. Sick and injured cats were visible to park-goers. The situation angered folks who wanted to use the park, and distressed others who saw the immense suffer-

ing of the cats. Complaints to the park managers and county increased.

Denise Bash, from Animal Lifeline (a Pennsylvania animal welfare group) was distressed by the cats' suffering and the county's failure to humanely solve this problem. She led the effort to help the cats, local government, the colony feeders, and the park users. First, Denise included all the interested parties in helping create a plan; and second, she made a realistic operational plan to get the job done.

Creating a realistic solution everyone can live with

Denise reached out to all the interested parties to create a solution everyone could accept—county government, park law enforcement, cat lovers and rescue groups, the general public, wildlife advocates, and the colony feeders.

This was no small effort. Each constituency had their own valid interests that sometimes conflicted. The county and park law enforcement needed to eliminate the nuisance conditions in the park so residents could enjoy it; cat lovers and rescue groups wanted to see the cats cared for; wildlife advocates wanted to see the birds and wildlife protected from the cat population; and the colony feeders wanted to continue to care for "their" cats.

To come up with a solution, it was crucial for all the different parties to understand and accept that the other groups
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had legitimate interests and needs. This only came through meetings, discussions, and conversations. Denise provided a lot of education about community cats to the non-cat groups to explain how a simple “round up” and euthanasia of the cats in the park would not work. At the same time, the cat groups came to understand that the park goers, the county, and park law enforcement had legitimate needs in reducing the number of cats at the park and cleaning up the sites.

During planning it was crucial for Denise and others to understand what the concerns were behind parties’ positions and look for ways to address those concerns. Sometimes the position a side took (“no cats at the park”) was the only way they saw to address their concerns (nuisance conditions in the park) without knowing that their round-up solution would not work (because other cats would just move in).

By knowing what another side cared about and needed, ways opened up to provide a solution in a way that didn’t conflict with another’s interests. So, for example, it became clear that the county’s position of “no cats in the park” reflected their interests: we need to remedy the nuisance in the park,

this cat population is untenable, and we would like there to be almost no cats living there. Cat groups could work with that! They knew that if you reach 80-90 percent spay/neuter rates, then the population declines through natural attrition. The county compromised on the “now” part of no cats, and could live with a declining population at the park over the years, if the nuisance part was addressed now.

Over several months, a realistic solution was created: all the cats would be trapped and spayed/neutered; friendly or adoptable cats would be placed into rescue groups, providing an immediate reduction in the cat population; ferals or others that couldn’t live in homes would be placed into barn homes or “working cat” programs. If there were more unadoptable or feral cats than barn homes available, the county agreed to their release back into to the park after spay/neuter, vaccination, and ear tip.

Other crucial components of the plan:

- a regulated feeding program
- removing the “junk” cat shelters and replacing them with attractive wooden houses
- gently moving the colonies away from heavy traffic areas



- maintenance trapping to sterilize any new cats
- a medical fund to provide treatment to injured and sick cats at the park
- increased efforts by park police to crack down on cat “dumping”

Making it happen

Once a solution was created, Denise made an operational plan to address all the parts—how do you trap, spay/neuter, and place an estimated 300 cats? Denise broke the plan down to its component parts: trapping, sheltering, spay/neuter and medical, placement, and aftercare. This was the only way to make this operation manageable. She enlisted a lead for each of these teams, whose only job was to manage its own part, from figuring out



supplies to volunteers and the myriad details to make it work. The leads coordinated with each other on timing and capacity.

The large number of cats, and the need to place as many as possible meant this could not be a standard TNR operation. Since we needed to trap all (or nearly all) the cats, we needed an extended period of trapping of 10 days. In addition, they created “Kitten Patrols” – teams of volunteers who would walk the colony areas to look and listen for litters of kittens (and

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moms) to remove and take directly to foster.

The need for placement meant we needed to have some time with the cats post-surgery to assess their friendliness. We set up a temporary shelter to house the cats after they were altered. This also aided the trapping efforts. Cats weren't released back into the park before the trapping was concluded.

Animal groups were enlisted to help in this lifesaving effort. Animal Lifeline volunteers and local animal control officers made up the trapping team, and had over 25 volunteer trappers who trapped over the 10-day period. RedRover, a national animal welfare organization, set up and staffed the temporary shelter in a county warehouse. The International Fund for Animal Welfare transported the cats to and from the spay/neuter clinics at the Pennsylvania SPCA in Philadelphia. Rescue Purrfect, in Bucks County, performed spay/neuter surgeries, and helped place cats in their foster network. The Cat Shack provided a large grant to help fund the surgeries. Many cat rescue groups, including Cat Tales, stepped up to take cats and kittens into their programs.

The hours were exhausting, but the operation succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. The county, cat groups, media, animal control agencies, and the general public were thrilled.

Approximately 247 cats were trapped, and another 100 kittens and moms were picked up by the "Kitten Patrols." Add in the 110 cats and kittens that were picked up in the months prior to the operation, and about 457 cats were removed from the park. The friendly cats were placed with rescues, and some ferals were put into barn cat programs – with only 157 spayed/neutered cats returned to the park. Through natural attrition we expect the population to decrease over the next 5-7 years.



It is possible to solve a seemingly impossible cat situation. We encourage you to try, and we created a how-to manual to help, based on the approach we used at Core Creek Park. This approach can be scaled-up or down to suit your own situation. It includes guidance, forms, and other resources to humanely solve cat overpopulation sites.

Beth Gammie is the director of field services for RedRover, a national animal welfare organization headquartered in Sacramento. She leads the RedRover Responders program that provides emergency animal sheltering in natural disasters and large-scale cruelty seizures. She led the team of RedRover volunteers at the Core Creek Park operation. ❖