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The Dilemma of the Friendly Outdoor Cat

Feral cats aren't the only felines who deserve to remain in their neighborhood homes

How many of us have found a friendly stray cat hanging out on our front porch or chilling at the neighborhood park and thought, "Oh, no! I better save this poor abandoned kitty!"?

Back in the day, I probably rescued at least half a dozen cats off the street and took them to a shelter believing they would be adopted if their owners didn't reclaim them. Now that I've spent more than 14 years working in animal welfare, I have a different perspective.

Now I realize that I may have been scooping up a cat who was doing just fine where she was, who probably had a person watching out for her and who didn't need me to rescue her. And with cats accounting for **more than two out of every three** animals killed in shelters, that's not something I feel good about.

Why do I think that? Anecdotally, through my work with shelter-based **community cat programs** I encounter people every day who care for one or more outside cats, many of whom are extremely friendly, and consider them "theirs."

Statistically, the 2019-2020 American Pet Products Association's National Pet Owners survey of 15,000 consumers found that roughly a third allow their cats some outdoor access. Another 14% said they took care of free-roaming cats, with 95% providing food and water, 43% providing shelter, 20% getting the cats spayed or neutered and 13% providing additional medical care.

Although some people might never let our cats outside, there are many who do. The bonds they have with their felines shouldn't be dismissed just because they don't keep them exclusively indoors. The truth is, behind every friendly (and many not-so-friendly) cat we see sauntering down the street is someone who cares about them (and often more than one "someone" who does).

"Friendlies come through our clinic all the time," says Leah Massey, community cat program manager at the **Humane Society of Charlotte** in North Carolina. "Those cats are friendly for a reason, because someone has made it friendly. Someone cares about this cat."

"There are lots of people in our cat programs who have created a bond with some of the friendlies," agrees Don Riser, animal services manager for **City of Hesperia Animal Services**. "Those cats do belong someplace and it's certainly not in our shelter. Plus, I find in talking to people that they want their friendly

stray back and they just appreciate the spay/neuter resources.”

The benefits of keeping strays out of shelters

There are a lot of practical reasons why shelters would prefer not to take in every friendly, “adoptable” cat spotted sitting on the sidewalk. Cats are notorious for getting stressed and sick in a shelter environment, often with illnesses like upper respiratory infections that can spread through the entire facility like wildfire. Even the friendliest cat can act terrified or aggressive in a cage, reducing the chances that he will get adopted.

And removing friendly cats from neighborhoods diverts resources that could be used to provide positive outcomes for the cats most at risk: owner surrenders, neonatal kittens and cats who are sick, injured or victims of cruelty.

Leah acknowledges that this is a major shift in shelter practices that can at first seem confusing to the public.

“We’ve drilled into them that if they find a stray animal, they should bring it to the shelter,” she says. “Now we are changing the messaging and that catches people by surprise. However, most people understand once we have a conversation and point out that the cat might already be home.”

Common arguments against returning friendly cats

In my work with shelters implementing return-to-field programs for cats, I’ve heard a lot of the same arguments against including friendly cats specifically. One is the concern that those cats might have gotten lost after getting out of their indoor homes.

Even though more pet owners are investing in microchipping as a permanent form of identification, the sad fact remains that the return-to-owner rate of cats from shelters remains where it has been for decades. Only about 2.9% of all cats admitted to shelters are reclaimed from shelters by their owners, largely because people just aren’t in the habit of looking for their cats there – or they wait too long to do so.

In contrast, cats are **13 times more likely** to be reunited with their families by means other than a visit to a shelter. The most common methods by which lost cats get back home? They return on their own or are found by people searching the neighborhood from which they went missing in the first place.

Another frequent argument against returning friendlies concerns the risks inherent in them being outside. From cars to predators to diseases, there are threats to life and limb that a cat wouldn’t encounter living indoors. But shelters aren’t 100% safe places for cats, either, particularly in terms of exposure to disease.

The claim that outdoor cats are unhealthy and likely to die from a variety of illnesses also hasn’t held up under scrutiny. **One peer-reviewed study** found that just 0.5% of cats that were part of six large-scale RTF and TNVR programs had health issues serious enough to require euthanasia.

And while people still think of cats as loners, the reality is that they do have relationships with one another as well as with people. Confident, friendly cats have been known to offer protection and support to other cats living in the same social group.

Facing realistic choices for cats

While some strongly believe that every cat deserves a loving indoor home with a warm lap and three squares a day, the reality is that not everyone thinks that. In the United Kingdom, **only about 10%** of all pet cats are kept exclusively indoors and the numbers cited above show that many people in the U.S. believe cats need at least some outdoor enrichment.

Those of us who work in sheltering or with rescue groups may believe that we can require people to keep cats inside through the adoption contract. People will make a choice about allowing their cats outside based on what works for them, however, no matter what they claim on paper. In some cases, letting a cat with behavior issues like spraying have some outside time is the only thing keeping that cat from being relinquished to a shelter.

That brings us full circle, with a friendly cat who now is at risk of losing his life because he has landed in a shelter and brought his behavioral baggage along with him.

Does all this mean you should let your personal cats outside? No.

However, my neighbors and I feed several cats in the area, including a number of friendlies, and we've been doing so for years. They'll even come inside on the rare occasion to have a nap on the couch. But I don't for one minute think I need to rescue them.

In fact, there's one big orange Tom who is easily more than 10 years old and is FIV+, which we know because one of the other residents had him tested some time back. He's healthy and content, he brings joy to many people, and he watches out for the other cats that live outside, serving as a sort of social glue to the gang that inhabits our block.

For a friendly outdoor cat, he has everything he could ever want. And that's all that matters to me.

Michelle Logan

Director of National Shelter Embed Programming
Best Friends Animal Society

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