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Trap-Neuter-Return - Best Practices

1) Set up feeding stations and shelters

The process of Trap-Neuter-Return begins with the setting up of feeding stations and arranging a regular feeding schedule. The cats will show up at a certain place at a certain time and you'll be able to withhold food and get them hungry when you decide to begin trapping. Improving the cats' nutrition by improving the quality of their food better prepares them for the stress of trapping and neutering. Adequate shelter also promotes their health and assists in locating them. If the cats are on private property, obtaining approval of the owner of any property, to which the caregiver requires access, is strongly recommended.

2) Secure an adequate holding space for trapping and neutering

Depending on the size of the colony, trapping all the cats may take two or three days. A space is needed to hold the cats as the colony is being trapped. The recommended minimum post-surgery recovery time is 24 hours for males and females – 48 hours if the female was pregnant. All cats should be checked prior to release to make sure they are alert and that there are no medical conditions requiring further veterinary treatment, such as severe upper respiratory infection, bleeding or excessive lethargy. While they are confined, the cats remain in their traps which are cleaned and the cats fed preferably twice a day.

Space in which the cats are held during the trapping and for post-surgery recovery should be warm, dry and secure. "Warm" meaning at least 65 to 70 degrees (especially post-surgery when the cats' body temperatures may be lower than normal), "dry" meaning protected from the elements, and "secure" meaning the cats are not accessible to other animals or anyone not associated with the project.

3) Decide what to do with kittens and friendly adults

Once trapped, caregivers shall assess the temperament of the cats and remove kittens and friendly adults from the colony to place up for adoption. Plans need to be made in advance to work with a reputable shelter or rescue organization, or provide other means of finding good indoor homes.

4) Arrange for spay/neuter

Locate a clinic or individual veterinarian who works with feral cats and can give a reduced rate for altering and vaccinating. Inquire about their policies and procedures for setting an appointment and the number of cats you can bring in at the same time.

5) Trapping

To be effective, 100% of the cats in a colony must be TNR'ed or placed up for adoption. Mass trapping should take place whenever possible. Traps are never to be left unattended. A trapped cat may be frightened and injure himself thrashing around in a trap. Additionally, he is subject to the elements and in danger from other animals and humans.

6) FIV/FeLV testing

FIV/FeLV testing is not recommended except when test results would be useful in diagnosing the condition of a symptomatic cat, or when a cat is being considered for adoption. FIV/FeLV testing is not recommended because the percentage of infected cats is low, sterilization contains the spread of these viruses, infected cats can be asymptomatic, there can be false positives, and testing is costly. If testing is chosen, under no circumstances should a cat be euthanized purely on a positive result. Symptomatic cats testing positive, should be euthanized only when it is in the best interest of the cat to prevent prolonged suffering.

7) Vaccinations

It is strongly recommended that a rabies vaccination be administered and that reasonable efforts are made to update the vaccinations on cats who can be recaptured. It is further recommended that the distemper (FVRCP) vaccine not be administered (to adults) because of the lowered efficacy of the vaccine without a booster and because of the stress on the immune system from multiple vaccinations at the time of neutering or spaying. However, due to the high kitten mortality from distemper (Feline Panleukopenia), it is suggested that kittens be vaccinated.

8) Eartipping

Returned cats should be eartipped in accordance with the universal symbol of an altered and rabies vaccinated feral cat - 1/4 inch off the tip of the left ear in a straight line cut.

9) Long-term colony care

Cats who are TNRed should be provided with long-term care, including the provision of adequate food, fresh water and suitable shelter. Designated caregiver(s) should consistently monitor the cats and keep a record of any illnesses or unusual behavior. Proper medical attention should be sought for any colony cat who appears to require it.

10) Colony statistics

Colony statistics are critical in recording the success of TNR. Statistics includes, but are not limited to, description of the cats, reproductive status, vaccine history, adopted, returned, eartipped, etc., will help document the change in colony numbers once TNR began.