

Catworld

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Fighting for ferals - how it all began

The pioneer, the model and the science-based charity who paved the way for the humane treatment of feral cats

BY TRACEY WOODS MCIPR

Have you ever wondered where the idea of controlling feral cat populations by trapping, neutering and returning them to where they came from originated? Or how the idea came to prominence?

In the 1950s, only a few years after the end of the Second World War, there were many feral cats living on bomb sites, around hospitals, demolition sites and factories. There was little interest or publicity in their welfare, or concern about their fate.

An animal advocate and reformer called Ruth Plant realised that most animal welfare organisations “only concerned themselves with the unwanted pets brought to them for rehoming and made no attempt to help cats living on the streets.” Councils and other bodies ordered the destruction of cats and employed pest control firms to do it.

When Ruth met the former model Celia Hammond, she realised there was a positive way forward. Celia had been rescuing, neutering and rehoming feral cats since 1965 and was, said Ruth “the first person I had met who had approached the problem with something positive and remedial. She devoted her time unceasingly to neutering the cats and wherever acceptable, putting them back on the site they had come from...but no-one had appreciated the value of it or paused to review the situation and see how it worked.”

To help feral cats, Ruth founded the National Cat Rescue Co-ordinating

Committee (which subsequently became the Cat Action Trust) with Celia as its first Chairman in September 1975.

By 1979, there was a growing academic interest in the ecology of feral cats – which is where the charity UFAW came in. The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) was founded in 1926 and is an internationally recognised scientific and educational animal welfare charity. Ruth was familiar with UFAW, which had first become involved in humane methods of controlling feral cat populations in 1974 when it objected to the use of carbon tetrachloride and chloroform in the euthanasia of cats. In 1977, UFAW’s Assistant Director at that time, Dr Jenny Remfry, conducted field trials investigating methods of trapping and the use of oral progestogen to control cat populations. In September 1980, the charity organised and held an international two day symposium in London on the ‘Ecology and Control of Feral Cats’. Dr Remfry presented her preliminary work on controlling feral cat colonies through the policy of ‘trap, neuter and release’ (TNR) at the symposium, which was considered a ‘landmark occurrence’ where attitudes toward feral cats began to shift toward humane treatment.

A paper by Dr Remfry, reporting on the main findings of the symposium, was published in the jour-

nal Veterinary Record in 1981. Subsequent work by Dr Remfry and UFAW Research Assistant Peter Neville, assisted by Dr Hilary Box of Reading University and David Moltu of the Zoological Society of London, convincingly showed that TNR was a very humane method of controlling cat numbers when coupled with clear identification of neutered cats through ear tipping (as first practised in Denmark).

UFAW published the first edition of ‘Feral Cats: Suggestions for Control’ in 1982, with a supporting video following in 1985. The booklet was in such demand it was reprinted twice and further editions were published in 1989 and 1995.

At the end of the 1980s, the charity funded a further field survey of the effects of TNR and the study found that this method was successful and more humane than any alternative, with neutered colonies surviving for years in good health if properly supervised. A supporting study also funded by UFAW into local authority policy and attitudes showed that local authorities were now more aware of the problems caused by feral cats than when UFAW first started work in this area and were more prepared to co-operate with local people in finding humane solutions to their control.

With the scientific evidence and publicity generated by UFAW, TNR became more widely acceptable within a few years, and UFAW



supported the wider use of this technique through training organisations in other countries including Kenya, South Africa, Tunisia and Greece. It is now accepted as a frequently-used component of well managed and monitored feral cat population management programmes.

Feral cats owe much to the pioneers such as Ruth Plant and Celia Hammond, as well as to science which, thanks to the support of UFAW and the input of scientists like Dr Jenny Remfry, has helped us to understand more about feral cat colonies. As Dr Remfry concluded in a presentation she gave in 1979: "The long term solution is, of course, to persuade owners never to abandon their cats and never to allow the queens to produce kittens unless good homes are known to be available."

Who are UFAW?

Over the last 90 years UFAW has led the way in using science to bring about lasting change – feral cats being just



one example. Despite its substantial achievements, outside the scientific and academic/veterinary community, relatively few people are aware that the charity has been hard at work for nearly a century. In its first few years alone, it began a long (and eventually successful) campaign to abolish the use of the gin trap, championed the use of cruelty-free perfumes, free from animal products such as musk or civet, and joined a committee set up by the British Board of Film Censors to scrutinise the

welfare of animals used in films.

Its history is the history of science in the service of animal welfare. From the smallest mouse to an Indian elephant, UFAW's work has made a tremendous difference to millions of animals all around the world. More recently, it has been developing an information resource for prospective pet owners on genetic welfare problems of companion animals, with many cat breeds included. You can find out more at www.ufaw.org.uk.

Help us to prevent animal suffering

A great many animals suffer needlessly due to our lack of knowledge and understanding of their needs and how best to meet them. UFAW is unique, promoting research and education, developing practical solutions to welfare problems and disseminating the results worldwide through publications, workshops and international conferences. Please help us with a donation – you can make a real and lasting difference for millions of animals now and in the future.



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