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In our hearts but not in our homes?

More needs to be done to fight ignorance that prevents our feline friends from being HDB flat dwellers

Whether you particularly like cats or not, they have come to be accepted as permanent fixtures of void decks at *Housing and Development Board* (HDB) apartment buildings. Many a childhood include experiences of playing with cats of all colours and sizes - some friendly and energetic but most just content to curl up in a corner for their late afternoon siesta.

It may thus be a rude surprise for the uninitiated that cats are actually not allowed to be kept as pets in flats. HDB justifies on its website that flat occupants are not allowed to keep cats as it is 'generally difficult to confine cats within the flat premises', and adds that other annoyances of keeping cats include 'shedding of their fur, defecating/urinating in public areas or even caterwauling sounds' that apparently impede harmonious living in a high-density environment.

Often, letters to the local newspapers echo these sentiments towards cats as flat dwellers complain about being greeted by pungent cat faeces and urine outside their homes and staircases in the mornings; about irresponsible neighbours allowing their cats to roam along the corridors; and, about the heartache suffered by motorists who have to deal with cat scratches on their precious vehicles.

Nation of complainers (who cause deaths)

In 2006 alone, the HDB, Town Councils and *Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority* (AVA) together received about 10,000 complaints regarding stray cats. In some of these cases, aggrieved residents even resorted to extreme measures such as trapping the stray cats themselves to be sent to the AVA 'for further action'.

However, it has been quite apparent that what most of these complainants do not realise is that this 'further action' - including those that get rounded up as a result of complaints - is the routine culling of these animals.

In a media release dated 2003, the AVA revealed that a staggering 10,000 to 13,000 cats are put to sleep annually by the *Singapore Society for Prevention of the Cruelty to Animals* (SPCA) and AVA. Meanwhile, Dr Tan Chek Wee pointed out in his letter to the *Straits Times* that almost all of the people who lodged the complaints were blissfully unaware that these cats would be culled, their intention being merely to have them removed from the area.

And as to whether the complaints received are true representations of overall resident sentiment, a survey done among 200 HDB households in the Jurong West area found that more than 90% of the residents did not want stray cats in their area to be removed from their carpark - in stark contrast to a single complaint made by a resident about his car allegedly getting scratched by cats.

No (good) reason to go on killing

It is no secret that culling continues to be the preferred choice of the authorities to manage the stray cat population in Singapore - in spite of the global shift towards more humane and rational methods.

To its credit, the AVA did consider alternatives by initiating the *Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme* in 1998 where volunteers worked with the Town Council to control the stray cat population in Bukit Merah View through systematic sterilisation.

While the pilot study reported that "only 4% of people strongly object to sterilisation and responsible management to control the cats (while) up to 96% of people do not want cats culled", the scheme was unfortunately abandoned as the number of complaints did not lessen in quantity.

Many animal advocates are strongly urging the authorities to consider re-implementing this successful scheme as it adequately addresses the many concerns while being a more reasonable method of stray cat management. For example, a sterilised cat does not caterwaul, is less aggressive and is generally less inclined to leave the home environment.

Cat owners to blame too

A large part of why the stray cat population is hard to manage is due to irresponsible or ignorant cat owners who keep cats on the sly and often fail to sterilise them, resulting in the indiscriminate multiplying and the eventual abandonment of unsterilised cats onto the streets. A case in point will be the October incident of a family who admitted to abandoning 10 emaciated and sickly cats as the original 3 they adopted had not been sterilised, leading to more than 30 unsterilised cats living in the home.

Many animal welfare groups are therefore calling for the HDB and AVA to review their current practices and policies, arguing for the authorities to regulate and educate pet owners instead so that a harmonious living environment is created and cats are well cared for - in addition to a more

successful management of the cat population.

In fact, Joanna Hughes, the former Associate Editor of the *Singapore Tatler* who has written several articles in support of the misunderstood feral feline species, goes a step further to emphasise that the education should preferably extend beyond just pet owners to non-cat-loving neighbours as well so that the latter group can overcome the stereotypical notion that cats are dirty, aggressive and will scratch and hiss when disturbed.

She suggests that cat owners who are currently keeping cats at home on the sly be given a six-month grace period during which they are to sterilise, micro-chip and register their cat with the local Town Council. In addition, she believes that cat owners should undergo a short course on how to properly care for their companions.

And while she concedes that this will cost money, her belief is that the funds spent on culling strays can be diverted to subsidise sterilisation and micro-chipping instead - which would only amount to the redistribution of existing expenditure and not additional cost.

Over the years (1981-1998), culling has not significantly reduced the number of cats destroyed each year or the number of complaints received. The inference we can make from these figures is that culling has not been effective in the long run in resolving the stray cat situation.

**Dr Lou Ek Hee, Assistant Director
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What You Can Do To Help

- Arm yourself with information and knowledge on the Trap Neuter and Return (TNR) method of managing cat population
- Talk to your neighbours and correct any misconceptions they might have with regard to cat behaviour
- Let all your neighbours know that complaints to AVA, HDB and Town Councils may result in the culling of the cats in question
- Continuously advise and encourage your neighbours who keep cats to sterilise them and not abandon any as they can approach a host of organisations for help if they are unable to care for their pets
- Volunteer your time, energy and money to organisations and groups who work towards effective long-term solutions to the problem



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Need to start from scratch

Licensing and regulation of cat ownership in HDB flats can indeed become a two-pronged approach to manage the cat population. On the one hand, cat owners can be openly engaged (i.e. no longer a fear of authorities) and thus be officially entrusted with the responsibility of sterilising their pet cat. On the other hand, the relaxation of regulations will empower cat lovers to open their homes to stray cats - effectively removing many of them from the streets and providing several of them with a safer and loving environment.



As Veron Lau, vice president of the *Cat Welfare Society* (CWS), points out, the law certainly continues to be a hindrance to any kind of coherent education to cat owners on a national level and the actions of recalcitrant cat owners do not give incentive for this rule to be changed. She calls this the 'catch-22' situation where rules cannot be changed due to the behaviour and behaviour cannot be changed due to those very rules.

This negative cycle therefore needs to be broken before we can start afresh and build a more comprehensive strategy that offers long-term solutions. Experience and science already indicate that there is much potential for the *Trap Neuter Return* method and coupled with a wide-reaching general awareness programme and relaxation of rules, a problem that has been plaguing the community - both *homo sapien* and *feline catus* alike - for 3 decades now can finally be put to rest forever.