Don't let fear drive policy on feral cats

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A 2012 Ward Research study commissioned by the Hawaiian Humane Society estimates that there are approximately 300,000 free roaming and feral cats on Oahu.

Such numbers are alarming and have led to concerns about potential human health risks from toxoplasmosis and the impact on wildlife.

Public opinion that decreases the status of cats in our community illuminate an important point: There are those who love cats and those who don't.

When populations increase to the levels that Hawaii currently faces, fears abound — one of which concerns toxoplasmosis, of which the most common source is uncooked meat. Rare and easily avoidable, toxoplasmosis is transmitted to people from felines only by touching infected feces and not washing your hands before eating.

As for wildlife, it is true that animals at large kill other animals. More need to keep cats indoors for their protection and that of other animals, in addition to a host of other reasons, including pet safety and a longer life for your feline. Cat owners should never abandon their cats to a colony or leave them behind when moving.

The Hawaiian Humane Society believes that every cat deserves a lap, and those that don't have one still need our compassion and care. There are far too many cats at large and struggling to survive in our neighborhoods and streets.

The Hawaiian Humane Society and cat rescue groups have been challenged by the number and plight of these animals. The Humane Society offers help in as many ways as it can every year: sterilizing thousands of feral cats a year, assisting with hundreds of cases involving community cats, advocating policies to address the issues, and rehoming kittens captured outdoors.

Through March, the Humane Society is offering $5 sterilizations of feral cats. Groups such as Hawaii Cat Friends, Joey's Feline Friends, Happy Cats, Poi Dogs & Popoki and more are devoted to cat welfare. Still, it is not enough, given the magnitude of the issue.

The Ward Research findings also concluded that nearly 20 percent of Oahu residents are feeding cats they don't consider their own, and 70 percent of these people don't know if the cats are sterilized.

"Trap, Neuter, Return & Manage" (TNRM) is a strategy that organizations and many individuals support that relies entirely on caring citizens.

The Humane Society also sees the other end of the spectrum, in which more than 10,000 feral cats are brought to us unwanted and unadoptable and are euthanized. Euthanasia is not the solution any more than
TNRM at its current pace. The only solution is for more people to become educated and involved. The issue of a growing population of free-roaming cats is larger than the noble efforts currently being made.

It's going to take the entire community to help reduce populations humanely through sterilization efforts, and more funding is needed for this, including veterinarians to perform the surgeries. We must increase awareness about the plight of cats outdoors and increase involvement and support from all sectors of the community.

Together, we can find ways both large and small so the issue can be approached with compassion and diligence.

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