

Inside Your Cat's Mind[®]

WHAT THEY REALLY THINK

THE
SECRET
LANGUAGE
OF CATS



HOW TO
DECODE
THEIR
BEHAVIOR

UNDERSTAND
THEIR INNER
WORLD

WHY FELINES ARE
MORE LIKE US
THAN WE REALIZE

EASY WAYS TO
STRENGTHEN
YOUR BOND

CENTENNIAL
ANIMALS

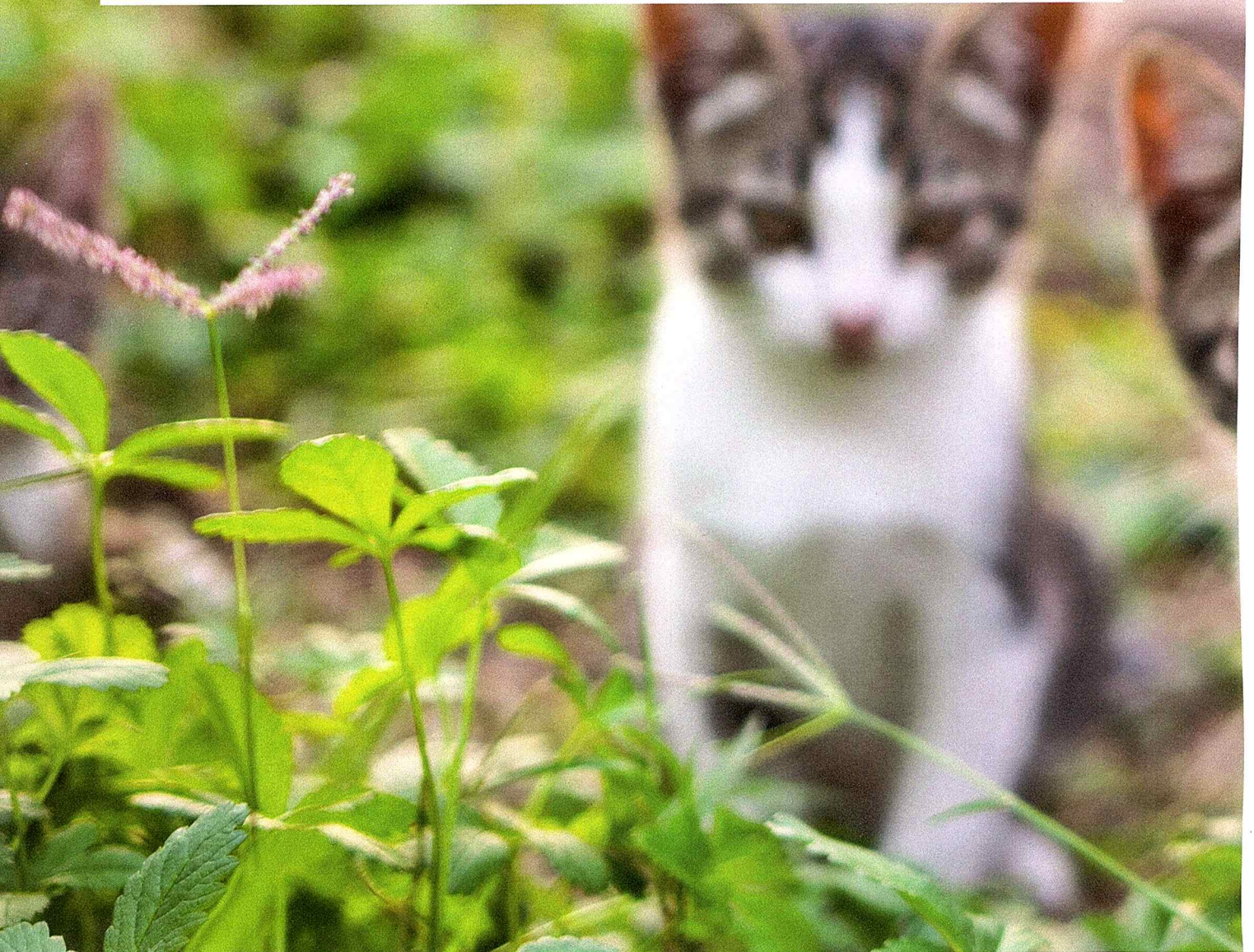


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ON THE STREET

Saving Community Cats

So you think they're a nuisance? Trapping cats, neutering them and returning them to their lives in the neighborhood offers hope for feral felines. **BY JEN REEDER**





Wherever you
find humans,
you'll most likely
find a society
of free-living
community cats.

Community cats are
socialized in the wild.
Don't try to pick one up
or bring one home.

Three letters have helped save the lives of countless cats in America: TNR. It stands for “trap-neuter-return” and is the humane option for managing community cats (formerly called “feral”). Since community cats haven’t been socialized to life in a home with humans, they typically won’t do well as pets, and if they land in a shelter they will be euthanized.

With TNR, advocates use a humane trap to capture a community cat, take it to a shelter or veterinary clinic to be vaccinated and spayed or neutered, and then return the cat to their environment (this way, they already know their food and water sources). While the cat is under anesthesia, the veterinary team tips his ear to mark him as sterilized.

Nancy Peterson, board member of the nonprofits Neighborhood Cats and the National Kitten Coalition, is former community-cats program manager for the Humane Society of the United States, which issued a position statement supporting TNR in 2006 soon after she assumed the role. (TNR was introduced to the U.S. in 1990 when the nonprofit Alley Cat Allies launched a pilot program in Washington, D.C.)

She likened the old model—which required animal control officers to trap cats and bring them to shelters, where they’d then be killed—to the adage “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

“It did not decrease the number of community-cat problems,” she says. “It was basically a waste of effort and money, and euthanizing

healthy animals is not something that shelters or rescues want to be doing.”

Unlike lethal management, TNR is not only humane, but effective, too, says Peterson. The techniques used have evolved to become more efficient, such as “target trapping” every cat in a colony for TNR and then monitoring the group for new arrivals, who will need to be promptly spayed or neutered to prevent breeding.

SAFER FOR EVERYONE

TNR helps both neighborhoods and the cats themselves. For starters, the cats are healthier after being vaccinated against rabies (and often, diseases like feline distemper); they can also get flea treatment and deworming when needed.

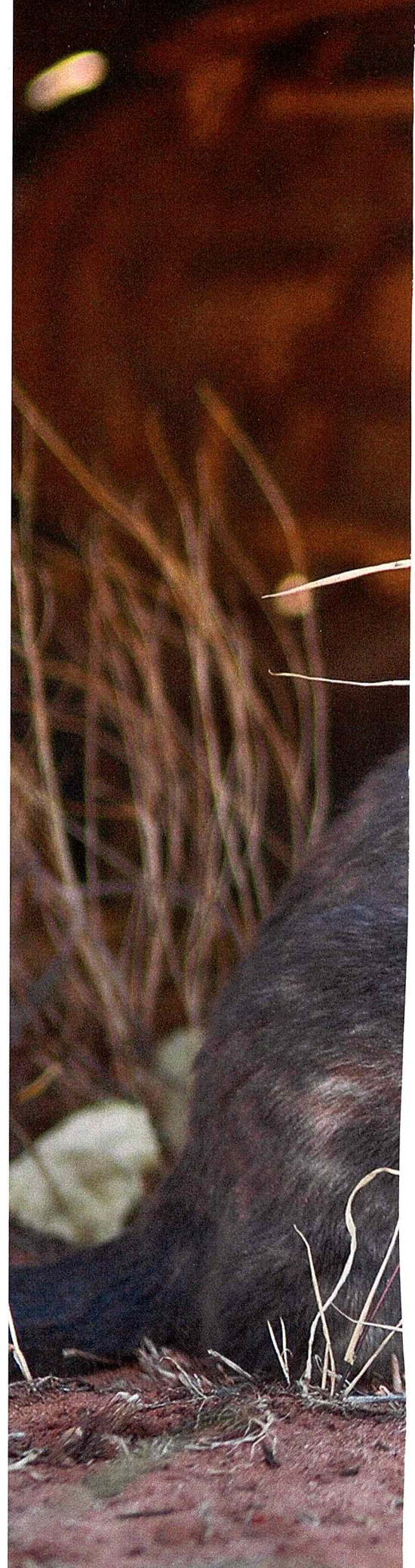
Once spayed, female cats won’t keep having heat cycles and reproducing—which, as Peterson notes, “takes a lot out of a cat”—and without testosterone, neutered males are less inclined to fight with other tomcats or spray to mark their territory.

The reduction of nuisance behaviors like yowling and spraying appeals to neighbors, who will also see an immediate reduction in the overall number of cats. Free-roaming kittens who still have time to be socialized are often adopted into homes, and friendly adult cats might find homes or work as “barn cats” to help with rodent control in barns and stables, according to Peterson.

“You get a reduction in the number of cats out there, and you’ve got healthier cats,” she says. “It’s not an overnight fix, but then again, neither is killing them.”



When capturing a community cat for TNR, it's best to use a large cage.



Community cats are genetically identical to the domestic cats we raise as pets in our homes.





When working with a cat colony, line up a vet in advance who can spay and neuter the animals.

Before bringing a community cat to a shelter, make sure it has a TNR program. Otherwise, such facilities could be a death sentence for unsocialized animals.



SUPPORTED BY SCIENCE

Numerous studies prove the effectiveness and sustainability of TNR. One recent study of a cat colony living in a 2-mile stretch in San Francisco found an initial population of 175 community cats decreased by 99.4% from 2004 to 2020, with only one remaining cat at the end of the program period.

Best Friends Animal Society, a nonprofit working to make America no-kill by 2025, has partnered with shelters and rescue organizations across the country to establish TNR programs that save tens of thousands of cats each year. For example, when Best Friends helped establish a TNR program in 2011 in DeKalb County, Georgia, the save rate for cats jumped from 46.5% to 77.8% in the first year alone.

A recent success story involves Palm Valley Animal Society in Edinburg, Texas. In 2018, it was one of the most underresourced shelters in America and had the highest kill rate, with around 20,000 animals killed every year. Best Friends staff embedded at the shelter to help with myriad initiatives, including TNR.

By 2020, the save rate had skyrocketed to more than 90%, according to Holly Sizemore, chief mission officer for Best Friends.

“The community-cat program is this amazing way that we help them get out and start talking to the community,” she says. “It’s a mutually supportive system; we couldn’t offer TNR if these wonderful people didn’t care for these cats and want to feed them every day, and call us if they see a newcomer come in and help trap him.”

Often, residents start out feeding a few community cats but quickly become overwhelmed as they reproduce and create more mouths to feed. So as Sizemore notes, members of the community who are willing to be caretakers while also helping maintain colony size

through TNR are a key component of successful programs.

Sterling “TrapKing” Davis, founder of TrapKing Humane Cat Solutions in Atlanta, is working to make TNR “as common as recycling.” Davis left a music career as a rapper to start his nonprofit organization in 2017 to save cats while changing perceptions of men—particularly Black men—in cat rescue.

“If there are only compassionate women out here doing this, how much help are the cats missing? How much more help will we get if we could engage different demographics?” he recalls musing.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Davis has made promising inroads in the predominantly Black neighborhoods he serves by getting kids involved, even offering them cash prizes for monitoring his traps and texting him when a cat’s inside. He loves their enthusiasm and hopes his motto—“You don’t lose cool points for compassion”—inspires them throughout their lives.

“I think it’s something that can make better adults—if we learn compassion for other living creatures early on,” he says. “Animals can help bring people together.”

To come together for the good of animals, TNR advocates can partner with city governments, which often oversee the municipal shelters and their animal control officers.

In 2008, First Coast No More Homeless Pets became the country’s first nonprofit to partner with a city—Jacksonville, Florida—to implement a TNR program. The Feral Freedom program has since saved the lives of an estimated 50,000 cats; the nonprofit shares a free online guide to help other communities create similar partnerships.

Jennifer Barker, chief operating officer of First Coast No More Homeless Pets, said collaboration between nonprofits and city governments can be key to successful TNR programs by empowering volunteers and cat advocates in the community to be part of the solution. “Affordable and accessible TNR options are fundamental to positive program results, and when nonprofits and city governments work together to provide low-cost or no-cost sterilizations, TNR becomes a realistic goal,” she says.

OUTREACH

Tips for Compromising With Upset Neighbors

Often, successful TNR programs find creative ways to compromise with neighbors who complain about community cats.

Becky Robinson, founder of Alley Cat Allies, says part of educational outreach can include suggesting—or even providing—humane deterrents. For instance, if someone is upset about cats leaving paw prints on the hood of their car, an organization might purchase a car cover for them.

When cats annoy neighbors by walking through their gardens, advocates might suggest scattering orange or lemon peels, since cats detest the smell of citrus. Other options include motion-activated sprinklers or devices that emit a high-pitched sound only cats can hear.

“We have to find ways to coexist,” Robinson says.

STREET LAW

The Vacuum Effect

Becky Robinson, president and founder of Alley Cat Allies, the Maryland-based nonprofit credited with introducing TNR to the United States in 1990, is gratified by the “seismic shift” in attitudes toward TNR that have led to widespread adoption both here and in many countries overseas.

She notes that Americans responding to national polls over the years have increasingly said they prefer their taxes be used to sterilize cats as the control policy rather than impounding and killing them—as many as 84% in 2017.

A FERAL FUTURE

Challenges still exist. In 2017, the American Bar Association adopted a resolution encouraging jurisdictions not to consider TNR “abandonment,” but some still do. Alley Cat Allies believes TNR should be exempted from abandonment laws.

“There are people who abandon and dump their cat, and that’s wrong,” Robinson says. “We support abandonment laws, but when cats are being neutered and returned to where they’d been thriving with other cats and the population stabilizes because of these efforts, then that’s exactly what has to happen.”

In a major victory for cat advocates, Utah’s 2011 Community Cat Act protected TNR and codified it into state law. But there are still cities and towns across the U.S. with punitive laws.

Some local governments have proposed legislation to prevent residents from giving food to free-roaming cats. In 2020, officials in Casper, Wyoming, voted down a feeding ban after public outcry.

“The way that cats get saved is because people defend them,” Robinson says. “When it comes to local city councils or county councils, what really matters is that they hear from their constituents. Anybody can be an advocate. The cats need your voice.”

You know the phrase “nature abhors a vacuum”? It refers to the phenomenon that occurs when a space is emptied and nature fills it. This phenomenon, known in conservation studies as the vacuum effect, has been observed across species including foxes, mice, coyotes, voles, possums and badgers—and of course, cats.

There’s just no changing this law of the universe. If cats are removed from their outdoor home, that creates a territorial opening—or vacuum. Like any resource-rich but empty space in nature, that vacuum will not remain empty for long.

YOU CAN’T BEAT THE LAWS OF NATURE

Once you understand this unstoppable reality, you’ll know why killing cats (or otherwise removing them) from a given location is doomed to fail, according to Alley Cat Allies, one of the leading advocates for the community cats who live alongside us in cat neighborhoods of their own. Grasp the rules governing ecosystems, especially those in the middle of cities, and you will see that simply killing cats living on the streets or in empty lots and parks won’t lead to fewer felines. Sure, removing cats from an area may cause a temporary decrease in the cat population,

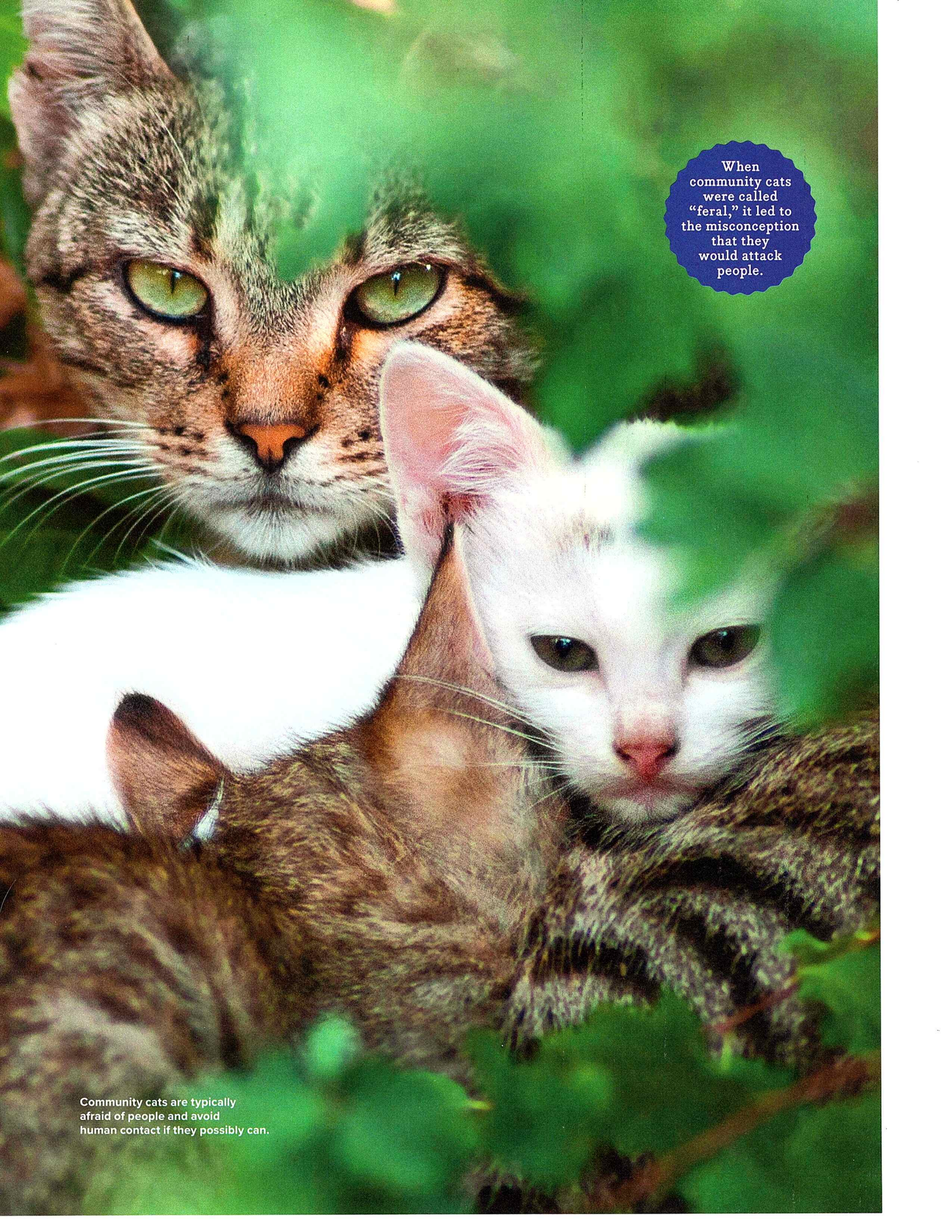
but ultimately, more cats will take their place—and it won’t take long. The new cats will find the empty space in the ecosystem, reaping benefits of the resources and all the largesse that nature provides. They will start to reproduce. And faster than you can say feral, every resource will be used again and every niche will be filled. In short, given the way nature works, if cats are removed from their outdoor home, that merely creates a territorial opening for other cats. Catching and removing (or killing) cats is futile. It is an expensive, deadly cycle that yields no long-term benefit while inflicting untold pain.

HOW TO FILL THE VACUUM

Instead of wreaking this havoc, we can break the cycle by working with nature—and making sure that the vacuum stays filled in a way we can control. That means capturing, neutering and returning neighborhood cats to the street and the park so that other, less-healthy, less-manageable—and higher-reproducing—animals won’t take their place. In this context, TNR is the only humane and effective approach to sound public policy for the millions of cats across the United States who live underfoot and out of doors. —Pamela Weintraub



Relentless: Cats in the community will seize unused resources to live and reproduce.



When community cats were called "feral," it led to the misconception that they would attack people.

Community cats are typically afraid of people and avoid human contact if they possibly can.