

## No More Homeless Pets Forum

**Date: June 2–8 2007**

**Topic: Building Humane Communities**

---

Bob Christiansen of [www.saveourstrays.com](http://www.saveourstrays.com) and formerly of Building a No-Kill City will discuss how to save animal lives and create more humane communities through Community Animal Management. Please join us to learn how every animal lover can play a part in reducing kill rates and creating positive change.

### Introduction from Bob Christiansen

You walk down the aisles and aisles of dog runs and look in their faces. Some bark for attention. Some sit listlessly in the back waiting, watching with imploring eyes that beg, "Take me home." You think, "There are so many good dogs here that are just destined to die. What can I do to help these poor creatures? Maybe I should take them all home. No, that's not practical. Should I rent kennel space at the local boarding facility? Should I work to build a new no-kill shelter? How can I help these animals in a meaningful way?"

"What's this box of chocolates doing here?" I ask. "It's for you," Mary responds! "I want to thank you for giving me an important gift." "What?" "I adopted my dog Roscoe to have a companion and friend, but all of his behavior problems were causing me to hate him. I was irritated and frustrated. I was spending less time with Roscoe and that led to more bad behaviors. I actually thought of giving him up. You taught me how to communicate with him, train him and modify his bad behaviors. We now have a lot of fun together. We're bonded! I realized it wasn't Roscoe that had the problem, it was me."

Ten years ago, I was searching for a meaningful role to help dogs in my community. I left my day job and became a dog trainer. I didn't know much about animal shelters, feral cats, rescues and such when I started, but I soon learned. I knew then that I liked animals and many were being unwittingly abused and killed because of ignorance. I wanted to do what I could to save their lives. Most dog trainers learn quickly that "pets have a people problem." I discovered in my journey through the animal world that ignorance is the main reason animals die prematurely, not just owner ignorance but institutional ignorance and inertia as well.

What is Community Animal Management? Community animal management is a systematic process of managing animals in the society where we live. It recognizes the mutual benefits of animal companionship and works progressively to resolve problems associated with public amenity.

What keeps a community from practicing effective Animal Management? What is a Community Animal Management plan? How can your community minimize pet impoundments and create a productive system to save animal lives? I will address these questions and more as guest of the Best Friends Network.

What role can you play to help reduce killing and animal abuse in your community? Join in the discussion as we discover the dynamics of pet overpopulation and explore

Community Animal Management. There is a meaningful role that all humanitarians can play to lower kill rates in your community.

### **Bio for Bob Christiansen**

Bob learned firsthand that “animals have people problems.” He started working with animals as a dog trainer, then turned his attention to writing. He has authored five books on animal welfare, two Dog Owner Guide Books, Choosing & Caring for a Shelter Dog, Board of Directors Handbook for Animal Welfare Organizations and Save Our Strays. Bob went on the “Save Our Strays USA Tour in 2000” and for three months conducted town hall meetings on pet overpopulation in 25 cities.

He created the [www.saveourstrays.com](http://www.saveourstrays.com) website and initiated the Building a No-Kill City list that discussed humane issues and Community Animal Management. In 2003, Bob co-founded and directed operations for Project CatSnip in Atlanta, Georgia. Bob is proud to announce that CatSnip has spayed and neutered over 30,000 cats in 4 years. Today Bob is working on opening a nonprofit, full-service animal hospital to serve the medical needs of indigent animals throughout metro Atlanta. He hopes it will be a model that can be emulated throughout the world.

### **I'm moving. How can I find out about shelters where I'm going?**

**Question from Mimi:** I'm going to be moving shortly to a community whose animal welfare organizations I'm not familiar with. So far all I've done is a little Internet research. Do you have any suggestions about learning my new environment so I can determine what kind of contribution I want to make and where I fit in?

**Response from Bob Christiansen:** This is a good question. When I moved to Atlanta, I was also interested in evaluating animal shelters in the metro Atlanta area to see the severity of the problem and which animal agencies are more productive in addressing the problems. Here is what I suggest you do:

Determine all the shelters and rescues within the county or area you are moving to by visiting [www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com) or [www.animalshelter.org](http://www.animalshelter.org). Note: It is important to stay within counties and include all counties and all animal agencies in your area.

Go to [www.guidestar.com](http://www.guidestar.com) and search their database to bring up 2005 IRS form 990s on all the shelters and rescues within the counties or metropolitan area where you live. This will give you a good picture of an agency's financial management, who is in charge and who is on the board of directors.

Determine if an agency is an open admission (traditional) shelter or a limited admission (no kill) shelter and what their main focus and mission is. Is that mission compatible with your interests?

Try to determine the state of evolution of the organization. Start-up organizations are usually led by a strong-minded person (usually female) who is active in day-to-day activities. They are hands-on! More established organizations have hired management, policies and procedures. They have larger budgets and usually more animals.

Contact the shelters or rescues and tell them you are interested in making a contribution to their organization. Ask for their 2006 entry and exit statistics. They should include all animals who were admitted into their system (impounds) and animals who exited their system to include adoptions, lost animals returned to owner (RTO) and animals euthanized (if any).

Now determine if the shelter is a government animal control agency, a nonprofit with an animal control contract, a nonprofit shelter or an agency that uses foster homes and pet store adoption facilities.

Determine the output of that agency. If they are animal control, do they have proactive programs like mobile adoptions, hours for adoptions on Saturday or Sunday, pre-adoption spay/neuter, feral cat programs, spay/neuter service or discount referrals, etc., or do they just round them up and kill them? If they are nonprofit, do they have life-saving programs and to what extent? What percent of their budget do they allocate to spay/neuter, adoption outreach, medical care, etc.? What is their reputation in the community?

Note: For open-admission shelters, the average exit statistics for dogs impounded were 40% adopted, 17-18% RTO, 60-62% euthanized. For cats impounded: 20% adopted, 1-2% RTO and 79-80% euthanized.

Does the agency need your contribution? Some agencies today have hundreds of millions of dollars in the bank. Some agencies do not use volunteers and their abilities properly.

To get the best picture of your community's pet overpopulation problem, you should look at the combined county/regional entry and exit statistics and convert those numbers into a "Pets Per 1,000 Population" number. Those numbers can be benchmarked with other like-sized communities to determine a rate of success or identify areas that need improvement. (I will address how to do that in another question.)

Good luck helping animals in your new location!

## The #1 cause of cat overpopulation

**Question from Traci:** I'm deeply involved in the cat welfare movement. I volunteer with a local rescue group and at the monthly local feral cat clinic. What I am seeing are more and more people who want to "help" cats (especially strays and ferals) who either lack the resources (free access to traps, free spay/neuter) to be effective or they don't want to use their available resources and prefer to simply feed the intact colony and place the kittens for free. This is causing more kittens and it is causing a strain on the shelter system and rescue communities. How can we address this as a community?

**Response from Bob Christiansen:** In my humble opinion, outdoor, feral and free-roaming cats are the number one cause of cat overpopulation around the world. Only 4% to 6% of all cats are purebred. Studies in U.S. and Australian cities indicate that 87% to 90% of owned cats are sterilized. These studies also indicate that many cats have had one litter before sterilization primarily due to procrastination and cost. The main reason owned cats remain intact is because of cost. The problem is difficult for most

people to comprehend. "Why do we want to release cats back into the wild after they have been neutered?" they ask. "Don't we want to decrease their population?"

Our Atlanta CatSnip program has performed 32,000 cat spays and neuters in 4 years. What I find is that people want to be humane. They believe a humane act is to feed outdoor, doorstep cats. They feed them, but they can't touch them or catch them. They don't know how to trap. They also watch as they have litter after litter. The kittens soon disappear (half of feral-born kittens die before their first birthday). These people are unaware of (unfortunately limited) resources and need education.

Some communities have embarked on information campaigns to tell people not to feed outdoor cats (Massachusetts SPCA, for one). The problem is that message contradicts what most people consider humane. Better fed than dead, they say.

So, how do we address the problem? The answer, as it always has been, is TNR: humane Trap, Neuter, Return. But for TNR to work, it must be done on a large, community-wide scale. People cannot be incriminated by governments because they care for outdoor cats. It takes a community of people working together – feral cat organizations, veterinarians, animal shelters and rescue groups, municipal officials, public health officials, wildlife advocates, and feral cat caretakers – to achieve results on a large scale.

Brian Cortis has done some great work in New York City with Neighborhood Cats. This model program works to raise awareness in the community, trains armies of trappers and establishes trapping networks. He is taking his program national to help communities around the country. I am hosting Brian for a 2-day workshop in Atlanta on June 22-23. I hope over time to have an army of trappers throughout the 20-county metro Atlanta area that can respond to calls from people who "feed em, but just can't catch em." For more information about Neighborhood Cats go to [www.neighborhoodcats.org/](http://www.neighborhoodcats.org/).

There is also a new Best Friends online community on the Best Friends Network to promote spay/neuter, answer questions and invite discussion, called Spay/Neuter Fever! It's at [network.bestfriends.org/spayneuter/news/](http://network.bestfriends.org/spayneuter/news/). Please join the community and get involved, especially in the "Humane Trap-Neuter-Return for Feral Cats" forum.

## Shelter leadership, politics and statistics

**Question from Diane:** I was very excited to see this question and the response. In our area, we have two large shelters that do animal control work (one is no-kill and one has high kill rates), one large no-kill and lots of little grassroots groups and rescues. I have started a movement to work toward turning our area into a no-kill community and a major part of this movement is creating a website where people can find out about the shelters and rescues. We are in the process of creating and sending out a questionnaire so that we can publish on the website the type of information you referred to, as well as a link to Guidstar.

I think a lot of local people will be astonished to see how much money the kill shelter has – and is not using for needed programs like spay/neuter. We also will have a calendar of upcoming events and information on pet services in the area with contact information.

We are hoping to provide information so that locals can make informed decisions about who to support with their time and money and also where to go to adopt and how to provide help in cases of emergency.

We want to be a sort of one-stop shopping center. I think that this will be a great service in our community. Thanks for validating what we had planned.

**Response from Bob Christiansen:** Alright, Diane! Way to go. I think this is a smart approach to trying to get your community to move forward with progressive Community Animal Management. (Of course, I think that anyone who agrees with me is smart.) We need to make the discussion less emotional and more scientific. As advocates, we need to promote responsible animal management not only with pet owners (guardians, if you prefer) but also with the animal agencies that are responsible for the care of animals once they become homeless.

There is a lethargy that exists in many organizations, especially in boards and top management. When you study community numbers, you will see patterns develop. The entry and exit statistics are consistent from year to year in many places. If the numbers have changed, there should be a significant event that brought it about. The only thing that changes is the hype and the person doing the talking. I know of many communities who were euthanizing tens of thousands of animals annually. To hear the directors talk, you would think they were not killing a single animal. "We are close to being no-kill," they profess. The fact is the numbers haven't changed, just the way they report them. We, as animal advocates, cannot fall for this ruse. I believe in full disclosure and a benchmark process to compare like-kind shelters across the U.S. and Canada.

Good, accurate statistics are vitally important to animal welfare. If I were king of the world, I would have anyone caught cheating on shelter statistics fired immediately. It should be state law to require all animal organizations that impound and sell dogs and cats to disclose their entry and exit numbers accurately. Those numbers are vital to determine where the problem lies. One study I did of a Georgia county found that 50% of the total cats euthanized were kittens. You don't have to be a Mensa member to know they have a spay/neuter problem in that county. The humane society had no low-cost spay/neuter program in place. After I sent a copy of the study to the board, they soon developed a low-cost spay/neuter program.

The major problem we face today in animal management is leadership and the politics that lead to institutional stagnation. (I will discuss this more as the week progresses.)

## Does my community have a pet evacuation plan?

**Question from njanmlrsq3:** Hey, Bob. Hope all is well and thank you for being here on the network. With Katrina behind us and reports coming from Florida and Georgia (wildfires) about animals being left behind, how can we go about making our local community more aware of evacuating with their pets? Also, where do you suggest we look to see if there is any plan in our communities that deals with evacuation with pets?

**Response from Bob Christiansen:** A good place to start is the Animal Emergency Response Network at <http://disaster.petfinder.com/emergency/>. They received a grant from Maddie's Fund to develop a U.S. network and initiate disaster plans after Katrina.

Note about Katrina: I visited New Orleans after Katrina to donate \$8,000 from Atlanta that would go to help with medical costs for animals that were victims of Katrina. All who donated their time and energy to this animal disaster should be commended. I found the organization that did the most work for the longest period of time was Best Friends. To read more about their involvement, please visit [network.bestfriends.org/hurricane/news/](http://network.bestfriends.org/hurricane/news/) for a walk down memory lane! You can also find out more about their Not Left Behind picture book from the Best Friends rescue teams at [www.bestfriends.org/NLB.cfm](http://www.bestfriends.org/NLB.cfm).

## Pit bull overpopulation

**Question from Holly:** Do you have any thoughts on what to do to address pit bull overpopulation?

**Response from Bob Christiansen:** Hi Holly! Nice to hear from you. The pit bull situation is a major problem afflicting urban shelters across America. Many big-city animal control organizations have had to build auxiliary shelters just to house pit bulls. Pit bulls are obtained as a cheap deterrent to crime in urban, low-income neighborhoods. They also are obtained to fight. Just like greyhounds, if pits don't measure up to performance standards, they are often abandoned or killed.

I'm no expert on this, but I do feel that what the country needs is a National Dangerous Dog Database. Any breed that insurance companies find to be a threat to the public, based on past history, should be required to be registered in this database. People who share their lives with a member of one of those breeds should be required to have the dog microchipped with the guardian, veterinarian and breeder (when available) information included; be required to take a dog training class that educates them on the special behavior characteristics of that breed and their tendencies; and be required to have adequate liability insurance (of course, such insurance would have to be readily available).

In my opinion, only people who truly love and want to care for the breed would comply. There would be no need to ban the breed. These are the same requirements we have to drive a car. Wayne Pacelle of HSUS said that we would not get compliance from the "bad guys." Right! So let's just not do it. Bad guys never comply until they are made to by law and law enforcement. Perhaps there could be an exception for rescued pit bulls so rescuers wouldn't be penalized. I would be interested to hear what members think. Please post your thoughts below.

We need to take the money out of it. Heavy fines should be imposed on breeders and dog owners whose dogs are captured at dog fights. Anyone caught staging dog fights should lose their house or property. It's a felony and they should go to jail. People who own and don't comply with registration in the database would receive heavy fines. Once people learn that there are major financial penalties for engaging in dog fighting, it will stop.

## Are we making an impact on overpopulation?

**Question from Holly:** We are planning a spay/neuter clinic in our community. How do we determine how many surgeries we need to complete to make an impact on pet overpopulation? Do you recommend the same model as you describe in SOS (Save Our

Strays, available to download free at [www.saveourstrays.com](http://www.saveourstrays.com))? How do we know we are making an impact? It seems that measuring intake/disposition is not enough.

**Response from Bob Christiansen:** Hi Holly! You ask some good questions. The effect that low-cost spay/neuter clinics have on shelter euthanasia is different for cats than dogs. The species must be looked at separately. Why? We have large numbers of cats who live in the wild, but very few dogs.

To have the biggest impact, your clinic should target dogs in low-income communities where a large portion of the mating occurs. Animal control can tell you where those communities are located. For cats, it's a different story.

I look at low-cost spay/neuter clinics differently now after operating one for four years. When we started, we targeted cats because we recognize (from research) that cats are the #1 spay/neuter problem. They are more fertile than dogs. The clinic we operate in Atlanta does close to 7,000 feline surgeries a year, operating four days a week. We have performed over 30,000 spays and neuters. I believe CatSnip is a cat-reduction program working to align the number of cats with good homes. A more meaningful measure of progress at this infantile stage of addressing the cat overpopulation issue is "animal lives saved" (not born).

We operate to provide quality surgeries at an affordable price. After starting and managing this service for four years, I can tell you this service enables responsible pet ownership. How do I know? Our customers tell us. We have thousands of testimonials. Would these surgeries have been performed without CatSnip? Ninety-three percent of our clients say no. That is the yardstick that I use to measure our success.

Regarding cat spay/neuter impact on shelter stats: Let's do some quick number crunching. There are 4.2 million people in Atlanta. That means about 800,000 owned cats and (conservatively) another 300,000 to 400,000 ferals. As we know, most of these 300,000 ferals are intact and in a constant state of reproduction (they can be grandmas before 1 year of age). Another 13-20% of owned cats are intact, many allowed outside to reproduce. The 7,000 we help annually are mainly cats owned by people who are experiencing financial difficulty. That is just scratching the surface. We would need to do 250,000 in year one and at least 50,000 thereafter to obtain zero population growth. Where is the \$12,500,000 (and people) for those spay/neuters coming from?

We are just not reaching the feral cat population in significant numbers to show a meaningful change in the euthanasia rate in Atlanta shelters. Shelters, in my opinion, are not the heart of the cat world, though. About 3 to 5% of community cats are euthanized in metro Atlanta shelters annually. That is greater than a lot of cities in the U.S., but not nearly as many as those who lose their lives free-roaming. I believe many more die due to hostile habitat. A common statistic is that half of feral-born kittens don't make it to their first year. Shelters are but a small part of it. Many people who know that open-admission animal shelters are places where cats go to die refuse to take cats to those shelters. So they are instead dumped, left to free-roam and fend in nature.

Areas in the U.S. that have lower cat euthanasia rates have several things going for them. There are usually harsh winters, significant predation, municipal policy that does not allow for cat relinquishment or trap impoundments, government financial assistance (New Hampshire, New Jersey) and/or many low-cost or no-cost spay/neuter clinics. One

thing that I learned from No More Homeless Pets in Utah was that low-cost spay/neuter, if done in massive numbers (millions of dollars in subsidies, including from Maddie's Fund), can decrease the number of cats killed in shelters.

In the absence of millions of dollars in grant money and lack of major coalitions consisting of low-cost vets, trappers, colony caretakers, neighborhood trappers, cat-friendly animal control ordinances, adoption agencies, etc., there will not be significant long-term change in shelter euthanasia rates for cats, in my opinion.

## What's the "state of the nation" now?

**Question from Holly:** How do you feel the "state of the nation" has changed since your tour and book?

**Response from Bob Christiansen:** I am deeply troubled by the current "state of the nation" regarding homeless animals. Currently I believe the humane movement has been "neutered." To hear some major leaders and organizations talk, you would think the pet overpopulation problem is solved and behind us.

After I toured the country, I decided to work more hands-on in a local program. I started the Atlanta Animal Alliance and launched Project CatSnip. It is satisfying to have accomplished over 32,000 spays and neuters and, most important, create a resource for those financially struggling to have their cats altered inexpensively. Now, I have decided to do more work on the national scene with the launch of [www.saveourstrays.com](http://www.saveourstrays.com) because I believe the humane movement is waning.

I attended the first no-kill conference in Phoenix, Arizona, hosted by Linda Foro. There was a great spirit that prevailed at the conference and several conferences thereafter. I was able to meet and learn from some good people like Michael Mountain, Ed Duvin and Merritt Clifton. The conferences and movement were energized by Maddie's Fund and the perception that millions of dollars would go to help fuel no-kill programs.

I don't sense the same spirit today. We have a crisis in leadership and political detente prevails. The no-kill movement was a great attempt to work progressively for homeless animals. It represented high ideals and said that the value of an animal's life is precious and should not be wasted. I believe in those ideals.

Unfortunately, the word "no-kill" carries heavy implications and negative connotations among many open-admission animal organizations. I sense it gradually being phased out. In my opinion, it was a great movement with a lousy name. I hope the same energy and enthusiasm can be ignited under a different name.

© 2007 Best Friends All Rights Reserved.  
Building a better world through kindness to animals

To post comments, please visit this discussion on the Best Friends Network at <http://www.network.bestfriends.org/Blogs/Detail.aspx?b=1257>