Population Control of Feral Cats

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Background

The Waterloo Companion Animal Welfare Trust does not deal directly with animals but it has a modest budget for service projects ($5,000 p.a.). Conditions of funding are that projects are local and that they "provide tangible benefits to animals". This year there has only been one submission: a local Citizens' Group has proposed a trap-neuter-vaccinate-release scheme for feral cats in their neighborhood. (A feral cat is one that does not have an owner and is not linked with one household. This includes cats that were originally owned, and their offspring that have grown up without particular human contact).

Trap-neuter-vaccinate-release schemes are a way to control the population-size of feral cats. The schemes involve trapping the cats in cages, taking them to a veterinary clinic to be castrated or spayed, vaccinating them for cat 'flu and other diseases, and then releasing them again. Males are usually released on the day of surgery; females are released 1-2 days later. In this case, the local veterinarians have agreed to charge $5 per vaccination, $10 for a castration and $30 for a spay. To achieve their purpose, trap-neuter-release schemes require full community buy-in. Volunteers must set traps and then bring the cats to the veterinary clinics. Also, owners of domestic cats must be aware of the trapping and keep their cats inside on those days.

The Group is well organized and seems to have an adequate number of committed volunteers. In addition, the local Animal Rescue Society has written in support of the project. The proposal describes a population of at least 70 cats that are often ill, fight with local cats, produce several litters of kittens each year, cause car accidents and are generally a nuisance. Some people have been shooting these cats on sight, sometimes causing injuries and twice shooting domestic cats, one of which died. The feral cats are believed to suffer a lot in the winter when it is normal to have temperatures of -50C with wind-chill.

The Trust discusses the matter with their veterinary adviser who favors the scheme. She says that without it the feral cat population will keep growing because humans keep providing food, in contrast with wild species where the population usually reflects the availability of food. She does recommend that, before undergoing the stress and risk of surgery, the cats should first be tested.
for feline leukemia virus (FeLV). This virus causes cancer and other fatal diseases and occurs in ~15% of feral cats which are then a hazard for domestic cats. The veterinary adviser says that all the cats in the scheme should be screened for FeLV and those that test positive should be euthanized. The FeLV test costs $12 and is very good, with a 2% chance of being mistaken (showing a false positive).

The Citizen's Group has made clear to the Trust that they cannot allow euthanasia of the cats because some of their members are against it and will not co-operate in trapping the cats. Those members say that these cats are like their own and they do not wish them to be trapped and handled if there is any chance that they will then be euthanized. Even if the cats are sick from FeLV, they say that it is kinder to let them die naturally outside.

**Issue to be discussed**

- Should the Waterloo Companion Animal Welfare Trust fund the trap-neuter-release scheme as proposed by the Citizen's Group?

**Class activity**

**Goal**

- Help students to evaluate competing ethical positions and to make a decision in an ethical dilemma.

**Approach**

- Five minutes of discussion in pairs to identify all the groups who have an interest in this case
- Assign each member of the class to an interest group, including a group called `Directors of the Trust`
- Split the class up into discussion groups, each containing one member of each interest group, EXCLUDING the Directors who should all stay together. Allow 20 minutes to identify the main arguments.
- Re-group according to interest group for further discussion of that group's particular position. Allow 15 minutes. (The Directors have stayed together throughout).
- Each interest group then nominates a speaker to represent their case briefly (3 minutes) to the Directors.
- Question-and-answer session led by the Directors (10 minutes). The class instructor moderates if necessary.
- The Directors leave the room to make a decision on whether or not the Trust should fund the scheme in this case (10 minutes)
- The Directors return and present their decision with reasons.
- Class discussion:
  - who changed their mind after hearing all the presentations?
  - what was the ethical position of each group?
  - what was the ethical position of the Directors?

Notes to Instructor

(i) Interest groups

- Directors of the Animal Welfare Trust who are answerable to the Trustees
- The Trust's veterinary adviser
- Cat owners in the area (who represent their cats)
- The neighbourhood who are don't like having feral cats around and are represented by the Citizen's Group
- Feral cats

(ii) Other factors to consider:

- Trap-neuter-vaccinate-release schemes are widely practiced and websites report definite stabilization of numbers. However, there have been few scientific studies about this.
- Handling is very frightening for feral cats.
- Legal considerations: what if one of the cats has rabies and bites one of the volunteers? A veterinary technician? Even without rabies, cat bites can cause severe infection. Who would be responsible?
- Most feral cats that test positive for FeLV will also be very sick but a minority of cats (~3%) can live with infection and not get sick from it. These cats are likely to spread the virus to other cats.
- Should owners be keeping their cats indoors anyway, away from cars, wild birds, other cats that might breed with them or infect them?
- FeLV infection is only one of many hazards that feral cats face. Others include predators, motor vehicles, inclement weather, food shortages, attack by human beings.