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Saving Lives Through Sterilisation

Setting up and Running a Cat Café

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CWS recently re-focused its objectives to emphasize the strategy of trap-neuter-release-manage (TNRM) as the best way to protect endangered community cats in Singapore.

This is the story of how a local university community worked together to use TNRM to resolve a perceived "stray cat problem".

The Beginning

Fourteen months ago my husband and I were fairly new residents on the campus. Looking at the residents' notice boards, I found a group of people with positive attitudes toward animals and one person who was listed as a cat supporter. I called, we met, and I got an earful of how unhappy some residents were with the animal control policies of our estate managers. I suggested that a cat café might be a solution, and Dawn Kua joined us in a meeting with the estate managers. She was very effective in putting forward the cat café concept. The cat supporter, a long-time resident of the campus, was forceful and persuasive in pointing out the limitations of the institution's approach to animal control.

What Is A Cat Café?

A cat café is simply a discreetly located feeding station where community cats are fed in a regular, responsible way so that they can be easily taken for sterilization and other veterinary care. They can then be released and managed in their home territory, where they aid in pest control and keep out other, un-sterilized cats. When the sterilization rate reaches 90 per cent or better, the cat population stabilizes and then declines through natural attrition.

Know What You Want From The Cat Café Proposal

At our meeting, the management agreed to consider a detailed proposal for a cat café scheme. They explained that they called their pest-control contractor to remove cats when they received complaints from campus residence halls, staff residing on campus, and university offices. They did not question whether the complaints were reasonable since they believe this is not within their brief.

However, they were willing to entertain a pilot scheme for a cat café to see if it would reduce the perception of cats as a problem. They estimated that 30 cats were regarded as nuisances at canteens, offices and staff and student residential areas. At first, they wanted the volunteers to site a single feeding station miles from where the cats were. We knew this wouldn't work. Instead, we reconnoitered the campus and proposed 3 sites which met a set of standards set out in our proposal.

Among other things, café sites must be:

- inconspicuous,
- away from residential blocks, offices, shops and canteens,
- accessible by vehicle,
- safe enough for volunteers working alone at night

The proposal also committed volunteers to feed responsibly and spelled out what responsible feeding is. It identified the support offered by CWS and requested help with site construction and animal holding from the estate management.

Total Support Is Important

Besides our proposal, we also provided support to brief volunteers on what to include in a cat-feeder's basket, advise on hazards they could expect to meet in the campus environment, and to provide contact names and numbers for volunteer support and campus security officers.

- We created a photo ID card for volunteer feeders.
- We created posters for campus-wide distribution at canteens and residence halls telling people not to feed cats because a group of volunteers was already doing so.
- We committed ourselves to pay a small monthly levy to purchase cat food.
- We met to discuss ways to involve the students of the university in the scheme. CWS helped by providing us with discounted sterilization slots at cooperating veterinary clinics.