

HFC Committee

From: Steve Oberlin <smoberlin@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, May 21, 2020 1:13 AM
To: HFC Committee
Cc: Gwen Good
Subject: Feral Animal Management on Maui (HFC-24)

Hi,

We'd like to respectfully offer testimony pertaining to (and opposed to) the proposal to criminalize feeding of feral cats on Mau that I hope will be helpful to the Committee and the Council.

My wife, Gwen Good, and I moved to Maui (Paia) full-time in 2017 from Hood River, Oregon. Hood River, by virtue of being on the wide Columbia River, which channels temperature-moderating air from the Pacific through the Cascades, has a very pleasant climate compared to other geographies at similar latitude (like Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, where we lived before moving to Hood River, where the average temperature is 25 degrees F colder in January despite both towns being at 45 degrees north of the equator). Just as homeless people living on the street are understandably much more commonly seen in communities with less harsh climates, so are feral cats.

For the 15 years we lived in Hood River, we helped feed and trap/neuter/release cats at several stations around the city that were maintained by volunteers, as well as at our house, which is on the periphery of the city. We don't have hard statistics and realize this is only anecdotal, but our observations and experiences reinforced the generally-accepted view of the local volunteer community and veterinarians that provided low-cost neuter/spay services, that trap/neuter/release works. While we can't claim that cat populations went to zero (there are always irresponsible people breeding dogs and cats and some fraction — of cats, anyway — always seem to end up being released outside), they were significantly reduced, in some cases to only a handful of cats showing up at a feeding station.

Our experience at our house was similar, but it's also worth noting that we were able to attract and gain the trust (in each case over many weeks and months) of several cats we trapped, neutered, released, and continued to feed, ultimately bringing two into our home as our pets (we only have indoor cats) and placing others in other happy homes. If responsibly feeding feral cats had been illegal, this best-case outcome of our compassion would have been tragically impossible.

Note that we emphasize "responsibly feeding" feral cats. It's imperative that an active effort to capture and neuter newly-released, dumped, or born animals accompany any feeding program. This needs to be publicized and made easy and safe. Some people who distrust government and "helpful" organizations already worry that the animals they feed in their backyard or on the street may be sent elsewhere or even destroyed if it is trapped and hauled off, ostensibly for neutering.

Also, where the making of something illegal might help is at the front-end of the feral animal pipeline. You may want to consider penalties for irresponsibly breeding or failing to neuter cats and dogs, or for dumping cats or other pets. Kanaha seems to be viewed by many as a great place to dump your pet when it's time to move off Maui, or disappear that annoying neighbor's cat or that unplanned litter of kittens. It's crazy how many pets get dumped there every year. We've only been here a couple of years and mostly passively support the hard-working people that are doing their best to operate a compassionate and responsible colony-wide trap/neuter/release/feed program, so mainly only visit Kanaha to windsurf, yet we've been approached by and have taken to Maui's excellent Humane Society two desperately friendly and confused cats that had clearly been pets until very recently. One turned out to be chipped, and was reunited with its equally-confused owner who lives so far from Kanaha that the only explanation was an abduction and dump by somebody with a score to settle.

We're sure we don't have to belabor the bad publicity, awful images, and hate-filled outrage campaigns on social media that will never die down if feeding cats is criminalized. These aren't spiders or toads you are proposing to sentence to a slow tortuous death, they're cats. One doesn't have to spend very much time on Facebook or YouTube to notice that a very large fraction of people in this world love cats. Taking such a horrific step as starving a population of cats without having completely exhausted compassionate alternatives will only magnify division and hate, not only on Maui, but from the world of visitors we hope to attract back to Maui to help reboot our economy after the extended Covid-19 shut-down.

Besides, it simply won't work. It's not only that starving feral cats only creates larger problems over wider areas and kills more wildlife while failing to meaningfully address the problem. It's not just that it will incite a massive shit storm of bad publicity (you better also make it illegal to record and post a video with Auschwitz-like scenes of emaciated and dying cats) and unanticipated un-budgeted-for side effects and repercussions. People simply won't comply. Just as criminalizing pot has had zero effect on its use and only caused countless ruined lives and billions to be wasted on pointless incarceration, we can reliably predict that no person with a heart will give a damn that its against the law when presented with the fact of a starving cat seeking food. We certainly won't, and we're absolutely certain we won't be alone.

There's a better way. We all want the same thing. Everyone we've ever known that is engaged in maintaining homeless cat colonies sincerely wishes there were fewer feral felines and is striving to reduce the number in a compassionate way. Zero feral felines would mean that all cats have caring families and that's the ideal we all strive for. Tap into that. We're not the problem. These unfortunate cats all ultimately arrived in their current deplorable predicament as a result of people who irresponsibly bred them, failed to keep them safe and secure, and/or cruelly dumped them, and this cruel starvation proposal does nothing to slow that. We need to encourage compassionate and responsible behavior toward animals and model that behavior for our children. There is a large body of evidence that cruelty to animals directly predicts cruelty to other humans. Imagine the monstrous lesson on how to treat unfortunate homeless creatures that have had to take to eking out an existence in the cracks of our community that Maui's children will integrate into their moral frameworks if this cruel and baseless criminalization of compassion is enacted.

Instead of criminalizing the efforts of all the good Samaritans that are spending their own money and time trying to help reduce and ease suffering in the world, we suggest instead focusing on ensuring that it is done more responsibly. Publicizing that the Maui Humane Society accepts animals for free, no questions asked, will help reduce dumping. Discouraging irresponsible breeding will help stem the tide of new animals that don't find homes. Supporting volunteers efforts to responsibly maintain colonies (you wouldn't believe the additional hardship and risk of having to park a half mile away and cart in food and even fresh water every day imposed by the extended closure of Kanaha) and achieve 100% neutered status by making it easier and safer to get access to colony sites, vet care and neutering services, and help quell fears that the animals they've been supporting will be destroyed instead of helped and returned.

Please. Approach this scientifically. Take a census of the cats (it's amazingly easy to count eyes at night with a head lamp). Engage and support those who are spending their own time and resources to address the problem (even us). Measure the results in a year, two, three... Attempt to slow the tide of new cats being released, lost, bred, or dumped. Educate people. Leverage the private funds and tremendous passion cats inspire people to invest. Adjust tactics as guided by evidence of what measures and tactics help. Take this approach, and we will all ultimately succeed in our shared goal, and in 5 years there will be far fewer homeless and unwanted felines on Maui. Over time, even fewer. It will never be zero as long as there are irresponsible humans making and releasing more, but it's easy to plausibly see a 75% reduction over a decade as not unreasonable, 90% in two. It's a hard and dangerous life for homeless felines, even with human support. Attrition is high. Increasing neutering and decreasing new animals released in the wild will ultimately yield results we can all live with, enjoy nightmare-free sleep over, and be pleased to share with our children as a life lesson on how incredibly vexing and contentious problems that seem to have no good answer can be solved by good people over time by focusing on our shared objectives, collecting data to measure progress, and using evidence to inform thoughtful and deliberate compassionate actions.

We can achieve this goal without becoming monsters. We're happy to help. Thanks for reading and considering our suggestions.

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