

Management of urban cats in Barcelona

Agnès Dufau

*Master Animal Law & Society. Research Group ADS-UAB (Barcelona)**

April 2013

Abstract

The Barcelona city council is officially promoting the humane management of free-roaming cats since 2007. The program moved a step forward in 2009 when the public neutering center opened, allowing the process to speed up. The program is based on the Trap-Neuter-return (TNR) method to control free-roaming cats' population. This method is the only legally and economically sustainable option currently available in Catalunya. Strategies of communication and education have been implemented to enhance the program. Since 2009 9.365 cats have been neutered and both the local government and the animal welfare organizations consider it a success for the community (less citizens' complaints regarding cats) and for the animals (reduction of cat welfare issues). It is still too early to evaluate the impact on the total free-roaming cats' population numbers, but the need to implement a comprehensive approach to reach a satisfying and long lasting solution is seen by all parties involved as essential. In this report we present the program as it is currently being implemented in the 598 registered colonies in 2012, analyzing how the administration is working closely with the local animal welfare organizations to manage the feline overpopulation issue.

Keywords: free-roaming cats; TNR; cat colonies; urban cats; animal welfare

1- Introduction

As in many Mediterranean cities, free-roaming cats are part of the urban landscape of Barcelona and groups of stray and feral cats are visible in public parks, redeveloped industrial areas or nearby the beaches. The favorable climate conditions combined with the increased number of cats as companion animals and the lack of responsible ownership culture are the main causes of feline overpopulation in the city.

Since 2007 the Barcelona city-council promotes the humane management of free-roaming cats population through a specific program (*Gestió de Colonies de Gats Urbans*). The program moved a step forward and improved significantly from 2009 when the municipal "Cat Neutering Center" (for free-roaming cats only) was opened. Since that moment the Animal Welfare Organizations started to get organized working together with the local government towards a common objective: improving cat welfare through the humane control of free-roaming cats. The program is based on the implementation of TNR (Trap-Neuter-Release) as the only legal and humane method to control the free-roaming cats' population.

***agnesdufau@gmail.com**

2- Urban Cats Management Program Presentation

In 2009 the newly created “Animal Protection Office” (*OPAB- Oficina de Protección de los Animales de Barcelona*) started to deepen on the management of free-roaming cats with 2 objectives: reduce the number of citizen complaints regarding uncontrolled groups of cats; improve the welfare of the animals. At that time this matter, which was a responsibility of the Public Health department (*Salud Pública*) of the city council, was transferred to the Environmental department (*Medio Ambiente*).

Since the Catalan Animal Protection Law (*Decreto 2/2008 de Protección de los animales*) prohibits the killing of healthy Companion Animals the options to remove and eliminate the cats (which had been the traditional method in the past) was no longer legal. Furthermore the fact that there was still an important number of un- controlled colonies made evident that the traditional capture and elimination of cats had not been an efficient solution¹.

As there was a large population of free-roaming cats in the city that could not be removed and kept in shelters (for both animal welfare and economical reasons) TNR - no-kill policy became the only option available. TNR is now considered the official public policy for the management of free-roaming cats in the city of Barcelona.

The fact that TNR is a policy in which Animal Welfare Organizations (AWO) accept to cooperate and invest time and financial resources has simplified its implementation. Since the beginning of the program the city council had been able to work with the support, knowledge and human resources of more than 10 organizations which were already applying TNR before the method was officially recognized by the public administration.

a- Parties involved

The program has been designed around the involvement of 3 different types of stakeholders: the AWO volunteers; the Animal Protection Office (OPAB); the “reference person” in each of the 10 districts of the city (“*Referente gato*”).

- AWO volunteers: “Progat” and “Plataforma Gatera²” are the 2 organizations which are working closely with the city council. Those AWO have been involved in the design and follow up of the program since the beginning and their volunteers undertake the whole process of capture, transport, and return to the initial location of the cats without receiving remuneration. The city council provides the financial resources to pay for the veterinary neutering surgeries³.
- Barcelona Animals Protection Office: in charge of coordinating the AWOs tasks, and to facilitate the communication between the citizens, districts and organizations. The ongoing communication between the 2 main AWO and the OPAB has had a strong impact on the success of the program, allowing the implementation of changes and improvements along the process.
- Reference person: those public officers are the link between the AWO and the administration. They have to approve the official forms before the NGO can start

¹ Phenomenon known as “Vacuum effect” (Allies Cat Alley) leading to the arrival of new individuals in “emptied” locations where shelter and food had been available in the past.

² Plataforma Gatera is a collective representing 19 AWO managing community cats

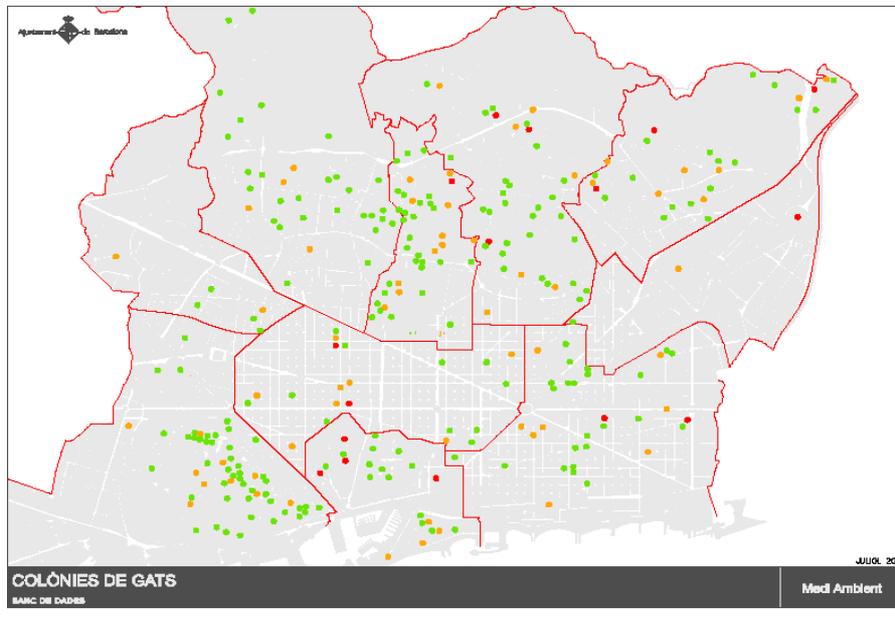
³ The volunteers do not receive public funding to feed the cats

working in a new colony; they are in charge of the follow-up of the work of the associations in their district. At present the high turnover and lack of understanding of some of those agents could be considered as one of the downside of the program.

b- Map of colonies

The list of official colonies of each district is permanently actualized when a new request form (*instancia*) is received by the district. There are different types of colonies in the list: the controlled colonies which only need to be maintained, the colonies which are being worked on and the newly detected colonies where the program has not started yet.

The requests forms may be presented by private citizens asking for the administration to solve a problem of nuisances or animal welfare issues (“negative request”) or by the NGOs participating to the program in order to get the authorization from the district to start trapping cats (“positive request”).



At the end of 2012 there were 598 registered colonies in Barcelona, and a total of 8.515 controlled cats⁴.

After 4 years of detailed follow-up of the situation, new colonies are still being detected⁵: when a request form is presented asking for an intervention in a new location, this location is automatically introduced on the colony listing of the district.

New colonies are usually caused by the arrival of newly abandoned or lost un-neutered cats and their offspring to a new location. The arrival of new individuals in the colonies, new born or lost or abandoned cat is the main slow down issue of the program.

⁴ The number of cat per colony may vary from 5 individuals up to more than 30 individuals.

⁵ Evolution of registered colonies: 407 in 2009; 468 in 2010; 512 in 2011; 598 in 2012

This fact makes very clear that the adoption of a comprehensive approach to reduce feline overpopulation, including the promotion of Responsible Ownership amongst the citizens, is crucial to accompany the TNR program. Communication and education campaigns to promote neutering, identification and registration and to prevent abandonments should be implemented simultaneously to the TNR program to succeed in the free-roaming cats' population management.

3- TNR program working options

The city council commitment to the TNR program allows the AWO to develop their work in 2 different ways: subsidized neutering through a direct allowance (Collaboration Agreement AWO-City Council); public neutering centre.

- **AWO Collaboration Agreement with the City Council**

A grant is allowed to each district on a yearly basis for the AWOs to spend in private veterinary clinics (neutering surgeries only). The AWOs have to follow a strict procedure and can use the clinic of their choice.

- **Neutering Centre**

The centre opened in June 2009 and is managed by a veterinarian. It is dedicated to neutering healthy animals only; no other medical or surgeries can be undertaken in the installation. Centre users are authorized volunteers from recognized registered AWO.

- a- **AWO Collaboration Agreement between the City Council: 1859 cats neutered in 2012**

In 2012 the collaboration agreement for the funding of the TNR has been signed by the 2 main AWOs working on free-roaming cats' population and the city council.

The commitment for the AWOs is to undertake a minimum of 1440 neutering surgeries (60% female – 40% male) with the allowance, which corresponds to a maximum cost of 100€ per cat. The procedure to receive the grant is as follows:

- All actions by the AWO need to be authorized by the district reference person. In order for the organizations to get the corresponding financial endowment, the district contact person has first to authorize the formal requests presented by a citizen or an AWO. The reference person revises the forms and establishes priorities together with the corresponding AWO, looking at a series of elements such as the level of nuisance generated by the cats or any animal welfare emergency situation.
- Once the organization has received the district authorization they can start working in the colony and get the cats to the clinics. For all neutering surgery the veterinarian who has carried out a surgery has to fill in an individual form (*ficha*) with all the information regarding each cat: location of the colony, date of the catch, name of the AWO and volunteer person. These forms will also have to be validated by the district contact person before any payment can be made to the corresponding organization.

The 2 AWO have to review the documentation presented before proceeding to the payment of the corresponding invoice. Each veterinary invoice is presented with an individual form. These forms allow the city council to control the TNR program on a quarterly basis.

b- Neutering Center (*Viver Tres Pins*): 977 cats neutered in 2012

The neutering centre opened in June 2009 to speed up the neutering process. This structure is dedicated to the neutering of healthy free-roaming cats only, and is not designed to allow any other type of surgery. It opens from Monday to Friday during 45 weeks per year.

The neutering centre is free for all registered users (80 volunteers from which 20 are active TNR agents) who are all volunteers of Plataforma Gatera or Progat. It is of special interest for the smallest associations which are not part of the Collaboration Agreement and do not get financial help from the city council⁶.

Despite the fact that the use of the center has been growing since its opening⁷, in 2012 the neutering centre has not yet reached its full capacity of 30 surgeries per week: the average number of surgeries being 22 cats per week, with a total of 977 neutered cats for a total capacity of 1350 cats.

In total the City Council spending for the TNR program in Barcelona has allowed to neuter 2836 cats (60% females; 40% males) with an average spending of 66€ per cat.

4- **Education Initiatives**

- Volunteers Workshops: “From cat care-taker to colony manager”

Since 2010 a Cat Volunteer Workshop is organized each year by the “Urban Cat Commission”⁸. The objective of the workshops is to get through the information on the program to all people taking care of free-roaming cats or interested in doing so. The meeting between volunteers and the administration allows the 2 parts to share information, worries and best practices. Amongst the subjects discussed during the 2012 edition were the legal rights and obligations of the volunteers⁹ and advices on veterinary protocols in a controlled colony.

- Best Practices leaflet

The Urban Cats Commission together with the City Council prepared a leaflet to be distributed to all AWO working with free-roaming cats for them to hand out to their volunteers and people feeding cats.

The best practices leaflet establishes the guidelines that cat care-takers have to follow to feed cats without infringing the local regulations¹⁰. It is a concrete educational tool which resulted to be very welcome by the AWO and their volunteers.

5- **Citizens perception of the free-roaming cats issue**

After 3 years it is still too early to evaluate the impact on the total free-roaming cats’ population numbers, but a positive impact on the public perception can already be observed.

⁶ 8 associations of the 19 represented by Plataforma Gatera are allowed a financial grant for TNR

⁷ 2009 (since July): 386 cats; 2010: 780 cats; 2011: 810 cats; 2012: 977 cats

⁸ The Urban Cat Commission is a working group part of the “Animal Protection Council” which was created in 2002 and is a forum for AWO and the local administration to discuss animal protection issues of the city.

⁹ A local Police Officer presented the local regulations and answered volunteers’ questions.

¹⁰ Ordenanza sobre la protección, la tenencia y la venta de animales de Barcelona – 22/12/2003

During 2012 the City council has received 189 citizens' formal requests (*instancia*) to take action regarding cats: 179 of them were considered as "positive", to let the administration know that there was a need of intervention in a colony; 10 were "negative" complaints regarding issues of filthy environment (no complaint about noises).

In 2011 the total number of complaints regarding cats had been 290: 271 "positive"; 19 negative complaints (18 filthy environment; 1 for noise).

During 2011 and 2012 94% of the requests received by the city council were positive, calling for action in order to control the population.

Between 2011 and 2012 the 35% decrease in the total number of complaints can be considered as a positive data. According to the administration¹¹ there is an ongoing change in the way citizens are communicating to the administration. Citizens are now more constructive and less aggressive than in the past when filling in the official request format, which suggest that the communication strategies are having a positive impact on the way the citizens are seeing this matter and a general evolution of the citizenship on Animal Welfare matters.

6- Conclusions

The free-roaming cats' management program has been implemented in 2009. Since then 9.365 cats have been neutered within the city council program and all stakeholders consider the program a success in terms of reduction of citizens' complaints, control of cats' population and improvement of cat welfare. Significant achievements are visible and all parties are currently working to consolidate the model, looking at education as a crucial element to raise citizens' awareness and step up the program results.

Barcelona is a clear example of the possibility to implement a working no-kill approach involving AWO as key stakeholders of the public policy. The AWO and the city council are aware that results could be raised improving cats responsible ownership culture¹². During 2012 the AWO involved in the TNR program have been rescuing and given in adoption a large number of tamed cats and young kittens¹³ and 440 cats officially entered the local shelter from which only 49 were reunited with their owners.

The city council is developing activities and supporting AWO initiatives to promote cats' responsible ownership in the city¹⁴. Responsible ownership campaigns and a better enforcement of the existing Catalan Animal Protection Law are the challenges the AWO and the local administration are now facing: a comprehensive approach to the issue of feline overpopulation is seen as necessary to lead to a satisfying and long lasting solution for the benefits of the cats and the community.

¹¹ According to OPAB (figures and comments - April 2013)

¹² % of identified cats entering the local shelter in 2012: 6.6% (equivalent for dogs: 41%)

¹³ 443 cats from the 6 most active AWO

¹⁴ Cats responsible Ownership campaign: www.lawebdelgatopaco.org