



The Oregonian

A glut of cats in a dog-crazy town spells neglect and death

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Portland has been officially declared Dog Town USA. We're nationally famous for all the doggie day cares and dog parks, and for the dog-centric culture of our community.

Which doesn't help if you're a cat.

By every measure, cats are second-class citizens, even in animal-loving Oregon, where most aren't treated as well as dogs:

We spend more than twice as much for veterinary care for dogs as we do for cats.

When pets wander off, dog owners are more than 10 times more likely than cat owners to go to a shelter to retrieve their pets.

Cats are euthanized in shelters at about twice the rate of their canine counterparts.

"Cats are the Rodney Dangerfield of pets. They don't get no respect," says Chicago pet writer Steve Dale.

How did cats end up in this mess, and how do we get them out of it? **Supply and demand**

"There are just too many cats. That alone devalues them," says Kathy Covey with the Cat Adoption Team in Sherwood. About twice as many cats are waiting for homes in shelters as there are adopters. If every shelter is bursting at the seams, and every neighborhood has someone offering free kittens, it's easy to "trade in" a cat with behavior or health problems for a newer model.

The answer, advocates say, is to spay and neuter more cats.

The Animal Shelter Alliance of Portland (ASAP) has determined that if about 10,000 more cats are spayed and neutered in the Portland-Vancouver area each year, the number coming into shelters will equal the number of people who want them.

Roughly 60,000 spay and neuter surgeries are performed each year in the Portland area in private clinics, shelters and subsidized programs, according to ASAP member Joyce Briggs, executive director of the Alliance for Contraception in Cats & Dogs. ASAP is working on a plan to increase that number, especially with low-income households.

Once the plan's in place, organizers believe the money to solve the problem will come. **Cats get a bad rap**

Others say the solution isn't as simple as spaying and neutering.

We don't devalue cats because we have too many, they maintain. We have too many because we devalue them.

"We would never as a society open the door and say to the dog, 'Deal with it,' but people do that to cats every day," says Dale, the pet writer, who blames popular culture and myths about cats.

While there are heroic dogs like Lassie and Rin Tin Tin in movies and on TV, on the feline side you get the evil Snowbell in "Stuart Little," the nasty Dutchess in "Babe," the sputtering Sylvester who is forever hunting Tweety Bird. Cats in popular culture are almost always the evil character, and those images can reflect our feelings about them. **Myths don't help**

Part of the problem is expectations, often based on damaging myths, such as:

1. Cats are aloof and independent. Actually, cats are highly social creatures. Even feral cats choose to live in colonies -- the only type of cat other than lions that prefers large groups to more solitary lives. Cats are trainable -- just look at what the cats on TV commercials do. They want to be with people.

That doesn't mean they're miniature dogs, however.

"I appreciate that my cats don't need constant direction like my German shepherd does," says Sharon Harmon, Oregon Humane Society executive director. She even appreciates that cats aren't little people, either. "I direct people all day long; the last thing I need is one more person to direct."

2. Cats are no-care pets. "We shot ourselves in the foot, saying that cats are the low-maintenance pet. People are expecting cats to be almost no-maintenance," says the Cat Adoption Team's Covey.

Cat owners need to plan to spend money when they adopt an animal. A "free kitty" isn't actually free. The latest estimate is that it costs \$386 for a female kitten to be examined by a veterinarian, tested for illnesses and spayed. "We're charging \$85 for a cat that's had all that done," says Covey -- and people often balk at the price.

It's not just at adoption time that people need to understand cats cost money. Cats are enormously underserved in terms of veterinary visits.

"Every cat needs to be seen by a veterinarian at least once a year," says Marla McGeorge, who operates the Cat Doctor veterinary clinic in Johns Landing. Because cats are so adept at hiding pain and illness, an annual checkup is even more important than it is for dogs.

Even veterinarians who practice the best possible feline medicine have challenges. When new pet drugs are announced, they're almost always for dogs. Many of the drugs veterinarians give to cats have to be off-label, since the drug companies don't conduct trials on cats as they do on dogs. "It's species-ism," says McGeorge.

3. Cats need to roam outside. There is nothing "natural" about the lurking dangers of dogs, cars and cat fights. More people are understanding this -- and it may be one of the best things that has happened to cats.

There's evidence of that change at the Cat's Meow boutique on Hawthorne Boulevard.

"I'm selling a lot of leashes and harnesses for cats -- a lot, a lot. That's definitely a change," says owner Linda Wion.

And that could be a sign cats are coming into their own and that someday cats won't be euthanized at shelters because no one wants them, that people will expend the same effort to find their lost cat as they would their lost dog, and that they'll spend the same amount of money for their care.

Maybe we'll be the first place to be called Cat Town USA.

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