

3-22-2010

## Feral Cats and the People Who Care for Them

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Feral Cats and the People Who Care for Them

by

Loretta Sue Humphrey

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Sociology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:  
March 22, 2010

Keywords: animal rights, animal welfare, caretakers, personal efficacy, social  
movements

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### Dedication

To my husband, David, for his patience throughout my second education and to the  
people who care for feral cats.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee, James Cavendish, Ph.D., Sara Green, Ph.D., and Christy M. Ponticelli, Ph.D. for their expertise and encouragement. My appreciation goes to Frank Hamilton, Ph.D. from the Animal Coalition of Tampa, Robin Bass from Save Our Strays, and Marilyn Weaver from the Feral Cat Coalition for allowing me access to their members. I am indebted to Sandra Dorton from Save Our Strays for introducing me to the practice of Trap, Neuter, and Return. My gratitude goes to all of the dedicated individuals who so freely and generously gave of their time to talk to me in the interest of furthering the cause of feral cats.

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## Feral Cats and the People Who Care for Them

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### ABSTRACT

Sociologists have described the characteristics of individuals who become involved in social movements, their motivations for becoming involved, and the methods used to recruit participants. One group that has been underrepresented in the existing literature is feral cat caretakers. The purpose of this study is to examine the traits of this group, information which would be valuable to groups dedicated to educating the public about the plight of feral cats, groups which offer information and resources to caretakers, individuals wishing to network with other feral cat caretakers, and policy makers in need of knowing what options exist to deal with feral cats.

A small sample of fifteen participants was interviewed either face-to-face or by email. Questions were open-ended to facilitate individual discussion and expression. The sample was drawn from personal acquaintances, recruitment letters posted in spay/neuter clinics, email blasts to members of feral cat networks, and referrals from participants.

Results demonstrated that while the demographics of the participants were similar to others involved in social movements, there were some differences in their recruitment methods and involvement in organized groups. Feral cat caretakers demonstrated a very strong sense of personal efficacy and self motivation.

## Chapter One: Introduction

In the United States, the contemporary animal rights movement is comprised of various well organized animal welfare and animal rights groups, each of which utilizes different tactics to achieve its goals. The goals of these groups range from protecting natural habitats and the prevention of cruelty, to ending the use of animals in medical research, entertainment, food production, and clothing manufacturing (Beers 2006, Guither 1998). One facet of animal welfare that has gained attention in recent years is the problem of domestic pet overpopulation. Along with many local animal shelters, well known national organizations such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have programs to raise awareness, educate, and encourage individuals to spay and neuter their pets. Emerging from this crusade are individuals concerned with the plight of feral cats and the problems created by the uncontrolled growth of their populations.

It is my observation that in the Tampa Bay region of Florida, these individuals often work alone using their own resources to care for feral cat colonies. Still other caretakers form small, informal groups to share in the care. Formal, organized groups exist on the local level (many Humane Societies have feral cat programs) and national level (Alley Cat Allies) to provide resources for caretakers and educate the public about pet overpopulation and pet abandonment. Because these feral cat advocates and caretakers are not well organized, they have escaped the notice of social movement scholars who tend to focus their research on established social movement



organizations, collective action and the characteristics of individuals drawn into collective action. It is the aim of this study to fill this void in the literature on the animal rights movement by studying the individuals who have become caretakers and advocates for feral cats in the Tampa Bay area.

Specifically, I have sought to discover through in depth interviews if those who become involved in the care of feral cats in the Tampa Bay area are similar to those who become involved in social movements in general as described by social movement scholars (Crossley 2002, Meyer 2007, Schussman & Soule 2005) and in animal rights movements specifically (Polenta & Jasper 2001, Jasper & Poulsen 1995). In addition to examining the overall characteristics of feral cat caregivers, I have sought to discover how my respondents perceive their involvement and decision to become caretakers. Do they share common ideologies with one another? What kind of identity does involvement in feral cat care create? What motivates these individuals to move from feeding feral cats to participate in TNR (trap, neuter, return)? Are they exposed to information provided by appeals from animal welfare groups, recruited through membership in animal advocacy organizations, inspired through association and by the example of like- minded individuals, or do they, as individuals, simply see a need and respond motivated by a sense of personal efficacy? By revealing the beliefs, characteristics, and practices of these feral cat caretakers, the answers to these questions will be useful to existing feral cat organizations and animal advocacy groups in their recruitment efforts and allotment of resources and to individuals wishing to network and organize with similarly inclined others.

## Chapter Two: Historical Background of the Animal Rights Movement

The concern for animal welfare dates back a thousand years to Greece (Dombrowsky 1984). Pythagoras believed it was morally wrong to eat animals and encouraged his followers to adhere to a vegetarian diet. St. Francis of Assisi also advocated kindness to animals and Leonardo diVinci refused to eat animals out of concern for their suffering (Dombrowski 1984). In 1780, British philosopher Jeremy Bentham posed the moral query, “The question is not, Can they reason? not Can they talk? but Can they suffer?” (as quoted in Finsen and Finsen 1994:24).

In America the earliest laws protecting animals were enacted in New England. In 1641, the General Court of Massachusetts adopted “The Body of Liberties”, statutes which specified the proper behavior towards animals and the rights of animals in Liberties 92 and 93 addressing the welfare “Of the Bruite Creature” (Beers 2006:20). While Liberties 92 and 93 offered some legal protection for animals the underlying principles behind them were religion and property. According to their religious principles, the Puritans were concerned with human charity and virtue. Animal abuse was counter to these ideals. Also, at that time because society as a whole viewed animals as the property of humans, animal cruelty was outlawed as a way to protect personal property.

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cultural and societal shifts would facilitate the emergence of a more encompassing animal advocacy movement. Factors which influenced the movement in America were the changes brought about by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) in Britain, the ideology of

the abolition movement, the ideas of Charles Darwin, and problems created by industrialization (Beers 2006). These factors along with a growing compassion for animals helped to shape the concern for animals into a viable movement. In April 1866, Henry Bergh, prominent animal rights proponent, chartered the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in New Jersey which is still in existence today. At the end of the meeting he said, “The blood red hand of cruelty shall no longer torture dumb beasts with impunity” (Beers 2006:3). By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were over 700 organizations dedicated to the prevention of cruelty to animals.

The contemporary animal rights movement is composed of many organizations and members. After 1967, there were over 1,000 groups with membership in the millions (Beers 2006). In 1975 Peter Singer, Australian philosopher and animal rights defender, published his landmark and galvanizing book, *Animal Liberation*, thought by many activists to be the Bible of the modern animal rights movement. After the publication of his book, the movement exploded and today there are over 7,000 organizations with well over 10 million members who lobby, advocate, and educate on issues concerning the rights and treatment of animals (Beers 2006).

Historically, the movement consists of people who call themselves animal welfarists, protectionists, humanitarians, rightists, and liberationists (Beers 2006). Welfarists oppose cruelty but not the humane use of animals by humans for food and clothing. They assert human superiority, but believe animals deserve ethical consideration. Welfarists maintain that some animals are more deserving of consideration than others, as in the case of companion animals. Rightists believe that all sentient creatures are entitled to certain legal and social rights, such as protection

from cruelty and abuse, and to deny these creatures these rights, be they human or animal, is a grave moral offence an injustice. Liberationists, the most radical of all of the groups, appeared after 1975, demanding the end of speciesism, a prejudice towards the interests of members of ones' own species over those of another species. After the publication of Peter Singer's book, *Animal Liberation*, the movement took a more radical shift from welfare to liberation.

Throughout the history of the movement there are similarities which connect advocacy groups of the past and the present. These include continuity in demographics, a diverse agenda, parallel tactics, divisive and disruptive internal differences, and similar opponents with well known arguments (Beers 2006). Prior to WWII the leaders of the animal rights organizations were predominantly white, male, and middle to upper class urban elites while white, middle to upper class women made up the members of the rank and file. The agendas of these organizations were diverse as were their motivations for activism. For example, Henry Bergh of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), rallied against the financial and political power of the industries which exploited both animals and humans. Activists condemned the cruel pastimes enjoyed by the wealthy and poor such as fox hunting by the rich and cockfighting by the poor. Many of the early activists were involved in human reforms such as abolition, women's suffrage and rights, and civil rights (Beers 2006) suggesting that not all activists were exclusively animal lovers. Their ideologies encompassed both animal and humanitarian issues. The middle and upper classes represented the majority of those involved in activism as they still do today (Schussman & Soule 2006), largely due to this segment of the population having more time and disposable income to devote to a cause.

Historically, what the movement lacked in demographic diversity, it made up in diversity of issues and campaigns. Activists waged battles on many fronts: seal hunts, abused workhorses, trapping, hunting, inhumane slaughter, strays, feathered hats and fur coats, performing animals, wildlife extinction, and vivisection (the use of animals in experimentation). In response to societal changes heralded in by the end of WWII, the face of the movement changed to include women in leadership roles and agendas addressing the exploitation of animals in biomedical research, cold war militarism, and consumer product testing. This extensive agenda might have been a weakness for the movement but it has proved to be a strength because the diversity offers something for everyone, broadening its appeal and member base.

Crucial to the life and continuity of a movement is its success as measured by such criteria as legal victories, changing societal views, and membership numbers. The early advocates had to shout to be heard over the voices of derisive opponents, but as the advocates gained respect and acceptance, their message became more mainstream and they pursued goals that appealed to the ideals of a more receptive and tolerant public.

Buoyed by early successes, the movement had to develop strategies to keep the momentum going. These strategies were crucial to the survival and effectiveness of the movement as they still are today. Most social movements will adopt and adapt the successful tactics of other movements to further their cause (Meyer 2007). The animal rights movement is no exception. Many members involved in animal advocacy were active in humanitarian causes so they applied the tactics used in their abolitionist, feminist, civil rights, and environmental groups to the animal rights movement. Such tactics included public protest and intervention, legislation, economic boycotts, prosecution, organizational networking, and public awareness and

education. Usually, the first tactic to be employed was legislation. Activists pushed for laws to be enacted to protect animals and then demanded they be enforced by arrests, prosecution, and litigation. Simultaneously, a humane education blitz worked to erode entrenched attitudes about the human-animal relationship. Sometimes, in order to be accepted, these ethical concerns had to be cloaked as self-centered human concerns. An example was the campaign for more humane slaughter methods which emphasized the dangers of tainted meat as well as cruelty concerns.

The early activists were aware that laws and education were not enough. Success depended on widespread publicity and media attention. At times, some activists would stage outrageous public spectacles to grab attention. For instance, Henry Bergh's urban workhorse protests in New York City caused traffic jams throughout the city. While many activists avoided such extreme tactics, they did not overlook the value of using shock tactics. Using the same method of the abolitionists, animal advocates devoted significant amounts of organizational resources to publications, photographs, and lectures depicting gruesome and shocking examples of cruelty. They also relied on the coverage of a sympathetic media to gain public and political support. Such coverage attracted the support of prominent figures who in turn gave credibility and visibility to the cause. Early celebrities to further the animal rights movement were Mark Twain and Jack London (Beers 2006). Essential to the early success of the movement was organizational networking in conjunction with other tactics. The combined tactics and sheer numbers involved worked like a juggernaut to break down the worst abuses of animals and entrenched beliefs concerning the relationship of humans to animals.

The early animal rights movement was not without internal dissention. As humane concerns became incorporated into American culture, some organizations

modified their agendas to better reflect the attitudes and expectations of the public. Not wanting to alienate a growing constituency, they dropped aggressive strategies and adopted more modest and conservative goals. The view was that smaller and more feasible gains would produce greater gains for the animals in the long run. More militant groups were angered and accused the moderates of selling out, betraying, and hindering the struggle for animals. In the Post WWII years the conservative groups networked and pressed the federal government to pass reform bills that addressed the most blatant of animal abuses in meat production and laboratory research. Congress passed the Humane Slaughter Act in 1958 and the Laboratory Animal Welfare Acts were passed in 1966 and 1970. During the 1960's and 1970's, the movement as a whole moved toward more controversial issues such as fur farming, but it was not until after 1975 that the radical groups became more vocal (Beers 2006).

Over the years the animal rights movement has given rise to many opponents and enemies. The diverse list of adversaries includes meatpackers, railroads, carriage and omnibus operators, hunters, trappers, circuses, zoos, the fashion industry, factory farms, multinational corporations, biomedical interests, state and federal governments, and carnivores. At first, opponents of the animal rights movement saw little threat to their interests, but as advocates scored more and more successes they began to organize and fight back with counter movements often depicting animal welfarists as antiscience, antihuman, antiprogress, unpatriotic, fanatical, and misanthropic depending on what interest was being assaulted.

The moral and philosophical questions pertaining to the relationship between human and animals is still being debated today and advocates, through individual and collective efforts, are fighting to be the voice of the voiceless. Who takes up the

mantle of an advocate, why do they do it, and do they think they can make a difference? In order to answer these questions as they pertain to the animal rights movement, it is helpful to review the literature that has investigated these questions with respect to social movements in general.



### Chapter Three: Social Movements

The most fundamental question social movement scholars have addressed is why participate? Meyer (2007:23) put forth the explanation “For large social movements to emerge, people need to believe that participation in a protest movement is needed to get some part of what they want and that the movement might be effective, in other words, that protest is both necessary and potentially effective”. Preceding this belief is a grievance. Blumer (1969) theorized that social movements can be viewed as collective enterprises seeking to establish a new order of life. They have their beginnings in a condition of unrest, and derive their momentum from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and from hopes for a new system of living. The life of a social movement depicts the emergence of a new order of life.

Both of these reasons for protest include the collective nature and the need to join forces with like- minded individuals to effect change. Tarrow (1998) emphasized the same point in explaining that contentious politics occurs when ordinary people, often in alliance with more influential citizens, join forces to confront elites, authorities, and opponents in a sustained effort to bring about changes. The result is a social movement.

The existence of grievances expressed by activists typically predates the emergence of a movement by many years but it is the element of political opportunity that gives rise and success to a movement. The key elements that facilitate political opportunity are salient public grievances, political space for activist mobilization, a political context that includes institutional rules and public values, political

alignments, and elite support (Meyer 2007). Changes in policy and laws often precipitate mobilization especially when the changes are seen as either a threat to or a victory for a movement. As in the case of the animal rights movement, early successes encouraged activists to broaden their agenda and pursue reforms.

Many scholars have attempted to identify and describe who is attracted to social movements and which of those individuals will become actively involved. The term “activist” includes many levels of participation which can include lobbying, letter writing, signing a petition, donating money, giving speeches, demonstrating, organizing protests, and risking arrest. The level of activism is often influenced by biographical availability (Corning & Meyers 2002, Passy & Giugni 2001, McAdam 1986). Biographical availability refers to the lack of personal constraints which would limit an individual’s availability to become involved in a movement such as full time employment, family obligations, and children.

Social movement scholars have found characteristics common to persons active in movements in general. They are generally the well off, the relatively well educated, middle to upper class, likely to vote, to contribute money to causes and to be aware of other political issues (Meyer 2007). It is thought that these individuals have time, monetary resources, and social capital to allow them to participate. The literature on biographical availability suggests that younger individuals are more likely to protest because they are less invested in careers and families freeing them from obligations that may prohibit activism (Schussman & Soule 2006).

Common to those who become activists is the belief that they can make a difference. Social scientists describe this belief as “personal efficacy” (Meyer 2007, Schussman & Soule 2006, Jasper & Poulsen 1995, Passy & Giugni 2001, Gist & Mitchell 1992, Geeas 1989). Bandura (1977) stated that self-efficacy refers to beliefs

in one's capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands. He further described self-efficacy as a dynamic construct which can change as an individual acquires information and experience. The development theories of Piaget (1954) and Mead (1934) offer insight into the development of self-efficacy. Early interactions between the infant and the environment, especially the environment's responsiveness to the infant's actions are critical to the development of self-efficacy. Individuals derive information about their efficacy from various sources in their environment. Bandura (1977) described three sources of efficacy information. They are vicarious experience (seeing others perform activities successfully), verbal persuasion (feedback from other individuals about one's abilities), and emotional arousal (assessments individuals make about their abilities from their emotional states). Bandura believed the most effective source of efficacy information is personal mastery experiences (Grecas 1989). He also stated that the family is the most important environment for the development of self-efficacy, the parents being the most significant factor. A number studies suggest that children of politically active parents are more likely to become politically active themselves (Corning & Meyers 2002). Socioeconomic status as measured by education and occupational prestige are positively related to self-efficacy and mastery and negatively related to powerlessness (Grecas 1989). These factors reinforce the findings of who becomes and activist and why.

Self-efficacy is a cognitive process frequently considered in the individual determination of behavior. The importance of self regulation in motivation and performance has been demonstrated in social psychology literature with several consistent findings (Gist & Mitchell 1992). First, self-efficacy has been shown to influence goal level and commitment (Locke et al. 1984, Taylor et al. 1984). Second,

self-efficacy influences an individual's initial choice of activities and his or her coping abilities while occupied with the task (Lent et al. 1984, Stumpi et al. 1987). Lastly, self-efficacy influences the interpretation of feedback (Silver, Mitchell, & Gist 1991) which in turn influences subsequent performance (Bandura 1986, Kanfer & Ackerman 1989). Self efficacy is an important element which influences an individual's goals, efforts, emotional reactions, and persistence all of which can be changed as a result of experience, feedback, and learning.

Social movement literature also reveals that social networks, both formal and informal, are critical to promoting activism (McAdam 1996, Crossley 2002, Corning & Meyers 2002). Previous, personal contact with someone in a movement is a strong predicting factor in the recruitment of an individual to a cause (Snow, Zurcher, Jr., and Eckland-Olson 1980). Personal contact and familiarity with an individual affords a potential activist the trust that a cause and an organization are worthy to become involved in (Passy & Giugni 2001). The credibility of a recruiter is an important factor in an individual's choice to become active in a cause (Benford & Snow 2000). Social psychology literature suggests that speakers who are regarded as credible are deemed as persuasive (Hoveland & Weiss 1951). Factors associated with persuasiveness include status and knowledge about an issue (Hass 1981, McGuire 1985). Social movement literature suggests that membership in organizations facilitates the recruitment into protest (McAdam & Paulsen 1993, Oberschall 1973, Paulsen 1991, Vera, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). These social networks provide the setting for the single most important predictor of involvement to take place, that is, to be asked to become involved (Schussman & Soule 2006, Meyer 2007, Rosenstone & Hansen 1993). Individuals rarely participate in protest unless they have been asked to do so (Klandermans 1997, Verba, Scholman, and Brady 1995).

These associations and networks are important because they allow organizers to frame or align their agendas so that they resonate with the personally held beliefs of potential recruits. New meanings and beliefs are created by appealing to and building on existing ones which is accomplished through frame amplification. The frame amplification process involves highlighting some issues, beliefs, and events as being more important and salient than others (Benford & Snow 2000).

This association and solidarity with like-minded individuals creates a collective identity which often motivates individuals to participate through norms of obligation and reciprocity (Poletta & Jasper 2001). Some social movement scholars believe that collective identity is derived from a concern with the opinion of others. It is this concern about one's reputation, rather than moral obligation that motivates an individual. Chong (1991) argued that because people expect consistency in one's behavior, people oblige by living up to one's reputation. He paraphrased Socrates advice to maintain a reputation by becoming the person you want others to think you are. Teske (1997) states that activism can be a way to construct a desirable self. Identity construction demonstrates the desire activists have to incorporate certain qualities into their lives and actions. An activist collective identity can be a worthwhile aspect of a personal identity. Gamson (1992:56) noted that "participation in social movements frequently involves enlargement of personal identity for participation and offers fulfilment and realization of the self".

In summary, social movement scholars have identified a number of factors that predict whether individuals are likely to become involved in a social movement. These factors include membership in organizations, personal contact with a person already involved in a cause, and being asked to participate in a social movement. Collective identity, an individual's cognitive and moral connection with a broader

practice or community is a predicting factor in involvement in a social movement.

Collective identity is appealing to an individual because it reflects what we are comfortable with, who we are, what we believe, and who we want to be perceived as by other individuals. Participation in identity based movements rather than political or class based movements allows an individual the freedom to choose who they are. It is anticipated that some of these same factors are likely to predict whether individuals become involved in animal rights issues and of particular interest, do these same factors predict who becomes involved in the care of feral cats.

## Chapter Four: Animal Rights Activists

Based on a review of the literature on the animal rights movement (Jasper 1995, Guither 1998) it is clear that although those involved in the animal rights movement share many of the same characteristics as individuals involved in other movements, there is one difference worth noting. It is how they were recruited and got involved in the movement.

First, I will discuss how animal rights activists become participants in the cause and then I will examine general characteristics of the activists.

As previously discussed, one mechanism for recruitment is through existing organizations and networks. Another method is through moral shocks. Jasper & Poulsen (1995:498) used the term to describe “when an event or situation raises such a sense of outrage in people that they become inclined toward political action, even in the absence of a network of contacts.” The most effective moral shocks are those which are translated into powerful condensing symbols. Condensing symbols are visual or verbal images that convey a range of meanings both cognitive and emotional. Organizers use such symbols to recruit members, especially strangers. Not all people respond to or ascribe the same meanings to condensing symbols but to those they resonate with, building on existing beliefs draws them into activism.

Organizers use various media to create moral shocks—direct mail, tables on streets and in shopping malls, demonstrations, and door-to-door canvassing. In their study of recruitment patterns, Jasper & Poulsen (1995:500) found that 72% of their participants rated reading very important in their recruitment, 78% rated reading,

listening, and watching television as very important, 47% rated friends and family as not important, and 44% rated previous activism as not important. In interviews with a small number of members of a local North Carolina animal rights group, Groves (1992) found that 25% of the members had heard of the group through direct-mail memberships in national groups, 25% through the group's own literature distributed at tables, and 20% through advertisements and newspaper articles about the group. While this is but a small sample of animal rights activists, it gives some insight into how a segment of this population is recruited. Clearly, this is a movement with considerable recruitment of strangers brought into the movement through exposure to literature rather than reliance on networks.

A notable characteristic of animal rights activists is that they are unreligious. In a 1985 poll of its readers, *Animals' Agenda* reported that 65% of the respondents claimed to be agnostic or atheist. This contrasts sharply with a 1984 Gallup poll of the general public which reported that 90% profess to believe in God, 70% belonged to a church, and 60% attended religious services at least once a month. Only 13% reported no affiliation to Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish denominations (Jasper & Nelkin 1992). A common sentiment within the animal rights movement is the rejection of the view that man has dominion over animals. They dismiss the secular and religious arguments that depend on human dominion to justify the utilization of animals. Research conducted at Oregon State University by researchers Wesley Jamison and William Lunch in the mid-1980's (Guither 1998) suggests that rejection of human dominion over animals is a common thread between diverse animal rights groups. Their survey data indicated that when asked if human dominion caused animal exploitation, 87% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed (Guither 1998).



In addition to recruitment methods and religious inclinations, animal rights activists share many similar characteristics such as socioeconomic status as measured by education, income, and employment. Also shared are demographic traits such as race, gender, age, rural or urban orientation, and whether or not they own pets. Previous studies of animal rights activists have yielded the following information.

### *Education*

Animal rights activists are well educated. Jasper & Poulsen (1995) found in their study of animal rights activists that 92% of their respondents were high school graduates and 51% were college graduates. Oregon State University researchers Wesley Jamison and William Lunch conducted a survey of 426 animal rights activists at the March for the Animals in Washington, D.C. on June 10, 1990 (Guither 1998). They found that 66% had received some college or university education, 40.2% had a Bachelor's degree or less, 7% had some graduate education but had not completed a degree, and 19% had an advanced graduate or professional degree such as a MS, Ph.D., or law degree. A readership survey conducted in November 1984 by *Animals' Agenda* had similar findings. Eighty four percent of its readers were college graduates and 25% held Master's or Ph.D. degrees (Guither 1998). In comparison, only 20% of the US population had completed some level of college education in 1984.

### *Income*

Jasper & Poulsen (1995) reported that in 1988, 21% of the animal rights activists in their study reported incomes of less than \$20,000 and 60% reported incomes of less than \$50,000. The Oregon State survey indicated that in 1989 activists reported annual household incomes of between \$20,000 and \$40,000 with a median income of \$33,000. A 1990 nationwide direct-mail survey of 1,020

subscribers to *Animals' Agenda* conducted at Utah State University by Rebecca Richards and Richard Krannich revealed that 18% of the respondents reported incomes of less than \$20,000, 42% had incomes between \$20,000 and \$50,000, and 39% had incomes in excess of \$50,000 (Guither 1998). *Animals' Agenda* reported that the median income of its readers in 1984 ranged from \$25,000 to \$50,000. In comparison the US Department of Commerce reported that in 1984 the median income for all households in the United States was \$25,000.

### *Employment*

In their study, Jasper & Poulsen (1995) reported that occupations in the services, professions, and artistic sectors were heavily represented by the animal rights activists. In the Oregon State University survey, it was reported that 44% of the respondents represented professions such as nurses, doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers, professors, and administrators. Sixty nine percent reported their job status as “working for pay” while only 4% reported their job status as “not working outside of the home”. Fourteen of the respondents reported being full time students. The Utah State University reported similar findings. Sixty percent of the respondents reported their job status as full time while 40% reported their job status as “other”. Of the employed in the USU survey, 46% held executive positions, 28% had technical positions and the remainder represented a variety of occupations.

### *Race*

Data suggests that the racial composition of the animal rights movement is predominantly Caucasian. The Oregon State University data indicated that 93% of the respondents were white. The Utah State University data showed similar results with 97% of their respondents reporting their race as Caucasian. It is speculated that

differences in income, time availability, education, and a larger concern with minority issues may account for this finding (Guither 1998).

### *Gender*

Various reports have suggested that the members of the animal rights movement are predominantly female. The Oregon State University and Utah State University research projects confirm this suggestion. The OSU study found that 68% of the respondents were female and 33% were male. The USU survey found that 78% of its respondents were female and 22% were male. In comparison, nationally, 51% of the population is female and 49% is male (Guither 1998).

### *Age*

In their study of animal rights protesters, Jasper & Poulsen (1995) found that the median age was 34 years with 33% being over 40. In the Oregon State study the median age was 29 years with most of the respondents being between the ages of 20 and 50. In the Utah State University study, 23% of the respondents were under the age of 29, 57% were between 30 and 50 and 20% were 50 years old or older (Guither 1998). In their study of their readers, *Animals' Agenda* reported that 75% of its readers were between the ages of 21 and 49. Twenty percent were 50 or older and only 21% of its readers were under 21. In comparison, the 1980 United States census indicated that 50% of the population was under 29, 24% was between 30 and 49, and 26% was 50 years old or older.

### *Rural/Urban Orientation*

Activists are predominantly from urban areas. The Oregon State University study indicated that 66% of the activists surveyed lived in metropolitan areas, suburbs, or cities with populations of over 500,000. The Utah State University survey

reinforces this finding with 73% of those surveyed living in urban areas and 27% living in rural areas (Guither 1998).

### *Attitudes Towards Pets*

The Oregon State University survey (Guither 1998) sought to discover by measuring emotional attachment, if animal rights activism was mobilized by personal experiences with pets. They found that 87% either strongly approved or approved of keeping pets in the home. Nine percent were neutral and 4% opposed pet ownership. Based on open response questions, intense emotional experiences with pets were a significant mobilizing force in the activists' lives. The Utah State University survey revealed similar findings. Using a scale of 1-7 to score responses, 7 being "not at all wrong", their respondents reported keeping a cat or dog as a pet and neutering a pet as not at all wrong. The *Animals' Agenda* reader survey indicated that 89% of those who responded approved of having pets in the home. Interestingly, these findings are in contrast to the stated opinions of well known leaders of the animal rights movement Ingrid Newkirk, cofounder of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), has stated that pet ownership is an "absolutely abysmal situation brought about by human manipulation" (Guither 1998). In his original introduction to *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer disclaims any sentimentality towards pets or interest in keeping them. It is not unusual for the leaders of a movement to be purists in their ideology as compared to the rank and file of an organization.

In summary, animal rights activists are different from activists in other social movements in how they become involved in the movement. Social scientists have described how networks and association with members of a social movement facilitates an individual's involvement in a movement. Being asked to become involved has been identified by social movement scholars as being the greatest

predictor of individual participation in a movement. The use of moral shocks by organized groups to mobilize and recruit members has been determined by social scientists to play a significant role in influencing individual participation in a movement. Recent studies of animal rights activists however, have revealed that recruitment into the movement relies on the use of literature to mobilize and attract members rather than depending on networks.

Studies of animal rights activists have indicated that they tend to have the following characteristics: well educated, relatively well off financially, Caucasian, female, over 30 years of age, employed (often in professional occupations), and either agnostic or atheist.

These studies provide a wealth of information about the characteristics of animal rights activists, but it is still unclear if those involved in the care of feral cats share the same characteristics as animal rights activists or individuals involved in social movements in general. Furthermore, do the same factors that lead individuals to become involved in animal activism also lead them to become involved in the care of feral cats? This is a question that steers my research and the answer to this question will help leaders of feral cat organizations and animal welfare groups to better understand the population they seek to attract.

## Chapter Five: Feral Cat Caretakers

Unfortunately, there is a lack of research on the characteristics of feral cat caretakers. Two studies provide some insight into the caretakers. One is by Centonze & Levy (2002) in which they surveyed 101 caretakers in north central Florida. This was a written survey distributed to caretakers who brought cats into a spay/neuter clinic within the first nine months of the clinic's operation. The results revealed that 84% of the caretakers were female. The median age was 45 years old with a range of 19 to 74 years. Eighty eight percent of the respondents owned pets and 66% owned cats. The major reasons respondents reported for feeding free-roaming cats were love of animals and sympathy for the cats. Most of the cats lived on the caretakers' property and 70% of the cats had been neutered.

The second study was conducted by Levy, Woods, & Etheridge (2003). They surveyed 587 households in Alachua County, Florida by telephone between March 1 and May 10, 1999. The sample was determined by using random digit and cross sectional selection. Respondents were questioned about feeding free-roaming cats. Twelve percent of the households in their sample reported feeding free-roaming cats. Households that fed free-roaming cats were more likely to own pet cats than households that did not feed free-roaming cats, but 43% of the households that fed free-roaming cats did not own pet cat or dogs. Only 8% of the households that fed free-roaming cats attempted to have such cats neutered.

While these studies provide very important information about the demographics of feral cat caretakers, describing who feeds and cares for feral and

free-roaming cats, they give little insight into why these individuals care for the cats and what motivates them to care for them. Little is known about feral cat caretakers and these studies have taken the necessary first step in identifying who they are.

It is my intent to build on the research cited above and add to what is known about feral cat caretakers. I seek to discover how and why individuals become involved in the care of feral cats. Are they recruited by other caretakers? Do they, motivated by their own sense of self-efficacy, independently start feeding cats and decide to neuter them? Why do they care for cats that are not their pets? Is there a spiritual component to their motivation? Do feral cat caretakers have characteristics similar to animal rights activists? Are they similar to activists in other social movements? I believe the answers to these questions will help others involved in the cause of feral cats be they caretakers, leaders of organizations, or policy makers.

## Chapter Six: Methods

My interest in this subject stems from my personal experience in caring for feral cats. I, along with a few other individuals, had been feeding what we considered to be “wild cats” at our workplace when a woman involved in cat rescue saw the cats. She asked me about them and I told her we were feeding them. Sally (not her real name) informed me that I *absolutely had* to trap them, have them spayed and neutered, get their shots, and release them. I had never heard of such a thing. The logic behind TNR (the practice known as trap, neuter, and return) was obvious to me so we spent the late Spring and early Summer of 2006 trapping 19 cats and finding homes for 6 kittens. I thought we were the only people who did this but through talking to others, I found there are a lot of individuals who care for feral cats. Knowing how much time, energy, money, organization, emotional investment, and commitment goes into caring for a colony, I wondered if other feral cat caretakers experienced the same emotions, challenges, and level of responsibility that we did (and still do).

To answer these questions, I interviewed 15 individuals. I arrived at the number of 15 because that was how many caretakers responded to my recruitment efforts. While 15 is not a large number and the results cannot be generalized to the general population of feral cat caretakers, I believe the results are indicative of the feral cat caretakers in the Tampa Bay region of Florida as I got many of the same answers over and over again suggesting I had reached a saturation point in my interview process. Twelve of the caretakers were interviewed face-to-face and due to



time and distance constraints, three were interviewed via email. The interview schedule, which appears in Appendix A was the same for both groups.

The sample was derived from three sources. The first source was individuals known personally to me. The second was through a recruitment letter posted at a local spay/neuter clinic, and on the website of two animal welfare organizations. By posting a recruitment letter, individuals could choose to volunteer to participate and I could ensure that members would not be offended by my approaching them. The third was through referrals from participants I interviewed. The interview was semi-standardized with open-ended questions to facilitate discussion and to allow the participants to use their own language, set their own priorities, and construct their own frames. I also let the participants know prior to interviewing them that I was involved in feral cat caretaking so that they might feel more comfortable discussing their activities knowing I was sympathetic to their cause. All of the participants live in the Tampa Bay region of Florida and in the following discussion and quotations, pseudonyms have been used to preserve their privacy.

The interviews took place from September 18, 2009 to October 31, 2009 and were conducted at various locations convenient to the participants. These locations included homes, workplaces, restaurants, and cat colonies. The face-to-face interviews were tape recorded, and I later transcribed them, changing the names of the participants to protect their privacy. Eight hours of personal interviews and three email correspondences yielded 83 pages of transcripts which, using primarily inductive reasoning, were analyzed for content and coded by themes, phrases, and words.

Because of the small size of the sample and the use a snowball sample technique, the generalizability of the results may be questioned. However, due to the

lack of research in the existing literature of this neglected group, this study can serve as a reference point for future study.

## Chapter Seven: Results

### *Respondents' Background and Characteristics*

In order to present a clear picture of my respondents, the demographic makeup of the group is as follows: all (100%) were Caucasian, fourteen (93%) were female and one (7%) was male. The median age was 53 with the age range being from 28 to 66. Ten (66%) reported being employed of which two were part time and eight were full time. When asked the highest level of education five (34%) stated high school, seven (53%) reported college, two (14%) stated graduate school, and one (7%) stated she was a student pursuing her Ph.D. Participants were also requested to indicate their socioeconomic group. Two (14%) declined to answer, eight (54%) cited middle, two (14%) answered upper middle, one (7%) said upper, and one cited her SES as student.

### *Motivation and Involvement*

When questioned about the kind of care they currently provide to feral cats, ten (67%) of the respondents stated that they currently feed and one (7%) respondent used to feed. Ten (67%) respondents reported that they currently trap, neuter, and return (TNR), and three (20%) have practiced TNR in the past but do not at present. One respondent reported that she provides only transportation to and from the trapping site and the spay/neuter clinic (7%), and two (14%) individuals provide medical care to the cats. What is interesting about these answers is that a pattern emerges illustrating that most of the respondents who feed the cats reported that they also practice TNR, suggesting that merely feeding them was not alleviating the

problem of unchecked reproduction. Betty, a 63-year-old Caucasian woman with a Master's degree, explained, "If you are going to feed, you have to do TNR because you are only doing half the job."

Respondents were asked how they originally got involved in the care of feral cats and if there was a person, incident, or experience that motivated them to become involved. I also asked participants if they received any information that made them aware of the needs of feral cats. Nine (60%) stated simply that they saw cats or kittens and began feeding them. Two (14%) became involved through a friend or co-worker and two (14%) were introduced to caring for feral cats because their family did it. One (7%) participant learned of TNR through volunteering at an animal shelter and one (7%) cited a lifelong concern for animals as motivation to become involved. Nine (60%) of the participants expressed that they saw a need and felt they had to do something, but not knowing what to do, they contacted animal agencies such as the county animal services, the Humane Society, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). These agencies provided them with information about TNR and caring for feral cat colonies. Mary, a 39-year-old Caucasian woman who works at a local university, expressed how she got involved through a friend, "My husband, currently he is my husband, he was my boyfriend at the time, had feral cats he was feeding and that is how I kind of got involved with feral cats. And it grew from there."

Others, however, as suggested by the numbers presented above, became involved in the care of feral cats by seeing the need in their own environment and deciding to take action. Janet, a retired woman with a business degree, relayed her story to me,

The feral cat situation happened in our neighborhood on the street where we live where we all live and we basically started out with the one cat that we knew of and then that turned into a total of nineteen cats. They multiply and we knew we had to do something about them rather than somebody else doing it because nobody else was doing it. We just knew we had to try to basically save their lives and take care of them and get them to the veterinarian and get them checked out, get them fixed and get them adopted.

Laura, a 47-year-old white woman active in community affairs, exemplifies those who saw the need and sought information from animal welfare agencies. She told me how she got involved and learned of TNR.

The house I moved into had several feral cats, they were reproducing and the animals were dying, the little ones and so I just, from my vet's office got information how to do it with Animal Coalition of Tampa. I started doing the trap and release and one by one we got at least the ones I know of under control.

A 29-year-old Ph.D. candidate named Opal, told me how she got involved and learned of TNR by stating, "I was feeding a few cats in my backyard. One of the cats got pregnant and had babies, and my husband urged me to get all cats fixed. He found out about HSTB [Humane Society of Tampa Bay] feral cat program."

When questioned why they care for cats that are not their pets, there were many answers but patterns emerged. Three (20%) participants said they could not stand to see the cats suffer and go hungry. Three (20%) individuals expressed that they felt sorry for the cats. Three (20%) respondents cited a love for animals as their reason to care for cats that are not their pets. Two (14%) stated that the cats deserved the same care as pets and two others articulated a love for animals and explained that

the cats did not ask to be dumped by irresponsible people who contribute to the problem of overpopulation. Other reasons cited were “somebody has to”, “it is the right thing to do”, “to give them the best life possible”, “they are living beings that did not have care from irresponsible people”, “for their well being”, and “to lower the birth rate”. The three (20%) respondents who reported not being able to stand seeing the cats go hungry and suffer elaborated on this as a motivating factor to care for the cats. The following quotes from Brenda and Betty shed light on this reasoning. Brenda, a 57-year-old accountant, explained how seeing hungry cats motivated her reporting the following:

If I said somebody has to, would that, I just, I saw a hungry animal and I fed it. That is what started it and then, you are not supposed to feed feral cats. Well, yes, but they are hungry so what are you going to do? It is like, if you see a person that is hungry, you try to help. Well, I saw cats that were hungry and I tried to help.

Betty elaborated on why she cares for cats that are not her pets explaining:

Because it is the right thing to do in my mind. Because I could not, I can not bear seeing one hungry, I can not bear seeing the overpopulation, that kills me. I can not bear to see kitten after kitten that are not taken care of. It is the right thing for me to do. It is not the right thing for everybody, I understand that but for me, in my heart, it is the right thing to do.

Three (20%) of the participants cited a love of cats as their reason for caring for cats that are not their pets. Valerie, a 51-year-old high school graduate who works full time, expressed to me that her love of cats is what motivates her.

Well, I believe in my heart that I just love cats. But I also believe that it is a calling for me. I guess I have a soft spot for homeless cats and I just feel sorry

for them. And that is how I got started feeding all the colonies I do and I always said to myself, a lot of cats that I find, they have got other things going on. And I always said to myself, why do I always find the cats that are sick or hurt? And I said, well, I think that God put them before me because He knew that if I saw them, he knew that I was going to make sure that they were going to be OK.

Lydia, a 49-year-old college graduate who is president and founder of an aggressive TNR cat rescue group, articulated her love of cats as her motivation in this manner, “I love animals especially cats. It breaks my heart knowing that there are homeless kittens/cats that struggle to survive everyday. I always have cat food in my car and I will feed any stray I see.”

An unemployed, 57-year-old upper middle class woman named Karen, related her love for animals in yet a different way, “I guess I just love animals more than people. For instance, this mother [a cat she found] did not ask to be dumped to fend for herself and her six kittens. She was not feral and was obviously someone’s pet at some point in time.”

Feeling sorry for the cats was another reason given why the participants cared for cats that were not their pets and Lee, a 61-year-old man employed full time, expressed his feelings to me simply stating, “I feel sorry for them. I just, if I can do it, I just like to take care of all of them.”

Most of the participants’ care of feral cats consisted of feeding, TNR, or both. When I asked if their care had changed or evolved seven (47%) respondents said they had started with feeding and moved to TNR. One (7%) participant reported she started TNR first and then began feeding. Two (14%) individuals said they only fed the cats. One (7%) caretaker reported moving from feeding to TNR to providing

foster care. Two (14%) others cited moving from feeding to TNR to taking on the care of additional colonies, one of which also provided medical care.

When questioned what was the primary reason for moving to TNR, the majority, twelve (80%) of the participants respondents cited the desire to stop the cats from reproducing and prevent to the resulting suffering by sickness, hunger, and predation, especially of the kittens. One (7%) expressed the desire to adopt the cats but acknowledged they were too feral. TNR offered the best solution, the alternative being euthanized at animal services. Lydia put it succinctly, “I want to stop the suffering of homeless kittens/cats. I knew the only way to do it was through TNR.” Karen explained why she moved to TNR like this, “To reduce the feral cat population and save kittens from horrible deaths like being carried off by hawks and dropped from 100 feet in the air to their deaths.” Valerie said, “I did not want any more cats. You know, there was too many cats out there hungry, trying to survive. I have seen kittens get hit by cars, and we just had to cut the numbers down. So, that is the only way.”

Similar reasons were voiced by a number of other respondents. A 42-year-old CPA named Shelly told me,

Just because that is the whole problem. I mean, just the cats, the overpopulation of them, the population of them. If you take two or three cats, in a year and a half, it can be eighteen cats and then it just becomes overwhelming. Just the desire to keep it small and just have it be less cats out there.

Opal conveyed the following to me:

I feel that TNR is the only way to bring the numbers down. I see a lot of unfortunate animals living on the streets and I am aware of the numbers of the



cats and kittens being euthanized at HCAS [Hillsborough County Animal Services]. I am trying hard to prevent this from happening.

Megan, a 28-year-old attorney expressed a similar sentiment,

I really wanted to see most of them [the cats] adopted but it is impossible when they have been feral for all of their lives. They really do not relate well to people and even sometimes when you feed them, so the trap and release really became a need, that we would rather feed them at the office complex, my co- workers and I and associates in the area, we would rather feed them at the office complex than see them in a shelter and ultimately see them euthanized or be in a shelter their entire life. They were having good safe lives in and around our office complex and that is what motivated me to want to release them back into that environment.

An example of the level of commitment that the respondents have in caring for feral cats can be seen in the use of the respondents' own financial resources. All of the participants surveyed use their own money to finance their caretaking activities. The amount of money spent varied on whether the caretakers were feeding only or trapping and paying for spay/neuter services. Respondents were asked how much money they spent a week on care. Six (40%) said they spent between \$5 and \$15 a week. Three (20%) stated they spent between \$20 and \$50 a week on care. One (7%) respondent reported spending \$50 to \$100 a week. Two (14%) said they spent between \$100 to \$150 weekly and two (14%) told me they spent between \$150 to \$300 a week. One participant confided that she did not know the exact amount she had spent on trapping, spaying/neutering but estimates she had spent \$5000 of her personal money. A couple of the respondents who trap for other people explained

that they try to get the people they trap for to pay or contribute to the cost of TNR but this is not always possible due to their low income.

I asked the participants if they consider the cats they care for to be “yours” or “like pets”. Their answers were often preceded with a laugh. Ten (66%) respondents answered yes and of them, five stated that they even have names for each cat. When I queried Vicky she said, “Absolutely. And they all have names. All fifty of them. And most of them come when I call them.” Four (26%) answered no, two of those four individuals being involved in trapping only and not in the feeding of a colony. These feelings of ownership and attachment to the point of naming the cats reveals the depth of commitment and involvement that many of the respondents feel towards the cats they care for.

Religious or spiritual feelings were a guiding and motivating factor in many of the caretakers’ lives. Respondents were asked if they considered themselves to be religious or spiritual. Five (34%) answered no. Ten (66%) answered yes. Of the ten that answered yes, two believed that caring for the feral cats was their calling. Shelly explained how her spiritual beliefs motivated her to care for feral cats:

I definitely feel like this whole thing is something God led me to. I kept asking for a change and this whole thing kind of evolved. I asked for a change. An overwhelming change. So I definitely feel like God led me to this and I feel very blessed that this is my calling.

Other explanations in line with types of religious and spiritual motivation were the following kinds of statements voiced by my respondents: the cats are God’s creatures, things happen for a reason (in other words God guided me to care for the cats), God helps me to care for the cats, we are here to be guardians, take care of, and

not harm animals, and another cited that the Torah has provisions for the caretaking of animals. Laura's view is this:

I believe all things happen for a reason and that you are brought to certain areas for a reason. I think that me going to that home [the house she bought that had feral cats living on the property], because, why did I get this house? There was a reason. And I believe you know, the higher above helps me to take care of and they help me to provide for the animals.

Brenda told me, "I believe God is everywhere. And maybe that is why I take care of feral cats because they are His creatures." Betty expressed a similar sentiment, "I believe these are creatures of God's making and maybe part of the reason I am here on this earth is to do as much for them as I can." Megan gave her reason of how her spiritual beliefs support her in her care of feral cats:

I think that we are here to you know, we were put on the earth to take care of it [feral cats] and I think that we are here to be the guardians of animas and not to treat them poorly or, actually, I will start crying if I see even a, and this sounds so stupid but, even if I see a squirrel hit in the road or an armadillo, I bawl because I feel bad for that animal and how much it must have hurt to be hit and you know, it bothers me. Yeah, I think we are supposed to take care of them and not hurt them.

#### *Perceptions of Self-Efficacy*

Feeling that one can make a difference by participating is a hallmark characteristic of an activist. When participants were asked if they felt they were making a difference in the lives of the feral cats they cared for all (100%) of the participants answered yes. The individuals I interviewed answered me decisively and emphatically when I asked them this question. Lauren, a 59 year old college graduate

who describes herself as an activist by trade and nature said, “Definitely. And yes. Did I mention yes?” Janet told me, “Yes, yes, yes”. Betty articulated simply, “I do.” Laura stated, “Absolutely!” Lydia explained to me how she felt she had made a difference.

Yes, every time I spay/neuter a cat I feel I have just improved their lives.

Knowing a female doesn’t have to go through the hardships of delivering, nursing, or scavenging for food and hoping her kittens survive or knowing a male will no longer have the uncontrollable drive to mate and fight makes a BIG difference in their lives. Every TNR project I do I gently educate the caregivers on the benefits of TNR, how it improves the cat’s lives and responsible pet ownership. Part of Countless Cats Rescue’s [the organization she founded] mission is to educate the community on responsible pet ownership and we do that every chance we can. We will be speaking to high school students at the end of October about TNR and how important it is to spay/neuter pets.

Mary conveyed the following thought to me: “Oh yeah, I do. I feel, medically that they are healthier, they get fed so they are not digging through dumpsters and things like that.” Karen told me in a straightforward answer, “Yes, very much so.”

When asked what they considered the quality of life was for the cats they cared for in their colonies, all of the participants felt that the feral cats had good lives. Eleven of the respondents (74%) said good and four (26%) said excellent.

I asked participants if they worked alone or with others. None worked solely alone in their feeding, trapping, and other caretaking efforts. All of the respondents reported sharing some aspect of their caretaking responsibilities. Five (34%) caretakers specified that they shared the responsibility of feeding their colonies with

others, two (14%) participants indicated that they transported the cats for other caretakers, two (14%) individuals reported having friends they could call for back up to care for their colonies when they are out of town, and five (34%) indicated only that they worked with others. In all instances the care began as a spontaneous effort but evolved into a more organized one as caretakers began to meet, network, and work with others.

Not only did these participants feel a sense of personal empowerment, they believed they could educate others about feral cats and TNR and empower others with that knowledge. When asked if they felt they were making others aware of the plight of feral cats fourteen (93%) said yes. Laura said to me laughing, “Absolutely! To the point they get sick of me talking about it.” Charlotte, a retired woman who now works part-time, told me that she tells everyone, “Yes, because everybody I know, I tell them.” Valerie stated, “Oh, yeah because I am always talking about it.” Mary elaborated on the subject telling me the following:

Yeah, probably because I try not to talk about it a lot at work but people ask me and when people ask me, yes, I absolutely share with them what the differences can be with TNR, animal abuse, animal neglect, people abandoning animals and what happens to them when they are left on their own.

Megan told me that she has made people in her office aware of the plight of feral cats in the following way:

Yeah, yeah I have gotten a lot of people in my office, even my boss, he feeds on occasion, to realize that they are animals and they are worthy of our attention and our time and our protection. And I have gotten a couple of people in the office to start feeding them that probably would not have if it was just them here.

Opal explained how she has educated others,

I think I was able to convince a number of people about the TNR. I have seen a lot of people change their minds as the result of me talking to them or them seeing TNR work. It appears that the general public is quite uneducated when it comes to TNR and choose to view feral cats as the source of all evil – they often do not make the connection between toms spraying and fighting and us trying to prevent that through TNR, for example.

Shelly also believed she was educating and empowering others by explaining to me, “Yes. And I think also that when I have come out to help people [trap], like I try to empower them to a certain extent, to have them take responsibility for it and to assist in the whole [trapping process].” The participant who said she did not educate others explained that for the safety of the cats, she did not tell people about them. When participants were asked if they felt they were furthering the cause of animal rights, seven (53%) said yes and the others did not answer the question.

Feelings of self-efficacy and being able to make a difference extended to participating in organized groups. When queried if the respondent had ever belonged to or contributed to any organized animal rights or animal welfare group fourteen (94%) reported they had and only one (7%) had not. One respondent had founded a local group dedicated to promoting TNR. Participants were asked if they had contributed to or belonged to any group whose specific goal is to aid feral cats. Seven (46%) reported they had and eight (54%) reported they had not.

The influence organized groups had on the participants varied. Although three (20%) cited they had no influence on their views or convictions for caring for feral cats the majority of individuals reported that organized groups had some influence on their views or convictions. Five (34%) respondents said they had received facts and

information from the groups they had participated in. Two (14%) participants reported to me that the groups helped to solidify their beliefs. Shelly, for instance told me,

I do feel like they solidify my views as far as it is OK the cats are outdoors, it is OK that there are feral cats, they just need to be spayed and neutered. So just knowing there is a bigger organization that believes in what I do kind of solidifies and makes me feel like I am not crazy, there is a need for this.

Two (14%) indicated they were influenced by the group to get their pets from an animal shelter, one (7%) said she had extended her concern to other animals and one (7%) did not know. One participant stated she felt useless contributing to national organizations because she was not directly involved in reducing the overpopulation of street cats and for that reason she started her own organization where she could see the impact of her efforts. Another individual said to me that she felt organized groups made people more aware of the plight of feral cats.

Participants were questioned if they felt organized animal welfare groups had any influence on local policies with respect to feral cats and if they felt they personally had made a contribution to those efforts. Four (26%) responded no or that they were not aware of any influence these groups had on local policies. Three (20%) specified local animal welfare organizations and gave examples of what they had done to further the cause of feral cats. Eight (54%) participants gave examples of how they had contributed to the efforts of these groups. Examples included writing articles for a neighborhood paper, by being an example through their caretaking activities, by volunteering at an animal shelter, by teaching others how to TNR, and by advocating TNR as public policy not euthanasia. When participants were asked if they personally were involved in changing policy three (20%) replied yes and ten

(66%) replied no. This finding suggests while some of the respondents are actively involved in policy change with respect to animal welfare, the majority (66%) do not combine their personal caretaking activities with advocacy for policy change. This finding also suggests that while respondents are motivated to care for the feral cats in their environment, they are not necessarily motivated to be drawn into efforts to change policies on a broader level.

Participants were asked if they saw feral cats/TNR as a part of a larger social problem of animal welfare, had they gotten involved in advocating for changes in social policies apart from any involvement in an organization. Four (26%) said no, they had not. Ten (66%) stated they had and their advocacy took many forms. Actions ranged from speaking at city council meetings, writing articles for newsletters, reporting abuse, contacting government representatives when animal legislation was pending, volunteering at animal shelters, appealing to housing authorities to be allowed to TNR, serving as a role model, to starting an organization dedicated to TNR.

I asked participants what issues they wished animal rights and animal welfare organizations would become more involved in. Four (26%) individuals answered that more people need to get involved and support the organizations with monetary donations, so that the groups can promote the need to spay and neuter pets and provide more services for special needs pets. Three (20%) participants expressed that organizations need to get more involved in TNR by educating the public that such a solution exists and providing resources to caretakers such as lending traps and providing services to socialize feral kittens. Two (14%) felt that these organizations need to do a better job of educating the public about the consequences of abandoning cats and dispel the myth that cats can care for themselves. Two (14%) respondents



expressed that organizations should become more vocal in discouraging the sale of animals in pet stores when so many unwanted and abandoned (and very adoptable) animals are being euthanized in animal shelters. Lee told me,

Well, with the animal welfare, I would just hope they would stop selling kittens and cats and puppies in the pet stores. There are too many of them out there in the SPCA [animal shelter] and whatever organizations that have all of these animals that you do not need to get to a pet store and buy a \$500 cat or dog. They can still sell supplies and fish and all that but, to have somebody buy a kitten or cat and they get tired of it, they just set it free and outside it goes and you have more wild cats.”

Another two respondents (14%) stated that there needs to be free or more low cost spay/neuter services available. Other answers were that the organizations should lend traps and there needs to be more support with medical services. Another response was that organizations need to let the public know that there is nothing wrong with cats being outside (other animals are) and that feral does not mean dangerous.

#### *General Questions and Characteristics*

While the following questions are not directly related to feral cat caretaking, the answers provide some additional insight into the characteristics of feral cat caretakers and have been included in the results. Social movement literature describes activists as being involved in and aware of other issues. When I asked participants if they were involved in other causes one (7%) did not respond, six (40%) said yes, and eight (54%) said no. The reason most often cited for not being involved in other causes was the cats took all of their time.

When asked if they felt they were active and involved citizens. Thirteen (86%) said yes and two (14%) said no. The individuals that were interviewed face-to-

face were asked if they voted and all twelve stated yes. The three that completed the email interview were not asked that specific question although one mentioned that she did. The other two did not respond.

Previous studies of feral cat caretakers revealed that feral cat colonies are found everywhere. My participants reported that their colonies were at their home, in neighborhoods or at their workplace. Nine of the colonies were in neighborhoods, six were at workplaces, three were behind restaurants, two were in parks, and one colony was cited at each of the following locations: an alleyway, a shopping mall, near a bridge, in the woods, and at an industrial park.

Animal rights literature describes participants as being pet owners. I asked my participants if they had pets at home. All fifteen (100%) answered yes. Fourteen had cats, five had dogs, and three had other types of animals.

## Chapter Eight: Discussion

In this study the majority of the feral cat caretakers I interviewed were white, female, employed, college educated, and self described as middle class. Although the sample I conversed with was largely a convenience sample limited to the Tampa Bay region of Florida, it is interesting to note that the characteristics of these individuals are similar to the characteristics of feral cat caretakers observed by other researchers. In their study, Centonze and Levy (2002) noted that 84% to 92% of feral cat caretakers are female. A comparison between the feral cat caretakers in my sample and animal rights activists in general reveals some similarities. Both groups are predominantly Caucasian. The participants in both my study and studies of the animal rights movement are predominantly female and the majority report being employed. Animal rights activists and the participants in my study are well educated, over half being college graduates. The majority of both groups consider themselves to be at least middle class. The median age of the participants in my study is slightly older than those in previous studies of animal rights activists, but both consist largely of middle aged individuals.

The participants in this study are similar to those who become involved in social movements in general in that they are relatively well off, well educated, middle to upper class, they vote, they contribute to other causes, and are aware of other political issues. The results of this study suggest that in many ways feral cat caretakers resemble individuals who become involved in other social movements.

While there are similarities, the feral cat caretakers in this sample are different in some aspects to both animal rights activists and social movement participants. Animal rights activists have been reported to be unreligious. According to a 1985 poll of its readers, *Animal Agenda* cited that 65% of the respondents claimed to be agnostic or atheist. In this study, 66% reported being either spiritual or religious. Many credited God with leading them to the task of caring for colonies, citing that the cats were God's creatures and this was their "calling". This may be due to how these feral cat caretakers became involved in caretaking. Most were not asked to get involved or recruited but rather saw a need in their environment and were moved to action by their own moral imperative. To what degree their religious or spiritual beliefs motivated the caretakers in this sample is unknown but the majority did cite a religious or spiritual directive. It may be possible that these individuals view everything in their lives as part of a Divine plan. One respondent extended the Biblical passage in the book of Matthew which tells believers that what they do unto the least of their brothers, that they do unto Jesus, to include the treatment of animals. The other 34% did not consider themselves to be religious or spiritual and consequently, their reason for taking on the care of feral cats came from other sources. Previous studies of animal rights activists indicate that most activists were moved to action through moral shocks. Organizers use various media--literature, posters, door-to-door canvassing, and demonstrations to create moral shocks. Social movement literature describes the single most predictive factor in becoming involved in a social movement is being asked to participate. In this study, however, the majority of participants did not come to feral cat caretaking in either of these ways. All but three saw a need in their immediate environment and felt they had to do something. This could be described as a personal moral shock but it was not one facilitated by an

organization. Only two of the participants learned of feral cat caretaking through a co-worker or friend and one through volunteering at an animal shelter. This finding has implications for organizations seeking to recruit members. Most of the participants had no prior contact with feral cat caretakers nor were they recruited by members of animal rights organizations. Most of the participants had no prior knowledge of feral cat caretaking and learned of caretaking and TNR only after they began feeding the cats they encountered. Nine reported contacting animal welfare organizations for this advice and information, so while these organizations do have and serve as an important source of information, they do not seem to be effective in making the public aware of feral cats or what measures can be taken to care for them. Ninety four percent of the participants reported contributing to animal welfare organizations but most were not aware that these organizations had feral cat resources until they specifically sought them out. In informal conversation with participants, several voiced their frustration with the lack of networking opportunities with other caretakers. Locally there is a group, The Feral Cat Coalition, which is an email network to link caretakers with other like-minded individuals but this type of organization is in the early stages of development. A few organizations facilitate networking by utilizing social networking sites such as Facebook and though participants were not specifically asked if they tried to connect with other caretakers via social networking sites, none stated that they did. This may be due to lack of time, which was a common sentiment, and a disinclination by this age group, middle aged, to engage in social networking.

Social movement literature indicates biographical availability or lack of personal constraints is a predictor of involvement in a cause, citing lack of employment, lack of family obligations, and youth as factors in enhancing the

likelihood of becoming involved. With respect to biographical availability, the participants in this study were not typical of social movement activists in general as the majority were employed full time, were married or had a significant other, and were middle aged. Again, a possible explanation for this may be how the caretakers came to be involved or the reasons they cited for their motivation. They were not recruited or asked, but rather saw a need and used their personal initiative to take action, believing they could make a difference and better the situation. When I asked participants if they were involved in any other causes besides feral cats, the majority (54%) said they were not and the reason cited most often was lack of time due to children and employment. The 40% who did report involvement in other causes had fewer obligations. They were either unemployed, retired, had no children or their children were grown or a combination of the above. This mirrors what has been advanced in social movement literature with respect to biographical availability. What this may suggest is that if these caretakers had more time and fewer obligations, they too, would be more active in other causes which social movement literature has proposed activists are inclined to do. With regards to the caretakers I interviewed, it is possible that due to constraints, they must prioritize their commitments and causes, leaving other issues dear to them for another time.

Common to those who become activists is the belief that they can make a difference, a belief described by social scientists as “personal efficacy”. When the participants were asked if they felt they had or were making a difference in the lives of the cats they cared for, every one of them said yes. Clearly this sample of feral cat caretakers possess a high degree of personal efficacy. Bandura (1977) described self-efficacy as the belief in one’s capabilities to motivate oneself, utilize cognitive resources, and take the needed course of action to meet situational demands. He

further described self-efficacy as a dynamic construct which changes as an individual acquires information, experience, and skill. Bandura also described three sources of efficacy information—vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. The participants in this study recognized a need and were self motivated by the desire to alleviate suffering. The majority had no prior knowledge of feral cats or how to help them so they called upon their cognitive abilities and sought out the information and having acquired that knowledge took a course of action appropriate to their situation. As the caretakers became involved and more experienced, some took on the care of additional colonies while others began trapping for other people. The majority of participants reported the quality of life of the cats they cared for as good to excellent. This reinforces Bandura's assertion that individuals derive efficacy information through emotional arousal and through the most effective source of efficacy information, personal mastery. As the participants gained experience, they took on more responsibilities, became involved in local policies, began their own organizations, and educated others.

Self-efficacy is a cognitive process frequently considered in the individual determination of behavior. It has been shown to influence goal level and commitment and serves as an important motivational element. This representation of feral cat caretakers is fiercely committed to their work and are extremely motivated to continue caring for their colonies and furthering the cause of feral cats. When asked for additional comments at the conclusion of the interviews, several of the participants described their involvement with feral cats as their calling, their passion, their obsession, and difficult but they would do it over again. The love of animals and a desire to alleviate and prevent suffering was a common motivating theme among the caretakers. Many expressed how time consuming it was to care for the cats (most

cared for the cats before and after work) but they believed it was a responsibility they took on and must honor. When questioned how much money each participant spent, the first response in almost all cases was a laugh. Before giving an estimate of how much money they spent, some common responses were “I do not know”, “I do not want to know”, and “Do not tell my spouse but...”. This suggests that caretakers are motivated enough and are willing to use their own resources and spend their own money to care for cats that are not “theirs”. These examples of commitment illustrate how self-efficacy contributes to motivation. This reinforces the social movement literature which suggests that self-efficacy is an important motivational element which influences an individual’s goals, efforts, emotional reactions, and persistence all of which can be changed as a result of experiences, feedback, and learning.

Social scientific studies of animal rights activists report that such activists are recruited into the movement by moral shocks. Jasper (1995) describes a moral shock as an event or situation which arouses a sense of outrage moving individuals to action even in the absence of networks. Sixty percent of the participants in my study had no prior knowledge of TNR nor had any contact with someone who did, indicating that they became involved in the absence of a network. Moreover, these individuals were not exposed to a moral shock facilitated by any person, group, or organization. I believe it is fair to say that they were moved by a personal moral shock and a sense of outrage at the miserable conditions they found the cats living in.

Despite the lack of formal contacts, this group of feral cat caretakers indicated they felt they were making a difference in the cause of feral cats through modelling, education, and advocacy. Advocacy took the form of reporting abuse, speaking at city council meetings, contacting lawmakers when legislation pertaining to feral cats was pending, writing for newsletters, and convincing housing authorities to



implement a TNR program. Another respondent started an organization dedicated to providing trapping services and education. Others said that they hoped they would serve as a role model and did not hesitate to use their actions to educate other individuals about the importance of spaying and neutering their pets and what they can do to help feral cats. Again, these actions illustrate the high degree of motivation and sense of self-efficacy these individuals possess.

The most significant findings of this study are the way the participants came to be involved in caring for feral cats and the high degree of motivation, self-efficacy, and commitment these participants possess. They were not recruited in their usual way as described in social science literature—networking, moral shocks, and being asked. Rather, they became involved on their own by seeing a need and responding to it. Once involved, the participants sought information from animal welfare organizations which many had belonged to or later joined and contributed to. This has important implications for organizations seeking to further the cause and make the public aware of the plight of feral cats. They need to devote more effort in making the general public aware of the consequences of not spaying/neutering cats and educating the public about what happens to cats when they are dumped and left to fend for themselves. They also need to let people know what actions can be taken to manage a colony of feral cats should an individual find one. Organizations need to give their feral cat programs a higher profile on their websites and in their literature so that their supporters and contributors are aware that these programs exist prior to needing them.

This group of feral cat caretakers is endowed with a high degree of motivation, commitment, and self-efficacy, describing their involvement with feral cats as their passion, their calling, and their obsession. This too, has implications for organizations

dedicated to furthering the cause of feral cats. In informal conversation with the participants a common sentiment was that there was no support or it was difficult to network with other caretakers. Time constraints were one reason cited but lack of a forum was another. Some small local groups attempt to facilitate communication between caretakers but they are not as well known as some of the larger organizations and therefore not utilized. If some of the larger, national groups had a platform for networking, perhaps it would help individuals connect more efficiently. In addition to providing a space for supporting each other and sharing common concerns such a platform could be used to more efficiently organize public actions to raise the awareness of the feral cat population.

It is interesting to note that although all of the participants reported having contributed to or belonging to an animal welfare organization, none of them described themselves as being an animal rights activist prior to becoming involved in the care of feral cats. Once they became involved in caring for feral cats, none of the participants reported being compelled to become more active participants in animal rights issues on a broader level. Also, none of the participants reported being feral cat advocates prior to discovering cats in need of care. In other words, none of the participants went looking for colonies to tend to. These observations suggest that feral cat caretakers are not typical activists as described by social scientists. They seem to be motivated primarily by personal moral, religious, and spiritual imperatives to care for and alleviate the suffering of feral cats and they carry on their work under the radar of social scientists and many formal organizations. However, because all of the participants had some type of association with organized groups, the caretakers comprise a sympathetic audience to which animal rights and, especially feral cat

organizations could tap into to recruit members if there were some way these organizations could identify and target feral cat caretakers.

Although the small size of this study limits the generalizability of the results, this study is important because very little attention has been given to this group of individuals. This has created a void in the social science literature which needs to be addressed as the information would be of value to organizations seeking to further the cause of feral cats by recruiting members. This information is important to social scientists in that it suggests that not all individuals become involved in causes in ways cited in previous literature. The results of this study can serve as a reference point for further study.

## Chapter Nine: Conclusion

Feral cat caretakers have escaped the notice of social scientists largely because, as a group, they are not well organized. Social researchers have focused their research on established social movement organizations, collective action, and the characteristics of individuals drawn into collective action. This study attempts to fill the void in the existing literature and clarify who becomes involved in and what the characteristics are of individuals who become involved in the care of feral cats.

While feral cat caretakers are typical in some ways to those who become involved in social movements in general and animal rights movements in that they are predominantly Caucasian, female, educated, and middle aged there are differences, mainly in how they became involved. These participants were not recruited by others, rather they were distressed by what they observed, saw a need and acted on their own. They became involved with other caretakers after they started caring for the cats, not before. The caretakers in this study are highly motivated, possess a high degree of self-efficacy, and are committed to the cats they care for and the furthering the cause of feral cats. This has ramifications for organizations seeking to attract members to their organizations in that they must use different methods to reach potential caretakers by increasing public awareness of the situation of feral cats and making their feral cat programs more noticeable to their members. Animal rights organizations could utilize this information to recruit new members from the ranks of practicing feral cat caretakers because these caretakers demonstrate an ideological commitment to the cause of animal rights. Policy makers can use this information to

organize and utilize individuals who do and would be willing to work with municipalities seeking to implement TNR programs which are more cost effective than euthanasia programs. This study contributes to what social scientists know about whom and how individuals become involved in causes.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A

### Interview Schedule

1. What type of care do you currently provide to feral cats? Feeding? TNR?
2. How did you originally get involved in the care of feral cats? Did you receive some information that made you aware of the need? If so, where did the information come from? Was there an experience, incident, or person that motivated you to become involved?
3. What motivates you to care for cats that are not your pets?
4. Where are the cats? On your property? Workplace?
5. Thinking back over the time that you have provided care to feral cats, would you say your care has evolved or changed? For instance, have you moved from feeding to TNR? Have you taken on the care of additional colonies?
6. If you moved to TNR, what motivated you?
7. Approximately how much money do you spend a week on care?
8. In your current caregiving activities, do you work alone or with other people? If you have worked with other people, was this an organized effort that involved planning or was it a more spontaneous effort?
9. Have you ever belonged to or contributed to any organized animal rights or animal welfare groups? How about any groups whose specific goal is to aid feral cats?
10. If you have belonged to or contributed to any such groups, what influence, if any, does/did the group have on you? On your beliefs or convictions for caring for feral cats? On your understanding of yourself and/or your desire to help cats or other animals?

11. What influence, if any, has the group had on local policies or practices with respect to feral cats? If the group has been an advocate for changing policies or practices, did you contribute to those efforts? How? Did you feel like you made a contribution?
12. If you see feral cats/TNR as a part of a larger social problem of animal welfare, have you gotten involved in advocating for changes in social policies?
13. Do you feel you have or are making a difference in the lives of the feral cats you care for? In making others aware of the plight of feral cats? In furthering the cause of animal welfare?
14. Based on your experiences caring for feral cats, what kinds of issues do you wish animal welfare organizations would become more involved in? What do you think it would take to get these organizations more involved?
15. Do you consider the cats you care for to be “yours” or “like pets”?
16. Do you consider the cats’ quality of life to be excellent? Good? Fair? Poor?

The following are questions about your personal background:

17. Are you involved in any other causes and do you mind telling me what they are?  
Do you consider yourself to be a religious or spiritual person? If so, how would you describe your religious or spiritual outlook? Have any of your religious or spiritual beliefs motivate or supported you in your care of feral cats? Have you been involved in any religious or spiritual groups and if so, have any of these groups motivated or supported you efforts with feral cats?
18. Do you consider yourself to be an active and informed citizen of your community? If so, in what ways are you active?
19. What is your highest level of education?
20. What socioeconomic group do you consider yourself to belong to?

21. Are you employed?
22. Do you have any pets, and if so, what kind?
23. What is your age?
24. What is your gender?