



Cat Management – How the Lonely Miaow Association Values Cats, and Ensures they are Responsibly Owned and Humanely Managed in Auckland

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How Lonely Miaow Started

Lonely Miaow started in 1990 when I and my partner Vicky realized that the black cat coming through our garden each day had been abandoned and needed help. We took Tiger on, fixed him up, and he became our loving companion for nine years. Hearing about other stray and abandoned felines numbers grew to thirty-six colonies, and Tiger was joined by more than a dozen others.

Now, a quarter of a century on, the Lonely Miaow Association is an Incorporated Society with dozens of volunteers, and has rescued 11,649 stray and abandoned cats and kittens from 3,337 colonies in the Auckland region at a cost of around \$2 million.

Lonely Miaow Resources and Processes

Over the years Lonely Miaow has built up a number of strategic assets which enable us to humanely manage stray and abandoned cats.

Our volunteers are first and foremost, with excellent and hard-working people managing the functions of Administration, Cat Rescue, Foster Homes, Marketing, IT, Fundraising, and Finance. Each manager has a small team of volunteers, or in the case of Foster Homes a large team!

Lonely Miaow has a comprehensive database, devised in the first instance by Natalija James, and enhanced and expanded by Simon Morris, and Lisa Lu our Marketing Manager. All incoming calls and communications from the public are entered onto the Call Log database and resolved or moved on to the Colony Record database. Members of the public can now also log a new colony directly through our website, which has reduced the number of calls and enabled our Cat Rescue Manager to action rescues more quickly. Each colony is automatically assigned a number, as is each rescued cat. Each cat is assigned to a colony and a colony is closed once all the cats there have been rescued. Each cat is Outcome once it leaves the care of Lonely Miaow. The great majority are vet checked, desexed, vaccinated, defleaed, dewormed, and microchipped before finding their new forever home with a caring and responsible member of the public. A number of key Management Reports are readily obtainable from our database on the cats and colonies. This data was used by Mark Farnworth and Glenn Aguilar of Unitec in their ground-breaking report “Distribution characteristics of unmanaged cat colonies over a 20-year period in Auckland” published in Applied Geography in December 2013.

For the past 2 years Lonely Miaow has leased an office in St. Heliers where the Treasury Team meet each Sunday to pay the bills, account for expenditure, acquit the grants received from various gaming machine trusts, the Lottery Grants Board, Auckland Council, and others, prepare the bi-monthly GST return, and manage the Association’s finances. The Administration team meet there every Wednesday to deal with queries and items received by e-mail and post, and maintain accurate and timely acquittal and filing of all the documentation.

High quality cat rescue cages are made for us by CJL Sons Ltd. in Otahuhu, and these are managed by our Cat Rescue Manager and myself. As well as our own volunteers going out to colony locations to directly rescue the stray and abandoned cats, we often loan cages to members of the public who have unwanted strays on their property. Each cat rescued is taken to a local vet for a temperament and health assessment, with the great majority being collected by a local foster home [1].

Lonely Miaow Focus and Strategy

We focus on stray and abandoned cats in unmanaged colonies in the Auckland region. We are

OPEN ACCESS

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Received Date: 19 Dec 2022

Accepted Date: 18 Jan 2023

Published Date: 23 Jan 2023

Citation:

Dormon P. Cat Management – How the Lonely Miaow Association Values Cats, and Ensures they are Responsibly Owned and Humanely Managed in Auckland. *Clin Case Rep Int.* 2023; 7: 1461.

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not involved with owned or feral cats, nor do we manage stray cat colonies.

Our management strategy is Trap, Assess, Resolve. We do not return a cat to a situation where its health and welfare are not being cared for. We work with members of the public who report stray cat colonies to us to achieve the best outcome for the individual cat, and we welcome collaboration with other rescue groups.

Reasons for our focus I am sure are clear to all. In spite of the significant numbers mentioned at the start of this talk Lonely Miaow has not made a substantial impact on the overall total. A guesstimate figure of 200,000 stray and abandoned cats in Auckland was published in *Animals' Voice* in 2012, which could mean around 1 million unwanted kittens born in Auckland each year.

The main reason we operate a Trap, Assess, resolve management strategy is because stray and abandoned cats are suffering, from starvation, sickness, and lack of shelter from inclement weather. A cat is a domestic animal, New Zealand's most popular companion animal. We believe it does not have a place outside of the human bond as a stray or feral in New Zealand. The suffering they endure is highlighted by a recent study made by Sarah Jolly, Unitec, 2014, "Welfare Comparison between managed and unmanaged colony cats in the Auckland Region." To quote: "It was of great interest that there was a significant difference in body condition score between the managed and unmanaged colony cats. Thin condition was much more prevalent in the unmanaged colony cats than the managed." "There was a substantial difference in the subjective quality of life score given to managed and unmanaged colony cats. No excellent quality of life scores was given to unmanaged colony cats."

What is a Stray Cat?

Lonely Miaow receives an unending stream of calls and reports from members of the public about stray and abandoned cats and kittens. All communications are responded to, to ascertain the number of felines involved, their exact location and type of location, and what steps have been taken to establish that these are stray or abandoned felines. Often these cats have turned up, usually at the place of residence and occasionally at the workplace of the person reporting. Most often too the person reporting has started feeding, then kittens have arrived, and now there are too many and none are wanted. We confirm that enquiries have been made to ascertain whether there is an owner, and no owner has been found. We may check ourselves with Pets on The Net, or distribute flyers around the neighborhood. Often, we are told that an old guy or lady had some entire cats, and now that person has gone the cats have dispersed throughout the neighborhood. On visiting the location to rescue those reported we are often told that "there are more down the back." There are always more!

Trap, Assess, Resolve

Each cat trapped is assessed by the rescuer and by the vet for temperament and health. The great majority are assessed as suitable for fostering and rehoming, with the main reason for a negative outcome being unsuitable temperament. The great majority of sick cats are treated by a vet, fostered, and rehomed. Whilst no cat is returned to a colony situation, Lonely Miaow makes a great effort to work with members of the public to achieve the desired outcome. Occasionally a cat is wanted back, and therefore after confirming that the person is willing and able to feed it cat food every day, the cat

is defleaed, dewormed, vaccinated, desexed and microchipped and returned to the place where it was rescued from, but as an owned, not a colony, cat.

What is a Cat Colony?

According to the Companion Cats Animal Welfare Code, 2007, published by NAWAC, Section 13: "Stray cats may live singly or may join colonies." Lonely Miaow considers a colony to comprise of one or more stray cats. A single stray is often a pregnant female, resulting in a sudden increase in numbers. The largest colonies we have been involved with have comprised 120 stray cats. An average colony is around five, basically a mother and kittens. The majority of colonies, 80%, are located on residential land.

Cat Colonies – How they are Managed and Resolved

At Lonely Miaow we define anything from one cat to a large group of cats at a property as a colony. When people contact us through our website, email or phone to report cats our call loggers log these in our database as colonies.

From these colony logs the Rescue Manager goes through daily and assesses the urgency of each colony based on:

If the cats are in danger?

Are they being fed?

Do they pose a risk to people?

Do we have foster space?

Any cat that is not being fed, is pregnant or is in danger is our top priority.

Usually if a cat is injured and requires urgent attention or is being mistreated, they will be referred to the SPCA. Sometimes we get reports of cats that are putting people at risk. We have recently been involved with a stray pregnant cat coming into a 99-year old's home and posing a tripping hazard. In this case not only is it a priority due to the cat being pregnant but also because the man could come to harm by it being there.

Once it is decided that the cats will be rescued a rescue volunteer is organized to go to the property to trap the cat, or the person reporting can drop it to one of our participating vets. When all the cats are in our care the colony can be closed.

We have still a number of colonies we have been working on for a long period of time that are not as simple to bring in. They have a colony manager who takes care of trapping and assessing these cats to slowly work towards resolving these larger and possibly wilder colonies.

Foster Homes and Fostered Cats – How they are Humanely Managed and Adopted Out to a Responsible Owner

Lonely Miaow currently has over 100 active foster homes throughout Auckland, a number that has almost doubled in the past year. The foster home management team have spent the last two years focused on both refining procedures and the growth of Lonely Miaow, hindered only by a lack of financial resources, a limitation that is shared by so many other rescue organizations. Winter is the quieter season when a lot of our hardworking volunteers take a short

break and we usually house upwards of about 60 cats and kittens. In kitten season the number of cats and kittens in our care can exceed 200.

All of our foster homes are volunteers – supplies and access to veterinary care is provided by Lonely Miaow, but the heart and soul of our efforts lie with them. The gift they give Lonely Miaow is one that many of you will be familiar with - not only do they contribute their valuable time while juggling family and work commitments, they are often found staying up late to feed orphaned or abandoned kittens, administering to cats that are unwell, and exercising patience with those that need a bit of time to come around to the idea of living with people.

It's not uncommon for a cat who lacks confidence around people to remain in our care for six months or more before even being ready to meet potential adopters, and the foster homes who not only have the perseverance to continue rehabilitation efforts, but the strength to invest so heavily in these cats, and then see them leave to go to new homes are a huge, and sadly very limited asset that helps to give these less confident, 'less desirable' strays a chance at a life where they are healthy, safe and cared for.

Lonely Miaow's cats and kittens are all desexed, microchipped, and started on a flea treatment, worming and vaccination protocol before leaving our care. Our adoptions include microchip registration on the New Zealand Companion Animal Register database, which is processed immediately after adoption to ensure that these microchips can be utilized without delay in the event that a cat goes missing. We are proud to be partnered with Pet Plan Pet Insurance, who offer a free four-week cover with almost all of our adoptions.

Our policies in assessing potential adopters include a mandatory meet-and-greet before an adoption can be mutually agreed upon (while we will allow a short 'hold' period, we do not consent to adoptions sight-unseen), owner-occupancy or confirmation that a landlord is agreeable to a new feline family member, and an open discussion on the household's suitability to the cat (or *vice versa*). We are lucky to have developed a relationship with Pet Stock stores in Auckland late last year, who have shown exceptional judgement and heart in caring for our more confident cats and kittens in-store and facilitating many more adoptions than we would have been able to achieve on our own. It is this collaboration that has allowed us to achieve our recent growth sustainably with only a few scary financial moments!

Lonely Miaow is only as great as our volunteers, and we are so proud of each one of them, and the development and improvements that we have been able to make in recent years. It is the combined efforts of all of us, as well as supporting and helping each other, that will ultimately see us achieve our common goal.

Future Management of Stray and Abandoned Cats

As stated earlier Lonely Miaow has not been successful in making a significant impact on the overall number of stray cats and colonies.

This is because we operate a scatter-gun approach, rushing to rescue cats from a colony in one suburb to a colony in other miles away. Over the years we have rescued cats from colonies in ninety-nine Auckland suburbs. We simply can't keep up. In discussing this issue with William Goma, Alley Cat Allies USA, over dinner at a recent NZCAC conference, he put forward a different approach. Start with one colony at one house, expand to neighboring properties, cover the whole block, then adjacent blocks, the whole neighborhood, adjacent neighborhoods, and finally the whole city, region, and country. But that would mean condemning cats in say Henderson to carry on suffering whilst we focused on say Otahuhu. We care for them all equally, so we keep rushing about rescuing a few from everywhere, and meantime the problem continues.

Sarah Jolly's study, referred to earlier, points the way for the future. "Global cat overpopulation is no doubt a human responsibility." "Compulsory, subsidized desexing, microchipping and vaccination laws for owned cats as well as colony cats could be implemented. Registration of cats would help enforce these laws." "More resources are needed for the removal of unmanaged colony cats from urban areas and for funding of larger animal shelters to make the potential of rehoming greater. Colony carers, wildlife managers, animal control, shelters, and veterinarians and most importantly the public must all work together to find the most humane solutions to this huge problem. Adoption for socialized cats remains the ideal solution but isn't possible for all stray cats. The responsibility of managing cat populations lies ultimately with both local and central government who can create and enforce laws and provide funding and resources. Non-governmental organizations also play a large role and should work together with the government for the best possible solutions."

We are delighted that the Wellington City Council has introduced compulsory microchipping and registration for cats which will come into force in February 2018, and we hope that this initiative will be taken up by all New Zealand's Territorial Authorities.

It is pleasing that the NZCAC has created the National Cat Management Strategic Group comprising NZVA, Companion Animal Society, RNZSPCA, local government, the Morgan Foundation, and NZCAC representatives, to proactively address the impact of cats in New Zealand, and by doing so taking up a number of Sarah's recommendations. The Strategic Goals are commendable, and achievable if we all work together. Management, a comprehensive database, staff and volunteers, legislation and bylaws, Cat Rescue Centers, and above all finance, are all requirements for success. Lonely Miaow fully supports the Intent, Strategic Goals, and Strategic Outcomes and we will play our full part in achieving these.

References

1. Spectrum for 6 June 1999 - The Lonely Miaow. 2011.