

Playing God

By Michael Mountain, Best Friends Magazine January 2001



If you've ever helped take care of a group of feral cats in your neighborhood, you know that it can be one of life's truly rewarding experiences.

Feral cats (or alley cats) are not the same as strays. Strays, who once had a home, can usually be rescued and put in a good new home. Ferals, on the other hand, are born on the streets and never connect with people at an early age. They tend to be wary of people and usually cannot adjust to being brought into a home.

People often talk about the unconditional love that our pets have for us. But I'm always especially struck by the unconditional love that's shown to feral cats by the people who care for them.

That's because, unlike your pets at home, a feral cat is never going to show its appreciation by jumping into your lap or purring in your ear. The reward of caring for ferals is simply knowing that you've done good for them. The cats themselves will almost always keep their distance - a bit like the birds and squirrels who come to your bird feeder, the ducks who visit your pond, and other urban wildlife who like to come by but are not pets.

But if feral cats are not pets, they are not quite wildlife, either. They exist somewhere between the two. They may have grown up in the urban "wild," but nature has not equipped them for life on the streets of a modern city. So they are very dependent on the kindness of people.

Several humane groups, - among them Best Friends and Alley Cat Allies - can show you what you need to know to take care of ferals properly. (It's important, for example, to get them to the vet to be spayed or neutered and for a health check.)

With good care, most ferals can live a decent life. Even without care, they can eke out an existence on their own. Indeed, some of them learn to do very well for themselves.

Of course, there's always a danger that they will get sick or be injured and come to a sticky end. For that reason, certain animal rights organizations hold the view that the "kindest" thing to do for feral cats is to gather them up and kill them - thus sparing them the possibility of present or future suffering.

This approach may be well-intentioned, but it is, in our view, completely misguided.

Life on earth has never been a bed of roses. It may never be. But no living creature wants to give up. We all have a basic instinct to survive and to live the best life we possibly can - feral cats included.

Once any of us starts undermining an animal's own will to live, we have begun to play God, preemptively deciding who shall live and who shall die.

It's understandable that well-meaning people under stress can get into the headspace of "Since we can't look after them better, perhaps we should kill them." But the whole premise is upside down. Rather, the question should be, "Since killing them is obviously wrong, what can we do and how can we work together to help them have a better life?"

By agreeing that killing is no longer an acceptable way of helping cats, we automatically commit ourselves to finding new and better options.

And, as anyone who has cared for feral cats knows, that's part of what unconditional love is all about.