

August 10, 2005

Dear Colleagues,

On July 7, 2005, I wrote Wayne Pacelle about the Humane Society of the United States' anti-feral cat and anti-No Kill positions. I did not receive the courtesy of a response. This is not surprising. In December 2004, I wrote Martha Armstrong, Vice-President of Companion Animals at HSUS and asked the same questions, questions like:

- Does HSUS support TNR for feral cats as a humane alternative to shelter killing?
- Does HSUS believe that healthy, feral cats should have a right to live and a right to their habitat?

She too failed to respond. In fact, despite an alleged commitment to the open sharing of information, she participated in a telephone conference call where all but two of the Asilomar Accords participants stated that they would refuse to provide the information requested.

Thankfully, several of you have written HSUS and have received responses. Unfortunately, they are not what I had hoped for as they all share a common theme: obfuscation. In one response, HSUS assures the writer that they are "concerned" about feral cats, but when asked directly, does HSUS believe that feral cats have a right to live and does HSUS demand that all shelters implement TNR as an alternative to catch and kill, they refused to respond directly, other than to say that their position is "evolving."

This is the same tactic HSUS used when they were opposing Alley Cat Allies at Riverside Park, Virginia in the 1990s, and sided with the park service program to eradicate feral cats. In reply to public letters of disapproval, HSUS dodged the issues saying they were making sure the cats were being treated "humanely." Of course, what they didn't say is that "humane" treatment under HSUS standards for feral cats was execution by lethal injection. Indeed, lactating mothers were trapped at Riverside Park and subsequently killed (and abandoned neonatal kittens were found by feral cat caretakers). Is this humane? There is a trend here: using words like "concerned" and "humanely" avoids having to deal with the truth.

So has HSUS rejected trap and kill as a legitimate response to feral cats? Have they embraced the No Kill paradigm? In fact, they have not. Today, I was forwarded yet another response from HSUS that also obscures more than it illuminates. In a letter dated August 10, 2005 to a concerned animal lover, which was forwarded to me, Wayne Pacelle writes that HSUS is "proud of its role in the development of the Asilomar Accords." We know that the Accords seek to end the term "No Kill," but what do the Accords say about feral cats?

Not only does HSUS' Asilomar Accords fail to mention TNR nor require groups to accept TNR, they classify feral cats as "untreatable" or "unhealthy." According to HSUS, feral cats would fall into the category of those animals who "suffer from a behavioral or temperamental characteristic that poses a health or safety risk or otherwise makes them unsuitable for placement as a pet." (Asilomar Accords, Animal Statistics Table, Glossary of Terms, P.) Under

the Accords, feral cats share the same category for hopelessly ill or irremediably suffering pets. And the same fate—death.

While it is true that feral cats are not generally suitable for placement as pets, this should not mean that they do not have an equal right to life, or that the humane movement isn't obligated to put in place non-lethal alternatives. Our commitment to both of these principles requires us to identify feral cats as their own category—as feral cats. And then make an equal commitment to TNR and pro-feral advocacy to bring an end to their killing.

Mr. Pacelle says that the Asilomar Accords are “an effort to move the animal care and control community beyond impasses resulting from prior disputes over issues like feral cat policy.” But it was HSUS and its ilk that caused the impasse by condemning TNR as “inhumane” and “subsidized abandonment” and seeking prosecution of feral cat caretakers. Now, Mr. Pacelle wants to move past this impasse *that HSUS itself created* by claiming that feral cats are “untreatable” and “unhealthy” and “suffer from a behavioral or temperamental characteristic that poses a health or safety risk or otherwise makes them unsuitable for placement as a pet.” In short, if we are to accept the Accords, we must accept that shelters can legitimately kill healthy feral cats. In fact, a resolution in favor of TNR was proposed for the Accords and voted down. This is not evolution. It is digging in one's heels.

Mr. Pacelle then goes on to say that they are “updating our feral cat position statements” to “ensure that our policies reflect emerging consensus within the field of animal care and control.” The role of a humane organization is not to follow consensus, but to lead. The largest and richest animal agency in the world is following animal control, who has a history of mass slaughter of feral cats. Is HSUS trying to gain consensus from hunters to come up with a position on hunting? Is HSUS trying to gain consensus from factory farms to come up with a position on humane farming? HSUS is supposed to lead, not follow. But the best HSUS can come up with is consensus from people who oppose TNR, kill feral cats, and—despite its impressive achievements at saving lives—condemn No Kill. By his own admission, we have to stop looking to HSUS, and start looking elsewhere: to No Kill, to TNR, to philosophies that embrace life, not end it. Leadership by definition leads. It never waits for consensus.

In fact, no where does Mr. Pacelle address the fact that his field offices continue to call No Kill “bologna,” feral cat caretakers “hoarders” and advocate for the killing of feral cats in Wisconsin by lethal injection.

But this is not surprising. Despite HSUS “evolving” position on feral cats, on their website *today* is a Statement on Free Roaming Cats that blames cats for everything from plague to vehicle accidents. They state that cats “prey on small mammals, songbirds, and other wildlife; spread zoonotic diseases such as rabies; defecate on other people's property; and cause car accidents, among other problems.”

By failing to own up to its sordid history against feral cats and its campaign of vilification against No Kill, and by vilifying cats to the public for everything from rabies to car accidents, Mr. Pacelle is attempting to rewrite history and the facts. He further notes that “For more than a century,” HSUS has strived for “honest talk about the realities of the field.” Why then did it inflate the San Francisco death rate for dogs and cats by several thousand to downplay the No Kill success in San Francisco? And why then did it refuse to print a correction or retraction? I can't imagine that anyone would find this “honest talk about the realities of the field.”

Finally, Mr. Pacelle says that his “approach will continue to evolve in the years ahead as we work, in a cooperative manner, to address the urgent plight and tragic plight of unwanted animals in this county. I believe that this approach has served the HSUS and its hundreds of community-based partners very well.”

To which I can only say, that I too believe in cooperation. And I say this to every shelter, feral cat advocate, rescue group and pet lover: join us in the fight against needless shelter killing. But, hear this loud and clear Mr. Pacelle, if you are with an organization or a shelter that continues to kill feral cats and other animals because you refuse to enact a TNR program, will not transfer animals to rescue groups, does not believe in foster care, does not take animals offsite for adoption, excludes volunteers from the facility and/or embraces the Asilomar Accords and other failed models of the past, there can be no cooperation. Our responsibility must always be, first and foremost, to the animals. And when a shelter refuses to work cooperatively to save lives, it is killing animals who do not have to, and should not, die.

While coddling shelters mired in catch and kill philosophies from Fremont, California to Washington D.C. and points east may serve “the HSUS and its hundreds of community-based partners very well,” it has not served the animals. They continue to end up in dumpsters, day after day, after injection with poison from a bottle marked “fatal plus.” HSUS is supposed to serve the animals, not “community-based partners” who oppose No Kill and TNR.

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of his response was something he didn’t say. In a letter filled with platitudes, his response underscores a point: Wayne Pacelle is content to regurgitate tired clichés. His response is not thoughtful, he didn’t investigate the facts, he is content to have HSUS provide political cover for catch and kill shelters by following animal control “consensus,” a consensus that is woefully out of step with public sentiment. The ones that lose (literally their lives) are the animals.

I have no choice but to conclude that when it comes to sheltered animals, Wayne Pacelle might say he cares, but he does not care enough. And that, to quote Robert Frost, “makes all the difference.”

Very truly yours,

Nathan J. Winograd

cc: Position Paper on Asilomar Accords