

# Case Study of a Feral Cat Sanctuary

## Why Sanctuaries Are Not The Answer For Feral Cats

by Kathleen Harer of Space Coast Feline Network

We began the Space Coast Feline Network Sanctuary with the best intentions: to protect and care for feral cats. We have accomplished this for a small number of animals, but with the resources we have expended, we could have helped a dramatically larger number of cats through well-planned Trap-Neuter-Return programs and accessible, affordable spay/neuter services for feral and house cats, particularly in low income areas.

Our vision for the sanctuary was a building composed of four living modules, each housing up to 25 cats, sited on enough land to provide a buffer from contact with the public. The cost to acquire and improve land and construct the facility was \$100,000. It is estimated that Brevard County is home to 100,000 feral cats. At this rate, housing only half of them in sanctuaries could cost \$50 million.

Constructing sanctuaries for widespread feral cat management would require an enormous amount of land. Even if we could house 100 cats per acre, it would take 1,000 acres to house these animals. Meanwhile, feral cats not brought into sanctuaries would continue to breed, creating an endless demand for these expensive, limited operations.

Consider instead the cost of spaying and

neutering feral cats. If we estimate the cost of surgery to be \$40 per animal (a low rate we have obtained through support from local veterinarians), the \$100,000 we spent to build our sanctuary would have paid for the surgeries of 2,500 feral cats—and prevented the birth of hundreds of thousands more.

### Location, Land, and Construction

Finding an appropriate, affordable site for the sanctuary was our first challenge. Land near the Kennedy Space Center was convenient for volunteers, but the cost was prohibitive and came with irresolvable zoning issues. We finally located a land parcel on the northern edge of Brevard County just outside Mims. Because the area was so isolated, we were able to buy a plot for \$60,000.

Remoteness came with a host of problems, however. Rezoning took nearly a year. To get a permit to build an access road and install electricity, the state and county required that we build a culvert for storm water at the property edge. With dwindling financial resources, we used unskilled volunteers and only two paid workers to build the sanctuary structure. Some building supplies were donated, but we had to purchase the bulk of them. Completing the structure took over 400 volunteer hours over a period of several months, mostly on weekends.

### Costs

When we opened our sanctuary doors in June 2003, we had already spent \$80,000 on land and construction. But water on the property is saline and cannot be used for drinking or even cleaning, so for years we hauled 10 gallons of water to the sanctuary each day. The \$20,000 we've now spent to build a water filtration system brings our startup cost to \$100,000.

That figure doesn't include the routine, ongoing costs of veterinary care, food, litter, and cleaning supplies to keep the cats and their home safe and comfortable. In a year, we spend an average of \$180 to feed and maintain each sanctuary cat.

We were fortunate that some of our members had adequate management experience to ensure that the project ran smoothly. If they hadn't, we would have had to pay consultants or spend even more volunteer hours to research management issues.

Our volunteers have been very generous with donations, but all of our funding comes from fundraising now, not out of our pockets. We solicit donations in our newsletter; hold fundraising dinners, silent auctions, fashion shows, and luncheons; and send out mailers.

## Staffing the Sanctuary

Perhaps the greatest difficulty we face is recruiting and keeping volunteer caregivers, a problem exacerbated by the remote location and demanding upkeep of such a facility.

We have some 25 volunteers, most of whom volunteer one weekend day per month; for weekday visits we rely on a small, dedicated group of caregivers. Most of our volunteers are older and eventually will no longer be able to help. When we lose a volunteer, we must not only replace that person, but also cover shifts until we do. At times, when no one was available on a particular day, we've had to just put out extra food and water. We lose several volunteers each year.

Taking care of the cats is no small job. Every shift, caregivers scoop litter boxes, clean and disinfect "accidents," set out fresh food and water, and, if there is time, sweep and wash the floors. Each week one volunteer buys and transports cat food, litter, and cleaning materials; another launders the cats' bedding at her home, which is an enormous task. Less frequent but routine tasks include cleaning the fans, spraying for fleas and ants, and checking all the cats for medical problems. Ten or twelve volunteers perform a thorough cleaning quarterly.

## Veterinary Care

Without a generous and supportive veterinarian, caring for our cats would be more difficult or even impossible. Our veterinarian has helped us with monthly Trap-Neuter-Return clinics and provided the sanctuary cats a lot of care for free. Not all veterinarians are willing or able to

work with feral cats, and certainly not all are willing to donate time and supplies.

But our location and small number of volunteers limit the level of ongoing veterinary care we can provide. In the short-term, we try to send a sick cat home with a volunteer if medication can be administered in food. We cannot, however, offer long-term medical assistance to cats who cannot be touched.

## Sanctuary Capacity

The sanctuary concept limits us to caring for a small number of animals over a long period of time. In our experience cats don't get along in groups larger than 20 to 25. Our sanctuary is designed to house up to 100 cats, 25 in each module, reserving one module for FELV-positive animals. Within a month of opening, we reached capacity.

Realistically, we cannot take in more animals until current cats die from sickness or old age. We lose about five cats each year. At this rate, it will be 20 years before we replace the original population. Meanwhile, the county's feral cat population continues to grow.

## Conclusion

Ten years ago our cats were living in a colony on the Kennedy Space Center property, and—as is often the case with feral cat colonies—volunteers could easily feed and monitor the cats on their way to or from work. Any incoming cats could be trapped, spayed or neutered, and vaccinated, then returned to the colony. Opponents of Trap-Neuter-Return often suggest that sanctuaries are a plausible way to manage feral cat populations.

They seem to think that all you have to do is build a fence. In reality, constructing and running a sanctuary is costly and self-limiting. Sanctuaries require endless volunteer hours, physical resources, and funding to help a finite number of cats. The potential to help cats through Trap-Neuter-Return, on the other hand, is limitless.

*The Space Coast Feline Network (SCFN), an all-volunteer 501(c)(3) organization, was established at the Kennedy Space Center in 1995 by concerned Space Center employees caring for some 100 feral cats on the property. When management insisted they remove the cats, SCFN built a sanctuary in Mims, Florida, to house these and other Brevard County feral cats. SCFN oversees other preventive programs in addition to the sanctuary.*

*Kathleen Harer, president and longtime member of the Space Coast Feline Network, oversaw creation of the Mims sanctuary. This case study is Ms. Harer's account of the effort and resources required in the seven years from the time SCFN envisioned the project to when the sanctuary doors opened in 2003, and what it takes to operate this shelter housing 80 cats.*

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