It's everyone's problem

As members of the Cat Action Team, the Hilliers have spent considerable time and money helping stray and feral cats

BY MIKE ENGLAND

SPECIAL TO THE GUARDIAN

Ten years ago, a handful of P.E.I. cat lovers formed an organization to control the numbers of feral cats on the Island and the spread of feline diseases.

A few months later, Bev and Fred Hillier joined the Cat Action Team (often referred to as C.A.T.). As they reflect on the past decade, the Hilliers feel that the team has made significant progress.

"There were a lot of diseased cats when we started, but that's drastically dropped," says Fred. "The spay/neuter/release program has made a big difference, where disease and in-breeding are concerned.

Under the program, five veterinary clinics set aside days when cat caregivers bring in cats from feral colonies around the Island to be spay/neutered. In the winter months, students at the Atlantic Veterinary College perform the same operation as part of their training.

The program was the first of its kind to be set up in the Maritimes. As word spread about the activities of C.A.T., neighbouring provinces became involved. Inquiries also came from Saskatchewan.

"In a sense, we have become the template in this field," says Fred.

But the program is not without problems, says his wife Bev.

"Our spay/neuters are not free. We have a special arrangement with participating clinics, which offer reduced rates, but we still pay."

In order to meet the costs of spay/neutering and testing for the main feline diseases, C.A.T. members spend huge amounts of time fundraising. The number of spay/days is actually determined by the amount of money available in the C.A.T. bank account.

Since there is never enough for all feral cats to be spay/neutered, a prioritizing system is used. Females in a colony are always treated first. In barns, where colonies can number over 40 cats, a minimum target level of 70 per cent is established to maintain stability until the remainder can be treated.

How many feral cat colonies there are on P.E.I.?

"Many people ask that question. But the answer is not straightforward," says Bev.

"How many cats make a colony? It might be just a couple in some instances."

Whatever the statistic, the basic problem results from people dumping cats in rural areas, often close to barns on working farms. The first three months of the year are the peak time for abandonment, says Fred, who helps to look after one colony with a couple of other people.

"It's heart-breaking. Each winter after Christmas, at least a dozen cats are dumped at this colony in the middle of the night. And I find them the next day (when I go to feed them) freezing, shivering, scared to go in the shelters to get food because there's a pecking order in the colony. And because they're probably house pets, they don't have that thick heavy underfur that the outdoor cats have."

Fred says he feels angry when he thinks about the people who are responsible for this situation.

"The person who dumped this cat is not saying: 'Would you look after it? I can't keep it any more.' 'My kids don't want to clean the litter box.' 'They're allergic to the cat' every excuse in the book (for) why somebody doesn't want the cat. And they don't even put $5 in a donation box to feed it.

"Domestic cats are part of a family. Dumping cats is as much a crime as dumping kids. What kind of person would do that, especially at that time of year?"

Bev believes that education is the key to tackling this problem. Students at a Morell school have chosen to raise money for C.A.T., and have invited C.A.T. members to talk to them about the issues involving feral cats.

"That's the right place to start changing the thinking for a whole generation. And, hopefully, they grow up with a different attitude," she says.

Kensington veterinarian and C.A.T. board member Nicole Gallant feels the same way. At the clinic where she practises, there has been an annual open house for the past 23 years, which is attended by students in the primary grades at the local elementary school.

"That experience certainly sensitizes them to the problem. And they'll be the pet owners of the future," she says.

P.E.I. Humane Society executive director Kelly Mullally believes that animal welfare on P.E.I has benefited from the involvement of agencies such as C.A.T., SpayAid and the society itself.

"The public is becoming better educated because of the work of these three organizations. And that has led to more responsible (pet) ownership. We would like to do more in terms of education and would welcome additional funding to make that possible."

None of the organizations she refers to receives any official financial support, other than what they receive from donors or fundraising.

Mullally feels government involvement is long overdue.

"I wish different levels of government would get involved and establish standardized approaches. There are serious issues here public health issues, educational issues, community and cultural issues. It touches so many levels of things we have departments of government in place for."

C.A.T. webmaster Ann MacPhee says everybody needs to play a part in dealing with the issues of feral cats.

"We, as a society, have created the problem. And it's up to us, as humans, to fix it. My plea is a simple one: spay and neuter. Don't abandon. The reality is too harsh."

Bev and Fred Hillier share a poignant, family moment with their adopted cat, Jasper. PHOTO SPECIAL TO THE GUARDIAN BY MIKE ENGLAND

AT A GLANCE

Fast facts

▷ Since its formation in the fall of 2000, C.A.T. has enabled over 6,000 cats to be spay/neutered.

▷ SpayAid is a fundraising organization which enables pet owners most in need, to have their animals spay/neutered at one-third of the normal cost. The remaining amount is shared equally between vet clinics and SpayAid. Since 2007, the society has spayed/neutered nearly 600 animals

▷ Programs similar to C.A.T. exist in many other parts of the world. In some countries, like the U.S. and the U.K., different levels of government help fund the programs.