Catastrophe to Catmmunity!

(A Lesson on Community Cats)

This lesson focuses on the lives, environments, and challenges of community cats. Students will gain an understanding and appreciation for their community's cat and will recognize that it is each community member's responsibility to help manage the community cat's population through Trap-Neuter-Return programs. Additionally, students will understand that community cats belong to the community, not inside our homes, but will learn the many ways in which they can help make their lives better.

Age Level: who's it appropriate for? All Ages

Prerequisite: None

Time: 30-45 minutes

Number of Participants: Full Group

Number of Educators/Assistants: 1/2

Materials:

- Photos:
  - (1) Picture of "trapped" community cat
  - (1) Picture of community cat with "eartip"
  - (2) Pictures of housing structures
  - (1) Picture of "vacuum effect"
- iPad for: YouTube video: "Feral Cat Home Makeover" (~3:00 min)
- Materials for building either Styrofoam or Plastic shelters.

Instructional Objectives:

- Students will be able to define key words, like "community cats", "T.N.R.", "feral cats", "eartip" "vacuum effect" and "colony"
- Students will be able to list ways in which they can help community cats, such as T.N.R., building cat shelters and the importance of not disrupting community cats.

Environmental Objectives:

- ♥ Students should use kind words and demonstrate compassion, especially while viewing photos.
- ♥ Students should use collaboration and fairness while building community cat shelters.

Procedure:

Lesson adapted from the San Francisco SPCA.

Introduction (5 minutes):

- ♥ Tell the students that today they will be learning about cats, but not just about any cats but about a very special kind of cat. These cats are called "community cats".

- ♥ **Ask:** *Who can raise their hand and tell me what they think a community cat may be?*

  - o A community cat is any cat without a guardian. This includes cats that have been abandoned or lost, cats that may be taken care of by one of more members of a community and "feral cats". Their home is the outdoors of our very own communities. Thus, they are not homeless or stray. Often, they live in a "colony", which is a group of cats.

  - o **Ask:** *What is a "feral cat"*? A feral cat is a cat that is too poorly socialized to be in our homes and kept as a "pet". The outdoors is their home.

  - o Recently, animal advocates and the public begun calling **"**feral cats", "community cats" instead. **Ask:** *What do you think of when you hear the words "feral cat"?* Take suggestions**.** ***Ask:*** *What do you think of when you hear the words "community cat"?* ***Ask:*** *So, why do you think they did this (changing the way in which we refer to these cats)?*
    - ▪ The word "feral" usually makes us think of negative images and words; like "ferocious", "aggressive", "dirty" and "not our responsibility to deal with". Some people thought of these cats as a nuisance. However, the term "community cats" is more true to what these cats actually are. These cats are not mean or a nuisance or dirty, but are simply the community's cats that live outside. The community (each and every person!) is responsible for their wellbeing and for making their lives better.

♥ Body: (15 minutes)

- ♥ **Ask:** *How do you think a community would do these things? How do people take care of them, especially if they don't want to live with humans and are scared of us?*

  - o They Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) them! (Write on board). With TNR, humane traps are set out and the cats are taken to be spayed/neutered, vaccinated and returned to the place they were trapped. TNR prevents the breeding that increases feral cat populations. **Show picture of TNR cat.**

    - ▪ **Ask:** *Why would it not be the best idea to let "feral" or "community cats" have babies?*

    - ▪ While these cats do have a home - the outdoor, ***Ask:*** *Is that the best place for cats to live? Why?* No. There are cars, and other animals, and they may not always have shelter from the rain or heat, food/water, veterinary care

and they don't have someone to give them love and always protect them. The lifespan of a community cat is only about 4-6 years. The best place for dogs and cats is to always be living inside with us. Because the outdoors isn't the best place for cats, we want to permanently reduce the number of these cats. **Ask:** *Over time, what would happen if we spayed and neutered every cat in a community?* That population would cease to exist. **Show picture of cat with an "eartip".**

- TNR programs also help protect the animals that cats may prey upon, like birds**.**

♥ **Ask:** *Why do you think we return the cats rather than removing them altogether?* Stray and feral cats populate an area because there's food and shelter that supports them. If you trap-and-remove or euthanize, other cats on the fringes of the area will move in. This is called the vacuum effect. The new cats will then produce more kittens, which lead to *even more* cats we must Trap-Neuter-Return. The cycle is endless. **Show "vacuum effect" picture and explain.**

- Also, the community (the cats' caretaker) may provide the cats with food, water and shelter *as necessary.* **Ask:** *We don't always recommend feeding the cats, why do you think this is?*

  - Most community cats can survive without humans feeding them because they do what they were originally bred to do-Hunting! If we start feeding the cats, they may forget how to find food on their own**. Ask:** *And, what would happen if their caregiver/community member moves or is no longer able to feed them?* They could starve.

  - Also, the community members will need to be sure to always pick up the food once the cats are finished eating. **Ask:** *Why is this important? What could happen if food is just left on the streets?* If there is excess food, more cats from another area could move in or other animals, like raccoons, skunks, coyotes and insects could eat the food. This could then make those "wild" animals dependent on humans and could put stress on the eco-system because with extra food, a population can increase.

- **Ask:** *If these cats wouldn't be happy inside of our homes, then what kind of shelter could the community provide for them? All Kinds! Wooden structures, plastic structures and even foam ones!* ***Show picture of plastic shelter and then Styrofoam one.***

♥ **Ask:** *What do you think we do with the kittens who are community cats?* Kittens who are still young enough to be socialized are typically adopted into homes as companion animals rather than returned to the outdoors.

- **VIDEO Time!** Show YouTube video: "Feral Cat Home Makeover" (~3:00 min)

- **Ask:** *Why do we have community cats in the first place? What do you think caused them?*

    - Humans! For thousands of years humans have been breeding cats to be our companions. Through this process, humans have "domesticated" cats. **Ask:** *How does a wild animal's behavior change when humans domesticate them?* They become "socialized" to people, enjoy being inside of our homes with us and they learn lots of things, like going to the bathroom in a litter box. They also learn that humans are their caretakers and thus, domesticated animals cannot fend for themselves.

    - However, if a cat gets lost or someone just abandons their cat outdoors and this cat isn't spayed or neutered, over time the cat and her babies and her babies babies will become "feral". This is because the animals will no longer be used to humans. In some ways, they have reverted to an "undomesticated" or "wild" animal. There are both environmental and genetic factors to a "feral cat"

- **Ask:** *Would a community cat enjoy human affection? Why?* Although they may look like our pet/domesticated cats at home, they are not. It would be like me trying to interact with or pet a raccoon. **Ask:** *Why might it not be the best idea for me to feed or try to make a raccoon my pet?* If I tried to make them my pet they would not be very happy or healthy, I would be disrupting the ecosystem that animal came from and that animal could see me as a threat and become scared and *what might an animal that is very scared do to me?* (Bite, run, hide, scratch)

- Activity (15 minutes. Depending on how much time you have)

    - Build shelters for community cats. Follow directions, depending on if you are making the plastic shelter or the Styrofoam one.

Debrief: (5 minutes)

- **Ask:** *What should you do if you see a cat outside that does not have an "eartip"?* Call the ARL or if outside Des Moines, call your local animal shelter so we can reduce the population.
- **Ask:** *What could you say to a friend who says: "There are so many stray cats in my neighborhood, they are such a nuisance, and it's not my job to take care of them!"*