

Can they get along?

The humans and cats of Chong Pang haven't always been on the best terms. Now, they will be test subjects in a humane experiment that hopes to resolve the question ...

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by **Teo Xuanwei**

The first time she saw cat poo at her doorstep one morning five months ago, Mdm Tan C M thought she was just plain unlucky. But, two weeks later, it happened again.

And despite her deploying obscure "remedies" such as mothballs and vinegar outside her house as repellents, the feline rebel struck again two more times in the following three months. The culprit was never caught in the act but the 52-year-old housewife believes one cat among the handful of strays in the neighbourhood was responsible for causing the mess outside her Yishun Avenue 5 flat.

There's also the overpowering stench that wafts into her house, soiled shoes and the flies the poo attracts that she had to put up with, she said in exasperation. And as the Chong Pang estate she lives in becomes the first to commit to a no-culling approach to spayed strays, Mdm Tan is clutched up about when, rather than if, the problem will resurface again.

"You sterilise the cats; they still need to do their business, right?" she said. "If you remove them, you don't have to worry about it anymore."

Cat Welfare Society (CWS) vice-president Veron Lau and other cat lovers Today spoke to, however, believe that it is unlikely a homeless cat was responsible for Mdm Tan's predicament. More possibly, it was the work of a pet cat that was allowed to roam.

Said cat caregiver Joey Goh, 39: "A stray would not know how to go up a high-rise building by itself." Culling cats, therefore, cures the symptoms but not the problem, she adds.

The differing mindsets depicts the perennial divide between the pro- and anti-sterilisation camps in the cat management conundrum that has been reopened in Chong Pang.

Last Saturday, Member of Parliament (MP) for Nee Soon Group Representation Constituency K Shanmugam, who is also Law and Foreign Affairs Minister, announced that his ward will embark on a more humane programme to manage the population of stray cats in the area. This means the grassroots organisations and government bodies will work with animal welfare groups and activists to sterilise cats and care for them in a responsible manner, such as cleaning up food scraps.

At stake, possibly, is which way the Ministry of National Development swings in deciding how to handle cat complaints across the island henceforth.

Minister Khaw Boon Wan, who first revisited this issue in a June 2 blog post, said killing cats is "not the best way to go" and that he has put weight on the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) to "seriously consider reviewing" its culling policy.

He added in the same post: "Where there are enough cat-lovers out there willing to own this problem, we can avoid culling in those estates."

A SECOND CHANCE

For animal lovers, it is clear this is their shot at a return to the Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme that was ditched in 2003 at the height of the severe acute respiratory syndrome crisis - after unsubstantiated reports linking house cats and ferrets to the virus.

They believe the trap-neuter-release-manage (TNRM) method will effectively and humanely solve the cat population issue in the long run. A cat feeder in Chong Pang, who declined to be named, put it thus: "It's a chance to prove to detractors that sterilisation works and that there are enough animal lovers in the community who are capable of taking ownership and resolving the various concerns some people may be facing."

Although animal welfare activists have repeatedly argued that culling is but a band-aid fix - they reason that other homeless cats will quickly stream in to stake claim on vacated territories and the same nuisances will resurface - winning over those who have been left hapless by oft-voiced cat-related woes could be a tall order.

This group views cat-culling through clinical lenses, as simply a necessary evil that's their best shot at eradicating their woes for good.

Banker Kevin Lee, 30, who lives in Yishun Avenue 2, is one who has also been scarred by cat issues. Having spent S\$1,800 on paint jobs on his car after it was purportedly scratched by homeless cats four times, he is looking at Chong Pang's new policy with trepidation.

"After you sterilise a cat, it doesn't make it not want to sleep on warm bonnets. If (culling) is something that has to be done to prevent the same problems from happening to me and other car owners, then no choice, you still have to do it," he said.

But Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals executive officer Deirdre Moss asked: "Other than some fur and some paw prints on the car, is there photographic evidence of a cat actively scratching a car? It takes quite a lot to be able to scratch a car's paint off. If it's true, there are solutions to be considered, such as devices that repel cats."

Even if one assumes this improbability, cat caregiver Ms Goh said: "It's about being reasonable. You park under a tree and your car gets stained by bird droppings, do you remove the bird? You suck up a lot of other things, why go out of the way to persecute cats?"

But Mr Lee had this counterpoint: "You cull crows too because they are a nuisance but nobody says anything. Do you think culling crows is humane? It's just a matter of how people view a particular animal."

QUICK FIX THAT'S NOT

The truth is some cat-related nuisances, such as the caterwauling racket in the dead of the night or unpleasant living spaces caused by irresponsible feeders who do not clean up food scraps, may persist.

What's needed is some tolerance and a little bit of time to educate people, said Ms Lau from the CWS. She said: "It's those who indiscriminately feed cats but do not clear up, or ignorant owners who allow their pets to roam or breed and then abandon the kittens that is the hurdle."

She noted that 70 per cent of complaints the CWS handles involve house cats or abandoned pets. "We're not saying everyone should be so tolerant and love cats too, but if people learn to be responsible, many of these problems can be managed."

Ms Moss also said: "Most people in general won't be against sterilisation in principle, it's just that they want a quick-fix solution to the issues they face. For them, here today-gone tomorrow is the best way, but it's not."

In fact, it could lead to other problems. For instance, the rat population could go up, as evidenced by the rat extermination drive that had to be launched in estates along Hume Avenue and Taman Jurong after the AVA returned to culling cats in 2003.

For some time now, the CWS has been working informally with the AVA and some town councils on resolving cat management issues through the sterilisation approach; Ms Lau also revealed that the CWS is in talks with other MPs - all favourable signs that more constituencies could follow Chong Pang's lead.

Mr Shanmugam, however, sought to rein in expectations a little. Responding to Today's queries, he said it was "premature to say how the Chong Pang cat management programme will affect the re-implementation of an islandwide sterilisation programme".

What he is hoping to do is simply to "put together a model which others could look at".

Indeed, much of how this test case plays out eventually still hinges on whether the wider community cares enough to do their bit for animal welfare.

When Today visited the bustling town last week, a shop attendant was cooing at and stroking a stray cat. Asked how he felt about cats roaming around, he said: "They are cute what, they come around so I play with it. Anyway I don't have to take care of it."

But does he think non-culling of cats is the way to go? The 30-something, who declined to

be named, said wryly: "As long as they don't cause me problems."

Trap, neuter, release - but can it be managed?

by Teo Xuanwei

The trap-neuter-release-manage (TNRM) approach involves bringing a cat caught by professional trappers for sterilisation and returning it to its territory. Then the crucial next step is to foster responsible cat caregiving and ownership by engaging the community.

This multi-pronged approach is favoured by animal welfare activists because it addresses the root of most cat-related complaints.

Sterilised cats, identified by their clipped left ears, feel no need to mate. What this means is an end to cats roaming large tracts of the estate and marking territories with pee, catfights over mates and caterwauling.

Releasing the cats back to their communities stops new strays from moving in to fill the vacuum and keeps the cat population - as well as rat and cockroach numbers - in check, studies in other countries have shown.

The "manage" aspect of the approach though, could be its Achilles heel because it involves sustained education efforts. Littering issues, for instance, would be resolved if cat lovers just bothered to clear up after leaving out food scraps for strays. Then there is pet abandonment by owners who are uneducated, can't afford to sterilise their cats or don't know how to care for them.

A review of the ban on cat ownership in HDB estates would greatly boost efforts to educate owners and nip abandonment in the bud, said Cat Welfare Society vice-president Veron Lau.

"Because (ownership) is outlawed, cat owners will not come forward to ask for advice or help. We are not able to reach out to them." Teo Xuanwei

'We will work hard to make sure it's sustainable'

In the past week, Mr K Shanmugam says, he has gotten "an overwhelming number of emails, posts on my Facebook Wall and letters of support" from animal lovers and "residents who support the spirit of civic engagement that is going into this project".

But there are also some who have expressed reservations over whether efforts to promote responsible cat ownership can be successful. The MP for Nee Soon GRC said, in response to Today's queries: "They are valid concerns, and we will have to work hard to make sure that the programme is sustainable."

On why Chong Pang is serving as the first test case for reviving the sterilisation-not-culling approach, Mr Shanmugam said he was approached by the Cat Welfare Society a few weeks ago through the Animal Concerns Research & Education Society, which he has helped for some years. They agreed on a pilot programme with the support of volunteers.

He revealed that there are those who want to extend the programme to managing stray dogs. "I think this is encouraging. We need to, however, make sure that we can deliver before expanding further."

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