Abstract for Summit

For over 40 years cat Haven has borne the brunt of the cat over-population in Perth. It is the only shelter without a “no kill” policy, and when other shelters are full, including the RSPCA, Cat Haven picks up the task of surplus.

Despite a local Government act passed 1995, which allowed local councils to deal with cats in the same ways as they do with dogs, not one of the 139 authorities have introduced serious cat legislation. It has been a political hot potato since then, between staff and local government.

Despite being a small charity that has to self fund, it has taken on the David and Goliath task of lobbying for changes that will encompass cat laws.

Background

Working for a cat only shelter, I will mainly discuss the progress made in changes to cats.

Cat Haven was founded via a group of very committed volunteers who secured some crown land from the government, and opened it doors 40 years ago this month.

Perth was awash with strays on the streets and the idea was that these cats would be rescued and rehomed if possible, but the majority were euthanized.

The organisation grew, introduced paid staff along side the volunteers and continued to euthanize cats in their thousands every year. That was our purpose. It was accepted that it was the only solution.

A ranger rescue serviced was introduced, which saw even more cats being brought in. Cat Haven’s telephone number was given out to members of the public by councils, handballing on cat problems, issues they themselves could have dealt with under the 1995 act-but who chose not to!

And we would respond to the demands of the public’s expectation that we would go and collect strays, and even owned cats all at our cost.

Year after year, Cat Haven saw the same cat owners come in with litters of unwanted kittens that were put to sleep the same day.

We kept doing this year after year, and expected different results. But we weren’t changing; we weren’t proactive in stopping the surplus. We just kept killing cats and getting hate emails from anonymous members of the public threatening to kill us!

I think it was a case of battle fatigue in the ranks and files of older members. They just couldn’t see the opportunity to make change, that anything new they did would have an impact.

The animal welfare industry unsurprisingly has a high burn out rate and Cat Haven is no different with staff and volunteers believing that nothing can change.

A Greens MP Giz Watson, introduced a cat bill in 2003, which didn't go anywhere, and the consensus was that there was no room for cat legislation in WA.

So we are proceeded on the same path as we always done…taking in cats, and putting them to sleep.

Cat Haven is by far, the major stake holder in the cat welfare industry in WA and the only "kill" shelter in the state, why would any other agency effect change when we wouldn't change ourselves?

In last two years, we have finally taken the over supply of cats and kittens seriously, taken up the challenge of change, and stopped being a victim ourselves.

For me, there is no one solution to the issues. It's complex and not fixed over night. The most important requirement is to have tenacity and using every agency you can to champion the cause-even if it they groups that you wouldn't normally deal with – or be at opposite ends of the animal welfare spectrum such as Pet Shops. I believe in the old parable, the wind and the sun….it's better to have people on your side!

The major shift had to be letting the public know exactly what we do….so many people hadn't heard of Cat Haven, or if they had, thought we were a boarding facility at the opposite end of the freeway!

We had to let them know that kittens are not automatically rehomed, and that as many as 100 a day in kitten season are put to sleep. Harsh facts, but with amazing results. We told people surrendering their cats they could be put to sleep that day.

Desexing

Then we started tackling the owners of kittens surrendered as to what they were going to do so that we didn't have to see them again. This would literally involve staff standing between the owners and the door, until they agreed to get the mother cat sterilised. We over came every objection that they had, until they agreed. Objections varied from "it's too far to bring the cat for sterilisation" to they have no money-despite the new land cruiser in the car park. For these, we agree to pick up the cat, and do the surgery for free!

I don't always agree with means testing people for discounted or free surgery. It is a grey area for me. If a person continually allows their female cat to breed, irrespective of income, we have to do something to stop it. We are the ones who live with the consequences.

We have worked with several pet shops over the passed 2 years, whereby when they are full, instead of turning kittens away, they ring us and we collect the same day. In addition, we ask them to hand the owners of the kittens a free sterilisation voucher for use at our clinic, with a use by date of no longer than 3 months. This ensures that we should get the cat in before she breeds and gives birth again.

We have had over 300 kittens come in from one pet shop, and close to 60 cats sterilised. This is in a high risk area for over cat population. We have now taken this one step further, and have written out to each pet shop this month, asking that they display this year's NDN Desexing poster, as well as

giving out the free vouchers. We are hoping that we can get some pregnant female cats sterilised prior to giving birth-thus avoiding another litter of unwanted kittens.

Once the kittens start flooding in, we will try to accelerate the number of pet shops who are part of the high risk areas.

We have placed an ad in the major Saturday newspaper, the West Australian, which has a reader ship of over 1 million, using a little bit of poetic licence! It goes along the lines of "Stop. Under soon to be introduced state cat laws, every cat will need to be sterilised, don't leave it until the last minute, ring cat Haven now, prices from $30…but limited spaces book now!" Well whatever it takes!

We have placed a similar ad into an advertising paper, the Quokka, with the same results-we are fully booked for surgery a month ahead. But we can always fit in an extra female, especially if she is pregnant, our vets will still perform spays until very close to birth. And though it might be sad, seeing these foetuses just lying in their sacs on the surgery table, we believe it's a lot sadder to euthanize 7 week old happy and healthy kittens, for no other reason than we can't find then a home.

We trail the Quokka (a weekly paper) and also the ads in the major weekend papers, looking for "kittens free to good homes" and ask the owners for the kittens in return for us sterilising their cat, sometimes down to doing it again for free if we have to. It's not can they afford the surgery, it's more a case of can we, cat Haven, afford not to do it? We are the orgainsaiton which lives with the consequences.

Volunteers will target notice boards in high risk cat areas, advising owners of our discounted sterilisation fees , $30 for males and $35 for females. We haven't increased these prices in 3 years.

Avenues for change

This is all good stuff for which we are proud, but it soon became evident that one welfare agency couldn't do all of this on their own-that the only way forward is to legislate.

We started out by referring cat complaints referred by councils back to them. We suggested to the caller, if they had a problem with a stray or nuisance dog, they could refer it to the council. Why wasn't their council doing something about cats?
We got two councillors in from two of he major councils, to witness our euthanasia room, to see a healthy cat and kitten put to sleep. They left white and shocked. No amount of statistics could have the impact of what they witnessed. A visit speaks a thousand words. One of those councils is introducing cats laws now, and using Cat Haven as a pound facility.

Last year, I invited the WA Premier Colin Barnett, down to Cat Haven to open our annual fete or Wet Nose Day as we call it.

I passionately believe that once you get politicians into the shelter, to see for themselves the day in day out operations, then you are half way there. Remember what I just said, a visit is worth a thousand words. We were lucky that Mr Barnett's visit coincided with him returning from Canberra from a CHOGM meeting very late the night before, and the media pack came down to Cat Haven to

interview him. He was asked, amongst other things, what he thought about compulsory sterilisation of cats, and he agreed with. It went out on all the news bulletins that night, and appeared in the printed press the following day.

That was our green light. We started a letter writing campaign, applauding his stance and congratulating him on tacking this very difficult area. There was no going back from there. The premier appointed one of his MPs' to draft legislation that will contain as its basic principals, mandatory sterilisation and micro chipping of all cats. The government is hoping to have this introduced by the end of the year. My understanding is, that it will be phased in over a number of years, with no retrospectively component. This is probably a wise move, to avoid a deluge of unwanted cats into our shelter. This will encompass all outlets for cats, including pet shops.

Accelerating adoption levels

This is more to do with reducing the numbers of cats and kittens killed in our shelter.

Thanks to the great idea of a former welfare supervisor, we hit upon the idea of doing a two for one purchase scheme for all cats or kittens…or a BOGOF (Buy one get one free!) So many times we hear how people who love to have another cat, but their existing cat just wouldn't accept it. We even hand them a sheet explaining why 2 are better than 1.

This has seen a marked increase in our adoption rates.

We have taken on board a foster care programme, which saved the lives of 722 cats and kittens last kitten season.