

Cats Outdoors! Beyond the Dogma.



Shelters must have adoption standards that help ensure animals will end up in quality homes. But blanket policies that deny adoptions to anyone who would allow a cat outdoors can harm more animals than they help. While we seek to reduce the risks our companion animals face, killing them in shelters rather than adopting them to indoor/outdoor homes where they might face increased dangers is a contradiction that simply cannot be reconciled. That is not to suggest that shelters should “lower” adoption standards, only that those standards should be more thoughtful.

Many shelters are quick to say that indoor-only cats live much longer than outdoor cats. Yet every day, shelters take in feral cats, many of them old tom cats, who have lived their lives outside. Most of these cats are healthy despite the absence of a known caretaker. In fact, an 11-year study of

feral cats found that the vast majority of the cats were in good physical condition, with only four percent killed for health reasons. Cats in the study by the end of the observation period had been present for an average of 6.5 years, which compares favorably to an average 7.1 year lifespan reported for pet cats, particularly since almost half of the cats were first observed as adults of unknown age.

Is life nasty, brutish and short for the outdoor cat? Perhaps if the potential adopter lives on a major thoroughfare. But for most cat lovers who do not live along the interstate, have nice neighbors, and see the same cats day in and day out, the answer is absolutely not. To say that a cat allowed outdoors faces these risks irrespective of location defies common sense and common experience.

But what about the life of the indoor-only cat? While pet owners who confine their cats indoors can provide their pets with needed exercise and socialization, as a general rule, a cat who is allowed to play outdoors is a more socialized, friendlier, healthier, and happier cat. This is because an indoor cat is more likely to be bored and obese than an outdoor cat, and fat cats are a recipe for a host of health and behavior problems. In addition, chronic boredom can lead to unsocial behavior like biting, scratching and inappropriate elimination.



Roger Tabor, perhaps the world's foremost cat biologist, relates the rise in obesity and behavior problems in cats to the move by the humane community to indoor-only cat practices. That doesn't mean that confining a cat indoors is bad for the cat, so long as the cat isn't going crazy from boredom or eating more than he should. What it does mean is that confined cats, as a general rule, are at higher risk for these problems than outdoor cats.

Holding onto a hard and fast rule that all cats should be indoor-only is unwise and unfair. Feral cats, for one, obviously belong outdoors. But pet cats can enjoy the out-of-doors too—if the area is reasonably safe. Allowing a cat outdoors in downtown Manhattan may not be a good idea. But how about the suburbs, quiet neighborhoods, or the countryside?

Shelters can differentiate between these situations in their adoption policies. Instead of a blanket "no outdoors" rule in the adoption questionnaire, shelters can instead evaluate potential adopters' responses to questions such as what happened to their previous pets (hit by car? died of old age?) and how much time the new pet would spend outdoors. This method allows common sense to rule the day rather than unfounded

dogma.

Life includes risks. We temper risk by using common sense in our own lives—should we fly on an airplane? Should we drive? Should we let the kids play soccer? Rather than simply turn away potentially excellent adopters who would allow their cat to spend some time outdoors, shelters would save more lives by applying the same kind of common sense risk/benefit analysis to their adoption policies.

But the bottom line remains this: How much sense does it make to kill cats in a shelter today, after denying otherwise good adoptions because of a concern that if the adopter allows the cat outdoors, the cat might be killed.

Such a contradiction (killing cats today because some of them might be killed later) simply cannot be logically reconciled, or ethically defended.

