

No Quick Fix for Feral Cat Problem, But Cafes Help

St. Thomas Source

BY MOLLY MORRIS

July 12, 2008 -- There's a series of new restaurants popping up here and there on the island which require minimal building material and no government permits, not even a business license or a health certificate.

The tiny establishments do have restrictions however -- customers must be four-legged, furry, homeless and able to negotiate an abbreviated front door. But Cat Café project director Dellia Holodenschi says these little dining establishments are in critical need of restaurant suppliers, volunteers to bring daily food and water to the locations.

Holodenschi started the Humane Society of St. Thomas Cat Café project late last year, after three years of research convinced her the program is the only humane and successful way of controlling feral cat populations.

Humane societies have countered the problem in the past by trapping and euthanizing the animals, brought in by well-intentioned folks who saw no other alternative. Holodenschi, says a forceful "no" to that practice. She says the commonly used program "is not only an inhumane solution, it is costly because it is without end."

The Cat Café program first traps the feral cats, gets them spayed or neutered with the assistance of the Humane Society, and returns them to their former colony where they receive food and water from a designated caretaker, so the cats no longer search for food in areas where they are a nuisance. The size of these colonies stabilizes and, over time, declines. Last year, 824 feral cats were euthanized when brought to the Humane Society by well-meaning individuals. Since the inception of the café program on St. Thomas, Holodenschi says, 192 feral cats at 36 different colonies have been trapped and released, and 15 kittens have been adopted.

Cats are right up there with rabbits in fecundity. The statistics are chilling: One four-month old cat can reproduce four times a year. Spaying one female cat can prevent 40,000 kittens from being born every seven years.

"We don't have a cat problem; we have a people problem," Holodenschi says, "and that's where I come in.

"After three years' research," she says, "I am convinced that the Cat Café will change these statistics." The program is based on the fundamental belief that feral cats have as much right to live as any other creature. They lead dismal lives, Holodenschi says, "ill, malnourished, constantly breeding and looking for food."

Right now, she maintains many of the cafes on her own, but she is sending out a plea for people with big hearts and a little time to bring food and water to a café in their neighborhood.

"The idea is I don't want to be running around like a crazy woman all over the island," she laughs. "I have nine cats, all strays including one from Romania (her native country), but even if I had 35, it wouldn't solve the stray problem we have."

Prevention is the key to the tragedy of overpopulation, she says. A successful businesswoman daytimes, Holodenschi invests all her other waking hours to her mission.

"I've been an animal lover all my life," she says. She believes if you let animals breed, you are not an animal lover:

"The more you allow to be born," she says, "the more have to be killed, since there are simply not enough homes."

Holodenschi has introduced the program to local hotels and schools. She works with resorts, restaurants, condominium associations, businesses and individuals to implement and teach long-term management of feral cat colonies. She has tailored a presentation for hotel managers, pointing out that the hotel no longer has to deal with the nuisance of stray cats. Guest discomfort at seeing hungry cats is removed by the addition of a feeding station set up away from the restaurant and maintained by a staff member.

The Ritz Carlton St. Thomas is the most recent convert to the new program, where a no doubt upper crust café is under construction. Jennifer McQueen, public relations coordinator, says, "We feel that the Cat Café offers the most humane way to manage the overpopulation. Our caretaker is working on the café right now to make sure it blends in with the property."

Youngsters at Charlotte Amalie High School created several cafes earlier this year, [brightly painted in Caribbean pastels](#). Students from Antilles School maintain the Bluebeard's Beach Resort café.

Holodenschi's effort follows in the footsteps of Dottie Grey, an island institution who for years fed stray cats, trapping them for spaying and neutering. (See: ["On Island Profile: Dottie Grey."](#))