

To Kill or Not to Kill?

By Michael Mountain

"No-kill shelters sound great," writes a lady from Carmel, California, in a letter to Best Friends. "But where do all the other animals go: the huge overflow our SPCA must handle? I need to continue to assist [our local] SPCA in our attempt to solve the problem."

There has often been a certain tension between traditional humane societies that are involved in euthanizing the animals they receive into their care, and the growing no-kill movement.

Back in the 1970s, when Best Friends was in its early days, the no-kill philosophy was largely derided by the mainstream. Most foundations ruled out giving funds to "irresponsible" shelters that didn't kill their animals. Some still do. ("You're just warehousing them. You're not making a real difference.") But much has changed in the last 20 years. And the time has come for all traditional shelters to adopt the no-kill philosophy.

Best Friends had its origins in a few friends visiting their local humane society once a month and taking home as many of the animals as possible who were scheduled to be destroyed. We would rehabilitate these "unadoptables," and find good homes for as many as possible. Of course, there were always some who simply couldn't be placed, for whatever reason. Those unadoptables became the founders of the sanctuary.

The two ladies who ran the humane society we visited each month in those early days were always depressed as euthanasia day approached. These tireless, kind people, who only wanted to nurture suffering animals, found themselves in the hopeless position of having to kill them. There seemed no way out.

In 1989, pet lover and commentator Ed Duvin wrote a landmark article that highlighted this dark paradox and served as a wake-up call to the humane community overall. Underlying the entire "humane" movement and its "shelters," he said, "is the dark secret that it is, in part, little more than a vast killing machine."

Ed Duvin's article became the subject of much discussion, and many traditional shelters began focusing more on spay/neuter and adoption programs, and on community education. Some of the nation's biggest SPCAs began to switch to a no-kill policy. One of the earliest of these was the San Francisco SPCA. They switched to a no-kill policy themselves, and then started working to prevent any homeless animal in the city from having to be destroyed.

At the first annual "No-Kills in the '90s" conference in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1995, Merritt Clifton, editor of Animal People, described what should be the essential difference between a humane society or SPCA and the city animal control department:

"Humane work and animal control are parallel pursuits... yet serve different functions. Animal control solves animal-related problems for taxpayers and voters. Humane



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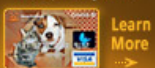
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Among all of us who are involved in animal care, we have achieved great things in recent years. According to Animal People, euthanasias are down from 17 million per year in 1987 to about 5 million last year. Neutering rates have climbed to 65 percent for dogs and 85 percent for cats.

The time is coming for humane organizations to remove themselves altogether from the business of having to kill the unwanted animals of irresponsible citizens.

People who simply want to do good for the animals should not be required to take on the job of killing them. This terrible burden is unfair to kind volunteers everywhere who want to nurture life.

The sad work of putting down homeless animals may still have to be one of the jobs of a city animal control department. It is not a pleasant job, no matter who has the job of doing it, but killing animals is not the work of a humane group. Nor should it ever have to be supported by the contributions of members whose passion is to nurture life and love.

Converting to a no-kill policy at a shelter requires building a close and harmonious relationship with the local animal control department. Shelters wanting to make these arrangements can get help and advice from the many no-kill facilities that have already done it and are now working cooperatively with city animal control. Here at Best Friends, we count the local animal control officers our friends and partners.

The light grows brighter and we can actually see the end of the tunnel. The goal of Best Friends, and all of us in the humane movement, is to help bring about a time when there are no more homeless animals.

When we first wrote, just a few years ago, that our goal was to bring an end to the problem of pet overpopulation by the end of this century, it seemed like a wonderful dream, if perhaps a slightly over-optimistic one!

But that goal is now closer than we could have imagined, and the flame burns brighter than ever. We are all working towards a time when there are No More Homeless Pets, and when every newborn can be guaranteed a life of love and happiness.