OPERATION GIT-MEOW

Background: Guantanamo Bay’s Cat Problem

Operation Git-Meow (OGM) is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization based out of Virginia, dedicated to helping the cat populations of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as well as the greater Washington, D.C. area. Their focus includes education on responsible pet ownership among military members and their pets. In addition, OGM assists in providing micro-chips and other veterinary needs to community cats (community cats are commonly referred to as feral cats, although these cats may be handled by humans, so the term feral is not always accurate).

Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (nicknamed “Gitmo”) houses a U.S. Naval base, which is 45 square miles and has a current population of about 5500 people living and working on the base. The base at Gitmo is not just a detention center, it is a fully operating military base, which includes military personnel and their families, the guards of the detention center, and contract workers. Other facilities on the base include family and single unit houses, an airport, a Naval Exchange, a gas station, a nine-hole golf course, tennis courts, swimming pools, a youth center and schools.

With all the people, families and facilities at Gitmo, it is not surprising that the base has issues similar to many communities in the U.S., including a cat problem. In addition to cats who were once pets, but have since been abandoned by their owners, Gitmo has a community cat population estimated to be as large as 500-2000 cats. Most of these cats are not vaccinated, which is harmful to humans; they are scavenging and hunting whatever food they can find, which is harmful to endangered species at Gitmo; and they are overbreeding, which is harmful to the cats themselves, who are fighting for scarce resources and can die very harsh deaths from wounds, starvation, or untreated conditions.

The Solution: TNR

To humanely and responsibly contain an overpopulation of community cats, a program known as TNVR or TNR (“Trap Neuter Vaccinate Release”/”Trap Neuter Release”) is employed. A TNR program starts with (1) trapping the cats, then (2) taking the cats to a veterinarian to get spayed or neutered, as well as receive veterinary attention if needed (some are often injured from fights) and necessary vaccinations, and finally (3) releasing these cats back into the community. Often cats who are trapped turn out to be friendly (often abandoned pets), or they are young enough to be socialized by humans, and these cats may be adopted out to homes. To indicate a cat has received TNR, the ear of each fixed cat is humanely snipped in a process called “ear tipping.” It’s the universal sign of an altered community cat.

The U.S. Department of Defense rules specifically prohibit TNR programs on their bases across the United States, this includes the base at Gitmo. Some bases do allow for community cats to be trapped, but they must be rehomed off base, typically to barn homes. Since there is no off base at Gitmo, instead, the military tries to cull cat populations by rounding up as many cats as they can catch and putting these community cats down. This process is not only inhumane, but it does not cut the population down, as the cats that are left behind have not been spayed or neutered and will simply keep breeding. The culling of community cats is contracted by the military out and it is
difficult to find out just how many cats have been killed or by what methods. For TNR to be used at Gitmo, it would require a special waiver of this military regulation.

OGM has proposed to work with the base commander at Gitmo and other willing civilian volunteers on base to start a TNR program in order to control the population of community cats on the base. In order to make this program happen, OGM is raising funds for the ambitious proposal and working closely with partner organizations. A TNR program of this scale requires great logistical knowledge/planning and vast resources, as well as dedicated volunteers to implement the program. The funds go towards the veterinary care the cats will receive, including staff who know how to spay/neuter and vaccinate cats. In addition, kittens and cats who can be socialized and adopted out will be available for adoption both at Guantanamo Bay and in the United States. These cats available for adoption must be transported off the base, which is very costly.

Set Backs and Successes

In April 2017, the base commander at Gitmo denied the waiver to allow OGM to begin a TNR program on base because of the military’s regulation prohibiting TNR. However, permission was given to a retiring government contract worker, who had lived and worked on Gitmo, to transport 25 community cats she had been caring for. Many of these cats were former pets left behind by soldiers and sailors who could not afford to fly them home and so they abandoned them at Gitmo. OGM led the mission to get a special exception to policy so that these cats could be safely transported via private plane by another rescue group called “Pilots ‘N Paws” to Lancaster County, North Carolina. While 25 community cats is a fraction of the number of cats still at Gitmo, the success of bringing these cats back to the U.S. is a huge step forward. OGM is a small group, just started in January 2017, but they have already achieved more than any other major animal group has accomplished in years of pushing the military to address this issue.

OGM is using the momentum from meeting with high level military officials and getting the 25 cats out of Gitmo, to advocate even more for a TNR program at Gitmo. More animal groups are joining OGM every week and they are beginning a campaign to push the military towards this common sense solution.