



A feral cat in North Key Largo.

Talk about taking your job seriously. While writing this article about the feral cat situation in the Keys, I adopted a shelter kitten.

Since my first little grey kitty, adopted in 1984, I have always had two cats. Unfortunately back then, as an inexperienced mom, I left out some yarn, the cat ate it, causing her death when its intestines became entangled. Why are there so many cute pictures of kittens with balls of yarn? My ensuing adopted cats: LC, Dolly, Ansie, and calicos Callie and Miely Bug thrived with lots of love and awareness of possible dangers lurking around the house. When Miely Bug passed of old age, I said she was my last, since Miely



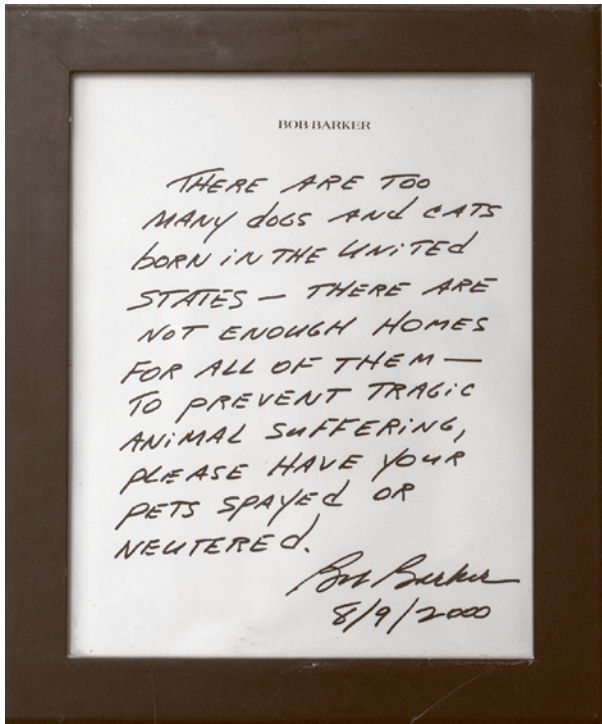
The minute the foster kitty was in our home, we knew there was no going back. Nikita grew into the most perfect companion.

was the best. If you were to ask any cat that, they would reply "Yes, I am the best."

About a year later, my heart having healed, my stance had changed to "I'm looking for a calico." In October 2025, I agreed to foster a 6-week-old kitten. It wasn't a calico but it was a survivor. It was one of two kittens that had been abandoned in the wild, not yet weaned and lacking skills for survival. When rescued, both kittens had wounds, and were in poor condition. One sibling eventually died. After weeks of medical care and bottle feeding, I received my foster kitten complete with missing fur and healing sores, but full of love. Immediately after bringing her home, my husband picked her up and kissed her. I knew there was no returning her. Over the weeks and months she grew into the most perfect companion, rarely leaving my husbands side.

What makes people think that abandoning kittens in a box at a dumpster or by the side of the road is a good thing? But it happens too often. Cats are dumped by their owners when they are moving out of the Keys. In the last decade, our islands have become home to another non-native species courtesy of pet stores and snake owners, the Burmese python, an efficient predator of furry creatures such as possum, raccoon, woodrat and possibly cats and little white dogs.

Thankfully there are people who care, and they are making a difference. There are a number of options in the Upper Keys to address the feral cat problem. Feral cats are trapped, spayed or neutered, vaccinated, tested for feline AIDS and leukemia and then are hopefully adopted. ORCAT is Ocean Reef's Trap-Neuter-Release program that began in the 1980s when the Keys had a serious cat overpopulation problem.



In 2000, Bob Barker, TV personality on "The Price is Right" provided financial support to the Humane Animal Coalition at MM 106.



Nikita posing on a pedestal. If you ask any cat they will tell you they are the best.

Stray and Homeless Cats... CONTINUED - Photos by Carol Ellis



At the time there was an estimated 10,000 feral cats that had been abandoned or lost in the Keys.

The Humane Coalition Shelter at mile marker 106 ocean side is the county facility. Marsha Garrettson who privatized the coalition in 1998 sums up her dedication by saying "I thought I could fix the problem." She realizes you can't fix the problem through adoption, you must focus on birth.

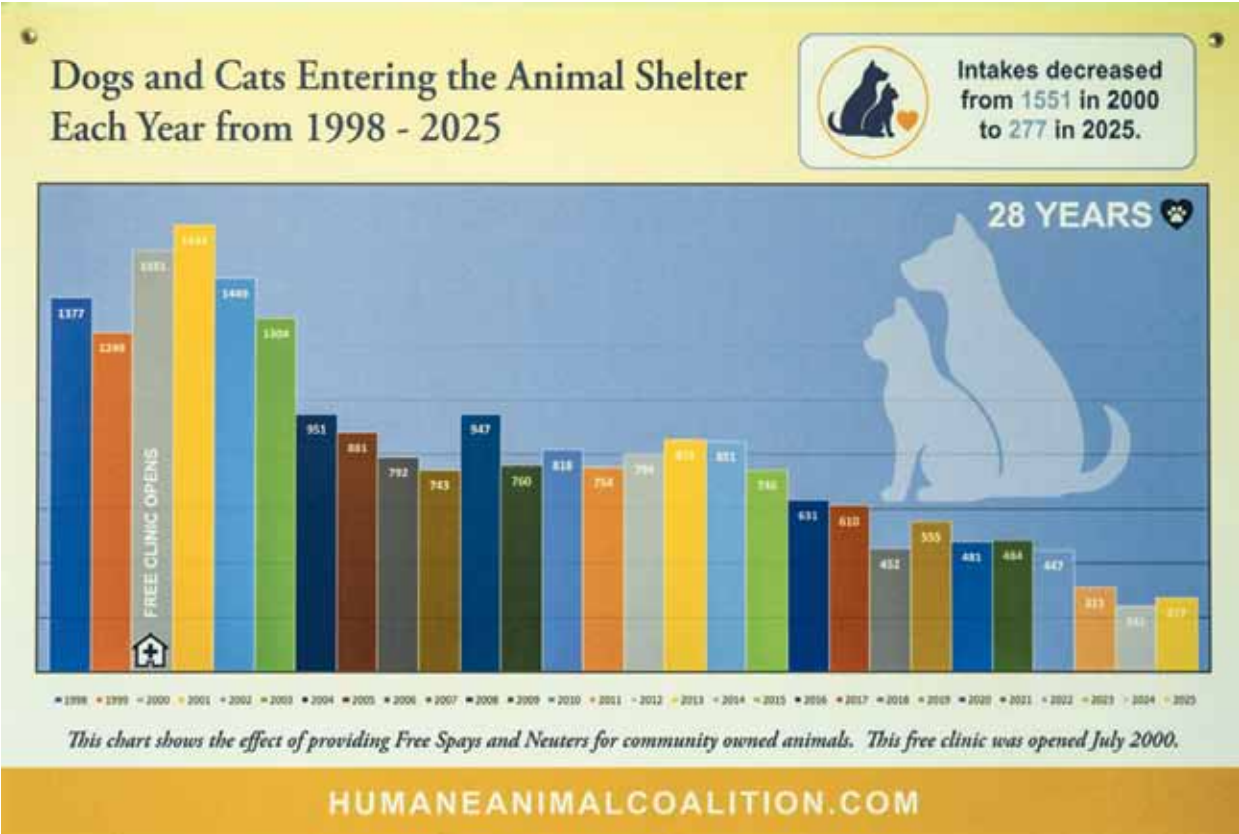
The industry of breeding, buying and selling is the core problem. All shelters are full as a result. There are no shortage of animals. If you closed every pet store, and shut down every breeder, there would still be cats and dogs needing homes. That's just the way it is. A cat can be nursing and still get pregnant and have another litter in just two months. A portion of society does not care. Owners with pets that get pregnant and produce more puppies or kittens, are not doing their job.

According to the website at humaneanimalcoalition.com: "By providing free spays and neuters to the citizen's animals living in our service area (MM 70 to MM 112) beginning July 2000 there is a direct effect in reducing the average number of animals coming into the Shelter each year from 1,642 to 241."

Another organization, The Upper Keys Humane Society (MM 101.6 oceanside), is also doing their part finding homes for abandoned animals. So far this year they have spayed and neutered 400+ animals. Their animals become socialized through their foster program and the Cat Cafe where kittens mingle with their visitors during visiting hours. Check ukhsociety.org for more info.

Cats do not belong in the wild. Domestic cats are efficient hunters, and their natural predatory instincts have negatively affected our resident and migratory songbird population. I love birds as much as I love my cats. So the cats stay in, and stay safe.

My new kitty... she is a calico. She'll be spayed by the time this story is published. Looking forward to having her inside our home.



CAROL ELLIS has lived in South Florida her entire life and Key Largo for over 40 years.



Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.



Anna Kent loving on a shelter cat at Upper Keys Humane Society. Socialization with humans is a key component of "finishing school" which ensures kitten adoption success.