USA: Millions Of Cats Killed, Millions Of Cats Declawed; The Culture Of Convenience And The Lack Of Respect For Life

Alev Dudek
Millions Of Cats Killed, Millions Of Cats Declawed; The Culture Of Convenience And The Lack Of Respect For Life

Approximately 1.5 - 2.5 million shelter animals are killed ("euthanized")* in the United States annually. These numbers represent a decrease from 15 million killed in 1970 and 3.4 million in 2013. However, the truth is that we will never know the exact numbers because shelters are generally not obligated to keep a record of the animals they kill.

While animals are killed at troubling rates at shelters across the country with little to no transparency, among others, justified by the inability to find homes, breeders continue to produce new animals. It is estimated that there are at least 10,000 puppy mills in the United States where over 2 million puppies are bred each year. Breeding for profit adds to the already high number of available animals.

Killing and discarding while breeding new animals, however, is not the only animal-related moral challenges we are facing in this country. We also seem to have a problem with accepting the physical realities of animals, e.g. that cats have claws and dogs are animals that bark. Therefore, we declaw cats, debark dogs, cut parts of their ears and tails off ("docking and cropping"), and somehow think that this is perfectly normal behavior.

Declawing, Mutilation That Is Outlawed In Many Countries

It is estimated that approximately 95.6 million cats are kept as pets in the U.S.A. An estimated 20 - 25 percent (approximately 19.1 – 23.9 million) is believed to have been declawed. However, the actual numbers may be higher. According to a CBS report, 32 percent of surveyed pet owners stated that they had their cats declawed (approximately 30.5 million). Again, there is no way of knowing the exact numbers. What is known is that the most common arguments for declawing are: protection of furniture and “if it were not for declawing, more animals would end up in shelters and subsequently, be killed.”

Declawing has been outlawed (or has never been a viable option) in many countries around the world. Even though there is an overwhelming consensus that the practice is painful and cruel, declawing is to-date widely practiced in the U.S. Besides the U.S., Canada is the only known country where declawing is similarly commonly practiced.
Ten Or More Amputations Performed At Once—Minimally Painful?

Many pet parents believe that declawing is “merely” a procedure similar to removing the nails from one’s toes. However, declawing (onychectomy) is much more than “just” removing the nails from the nail bed. It is an amputation of the end bones of each toe.** Meaning, when a cat is declawed, ten or more (see polydactyl cats)—not one—amputation is performed on the animal at once.

Onychectomy is a procedure, if it were performed on a human being, it would be comparable to cutting off the last joint of each finger. Please keep in mind here that the animal must walk on her/his toes shortly after the procedure. It requires little imagination to envision what it would feel like when 10 or more amputations were performed on a body when a) all of the amputations went “as planned” and b) in case they “didn’t go as planned.”

Besides the initial pain and suffering associated with declawing, there are also other long-time side-effects. Even if the procure is “successful,” by declawing, the animal’s physiology is changed for life.

Playing Down Cruelty And The Culture of Convenience

There are two major reasons why declawing is so widely practiced in the U.S. The first reason is the culture of convenience. We Americans love our conveniences. It is so much more convenient to take a cat to a vet and get it declawed than to figure out respectful ways to coexist with the animal. However, convenience is not the only reason why declawing is so common. The second reason is the lack of education. Many cat parents don’t know just how cruel this procedure is. If cat parents were properly informed by medical professionals, many more would opt against the procedure. People who adopt pets generally have good intentions. They adopt animals because they love them, not because they want to inflict pain and suffering on animals.

Pro-declawing veterinarians have been down-playing the cruelty associated with declawing. This includes The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP). AAFP recently took a “strong position against declawing.” However, only after having failed to recognize that declawing is cruelty and therefore, should have been opposed all along.
Veterinarians who perform the procedure claim that cats heal very quickly and that relatively little pain is associated with the procedure. The pain can allegedly be reasonably managed by painkillers. At the Porter Pet Hospital, for example, young cats don’t just heal after undergoing the amputations, they “breeze through recovery.”

According to pro-declawing narratives, veterinarians are working with their customers to ensure that all other alternatives are weighed in before considering declawing. Any American who has ever been to a doctor/vet knows that such a notion has little to do with reality. When was the last time you went to a doctor and were given the time to exchange enough information to come to an educated conclusion? Additionally, there are technically no “alternatives” to declawing because declawing is cruelty and subsequently cannot be an option in a civilized society. However, there are, naturally, ways to coexist with a cat in a respectful manner but those are not “alternatives.” They are viable options in civilized societies.

The pro-declawing attitudes of many U.S. veterinarians, however, are somewhat understandable. There is too much profit to be made in the pet industry. Even a rather underestimated price of $100 per cat/declawing—a bargain, given the amount of pain and suffering that is caused to the animal—makes declawing a billion-dollar industry in the U.S. Many veterinarians naturally don’t want to miss out on those profits.

**Hope—Many Veterinarians Refusing To Perform The Procedure**

In spite of the troubling status-quo, there is hope for America’s cats. More and more veterinarians are refusing to perform the procedure and more and more Americans are speaking out against it.

Several cities in California and Denver (CO) have passed legislation and made declawing illegal. Anti-declawing legislation has also been introduced in several state legislatures such as in New Jersey, New York, West Virginia, and Rhode Island.

It is only a matter of time until we catch up with other developed countries and declawing becomes no longer an option in the United States. However, let us hope that one day we will also have reached a
point as a society where we don’t need to convince each other about the “pros and cons” of inflicting pain and suffering on animals and instead, agree that cruelty toward animals can never be an option.

*The killing of animals at shelters is often referred to as euthanasia. However, euthanasia occurs when the purpose of killing is to relieve severe pain and suffering. The mass killing of hundreds and thousands of animals does not meet the definition of euthanasia.*

**Declawing is generally performed on the front toes only.**