Identification methods for spayed and neutered feral cats

1. Introduction

In Switzerland and many other countries, the suffering of cats is immeasurable. Hundreds of thousands of homeless cats live on farms, in garden centers, garden plots, industry areas and settlements. They reproduce exponentially, often suffer from hunger and disease, have accidents or are killed actively by humans. Animal welfare organizations such as NetAP – Network for Animal Protection, or Schweizer Tierschutz (STS), have been addressing the problem of feral cats for years and neuter thousands of cats every year in order to break the vicious cycle of suffering.

2. Importance of a fast and efficient way of recognizing non-neutered feral cats

For an efficient, effective and sustainable population management of feral cats in combination with the smallest possible impact on the animals, it is very important that non-neutered (so-called “intact”) animals may be distinguished quickly and clearly from already neutered ones. This is important for the following reasons:

- Previously neutered animals are not exposed repeatedly and unnecessarily to a lot of stress that is connected with capturing.
- Already captured animals aren’t unnecessarily anesthetized or even operated again (operation scars may not be recognized as such anymore in many cases).
- The animals aren’t exposed to the unnecessary risk that is associated with an operation or anesthesia, just as it is with humans.
- There is no waste of time, because animal welfare organizations can devote their valuable time to the animals that still need to be neutered.
- Efficient population control is possible, since it is clear immediately when new arrivals appear.
- There is no loss of funds, because the valuable donations are used specifically and strictly for the animals that have not been neutered yet.

3. Identification methods for neutered animals

3.1 Ear-clipping as an internationally accepted method

The removal of the tip of one ear (also called ear-clipping, ear-tipping or ear-cutting) has prevailed as an internationally accepted and effective marking for neutered feral cats. It is supported and recommended by countless animal welfare organizations and renowned institutions, such as the Humane Society of the United States, the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) and the International Cat Care (formerly Feline Advisory Bureau (FAB)).
The removal of the tip of the ear must be implemented properly. The small procedure takes place under anesthesia during the neutering/spaying process. The tip of the ear is removed with a straight cut by means of a clamp and scalpel; for kittens 3 mm, for adult cats not more than 1 cm. The clamp is left on the ear for approximately 15 minutes. When it is finally removed, the cut usually will have stopped bleeding entirely. There may be, in rare cases, some post-surgery bleeding, but the blood loss is minimal and impairs neither the health status nor the functioning of the cat’s ear - the same applies to the missing tip of the ear which has no influence, either. Since the cats are under competent observation until the day following the neutering, the ear can be examined again.

This form of ear marking has important advantages compared to other methods, which will be explained later on:

- The mark is permanent, i.e. it does not fade (e.g. like tattoos) and can’t fall off (e.g. like ear tags).
- It is visible from far away, even at dusk, even for untrained people.
- It can’t be confused with fight or accident wounds, since these would not cause such a clear and straight cut at the tip of the ear.
- It is internationally accepted as a sign for neutered/spayed cats.
- The procedure takes place under anesthesia and is painless for the animal.
- It can be conducted simultaneously with the neutering and by using the same instruments (scalpel and clamp).
- A competently conducted operation leads to neither post-operation bleeding nor infections.
- The functions of the ear (e.g. hearing) are not impaired.
- There is no influence on the behavior of the cat (e.g. the movement of the ears is not impaired).
- The mark can also be life-saving for a cat, since many hunters exclude cats of controlled colonies from being hunted if they recognize them as animals with a clipped ear.

Disadvantage:

- The missing tip of the ear has an influence on the visual appearance, which some people may find unpleasant or bothersome. It is important not to forget, however, that we are speaking of feral animals, which most people will never see anyhow.

3.2 Marking alternatives not successfully implemented

The following alternative marking methods for neutered feral cats have not prevailed in animal welfare work.
a) Tattoos

The tattoo is applied on the inside of the cat’s ear.

Advantages:

- It is more or less permanent.
- It can be applied on the already anesthetized cat.
- Such a mark could be applied anywhere on the body (which is, however, not recommended due to fur growth).

Disadvantages:

- Most cats must be caught in order to recognize the mark. This already causes a lot of stress for feral cats.
- If a cat has a darker skin color, the ear is covered in fur or the cat resists, all of which causing that a tattoo cannot be recognized easily with the naked eye only, the captured cat has to be sedated so the ear may be looked at more closely.
- The tattoo ink, and with it the mark, may fade over time.
- Tattooing is connected with additional costs, since acquiring of additional special equipment (e.g. tattoo tongs, tattoo ink) is necessary.
- For the tattoo, additional time and workloads apply, since the needles have to be sterilized for each and every new cat. In contrast, for ear-clipping, one may work with the same surgical instruments set designated for each cat.
- In rare cases, a cat may be intolerant to or incompatible with the tattoo ink.

b) Collars

A collar – at best with a tag on it – is still a very common and useful identification method for pets.

Advantages:

- An additional invasive intervention on the animal is not necessary.
- A collar is plainly visible from far away.

Disadvantages:

- A collar serves multiple purposes, meaning it cannot be definitely assigned to neutered animals.
- A collar may very easily be removed and for this reason is not considered a permanent marking method.
- A collar may tear or become brittle over time.
- The cat may get caught and strangle itself.
- Additional costs are high.
c) Ear tags

Ear tags are attached by means of a metal clip or through a hole in the ear.

Advantages:

- The mark is visible from far away.

Disadvantages:

- The ear tags may easily be removed or torn off in a fight, meaning that this is not considered a permanent marking method.
- The animal may get caught on something with the tag and tear it off, which can lead to uncontrolled new injuries.
- The ear tag involves the acquisition of additional materials that must always be on hand.
- It involves additional costs for the materials and an overhead for maintaining a potential database.

d) Chip

The animal receives a hypodermically injected microchip (usually on the left side of the neck). This microchip can be registered and programmed with information. The number can be read out with a reading device.

Advantages:

- This method is permanent.

Disadvantages:

- The marking is not visible from a distance.
- Even with captured cats in a cage, the microchip cannot always be read out. For this reason, an additional anesthesia may be necessary.
- Only the registration number is readable, which means that access to the index is necessary in order to receive any further information which may be registered (which is difficult during neutering campaigns for feral populations).
- Additional effort arises with the recording of databases.
- Invasive operations come with the risk of the microchip being implanted incorrectly or traveling throughout the body belatedly so that they cannot be read out.
- Additional costs arise through additional materials and work steps (e.g. microchip, chip reading device, registration).

e) Shaving of a patch of fur

During a control campaign, the tip of the tail, for example, is shaved on already neutered animals, in order to avoid capturing the same animals repeatedly during the same campaign.
Advantages:

- The marking is visible from a distance.

Disadvantages:

- This is not a permanent marking, since the fur grows back and the marking is not recognizable anymore after only a short period.

f) Color marking

During a control campaign, the already neutered animals are sprayed with dye to avoid capturing the same animals again during the same campaign.

Advantages:

- The marking is visible from a distance.

Disadvantages:

- This is not considered a permanent marking, since the color disappears after only a short period of time.

4. Law

The docking of tails or ears of dogs may be prohibited by law (e.g. according to Art. 22 of the Swiss Ordinance of Animal Protection). Opponents of ear-clipping claim that the ear-marking for neutered feral cats is comparable to the ear-docking of dogs, and that it is therefore contrary to animal protection laws.

Such a comparison, however, does not differentiate between the purposes of the interventions. The prohibited tail- or ear-docking of dogs concerns a purely fashion-motivated change of the phenotypical appearance of the dog, which is mainly undertaken for esthetic or raceotypical reasons. Additionally, by this intervention, dogs are restricted in their ability to communicate with other dogs. On the other hand, the removal of the tip of one ear of the neutered feral cat does not serve the esthetic sense of humans, but is only for the safety of the animal, in order to protect it from further interventions or even death. The ear movement (which for cats is, analogously to dogs, an important communicative instrument) is not impaired, since only a minimal part of the tip of one ear is removed. The small cut to the ear, which is implemented under anesthesia and the use of painkillers, does not cause any pain when performed by a trained professional – on the contrary: it aids the cat in avoiding future interventions and offers further advantages which outweigh the potential disadvantages many times over.

5. Result

The removal of the tip of one ear is the only possibility to recognize a neutered cat from a distance clearly and quickly, and to save it from unnecessary stress and a possible unnecessary operation. A professionally conducted castration campaign involves a lot of time and money for animal welfare organizations, and a lot of stress for the feral cats. Along with
live traps, even nets and blowguns may be used in order to neuter an entire colony. However, neutered colonies must also thereafter be kept under constant surveillance in order to recognize and treat new arrivals immediately. Otherwise, the risk is great that population control fails and uncontrolled reproduction begins again.

Therefore, in the interest of a sustainably functioning population control of feral cats, the ear-marking through removal of the tip of the ear represents the only practical and functioning method in the interest of the animals.

6. Experiences from daily routine in animal protection

Through NetAP or partner organizations, tens of thousands of cats are neutered and marked with ear-clipping yearly. These cats are then usually looked after and controlled in so-called cat colonies. So far, there has never been a known case where the ear-clipping has led to an impairment or infection.