

Feline Home Design

Research review could help shelters and adopters better accommodate kitty companions

More than 50 percent of pet cats are kept entirely indoors during the day, and nearly 60 percent at night, according to the most recent pet owners survey conducted by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. But when

mal behaviors; and freedom from conditions likely to lead to fear and distress.

By examining their surroundings from a cat's point of view and taking a cue from Rochlitz's conclusions, adopters may be able to create a kitty haven in their homes.

together and shared resting spaces.

Recommended interior design elements for felines include structures that allow them to use vertical space; comfortable resting areas for all cats in the home; hiding places where cats can retreat from other cats; and at least one litter pan for every two cats (or, even better, one per cat), placed away from feeding and resting areas.

The social scene

Research has shown that optimal socialization to humans occurs when kittens are between two and seven weeks old, and this time period is commonly thought to be ideal for socialization to other cats as well. Although inter-cat interactions can be rewarding and enriching, writes Rochlitz, the caregiver is the single most important factor in the cat's welfare.

Although most well-socialized cats can be housed in groups if the area includes sufficient space, resting places, concealed retreats, and easy access to food and litter pans, communal living situations present challenges. Cats tend to lack distinct dominance hierarchies, signals for diffusing conflict, and reconciliation behaviors, and felines in the wild typically disperse in order to avoid aggression. Clinical behavior cases have suggested that feline behavior problems often derive from environmental stressors related to relationships with other cats or with humans. The incidence of problems such as fearful or avoidance-related behaviors tends to increase when four or more cats inhabit the same household, especially if the cats are unrelated.

Scents and sensibility

Cats' highly developed sense of smell plays an important role in communication with other cats. Appropriate scratching surfaces allow them to deposit olfactory signals and help maintain healthy claws,



those cats go a little stir-crazy in their home environments, some of them can end up at your shelter.

To learn what makes cats thrive indoors, Irene Rochlitz, a researcher at the University of Cambridge in England, reviewed previous studies and published her conclusions in *Applied Animal Behavior Science* (Volume 93). Feline welfare can be assessed using a modified version of "The Five Freedoms," Rochlitz wrote. A set of basic welfare standards developed for farm animals in 1965, the Five Freedoms call for access to food, water, a suitable environment, and health care; the freedom to express most nor-

Interior decorating

One study Rochlitz mentions recommended that an indoor-only cat should have access to at least two rooms, while another study of cats in a 10-room household found that neutered males had an average home range of 4 to 5 rooms and spayed females had a range of 3 to 3.6 rooms. Researchers examining the social behavior of neutered indoor-only cats observed that the cats spent most of their time out of one another's sight and tended to maintain a minimum distance of 1 to 3 meters (or 3 1/2 to 10 feet) when together. Gender had minimal effect on social behavior, and the cats regularly ate



writes Rochlitz. In fact, one study suggested placing scratching surfaces in resting areas, entries, and exits to the home, since these locations are an important part of a cat's home territory.

On the job

Play is good for cats, and toys are the name of the game when giving kitty a job to do or a problem to solve. Variety and novelty are important, and as most cat owners have learned from failed toy-buying experiences, looks aren't everything. One study found that mobile objects with complex textures that mimic prey char-

acteristics are the most effective at eliciting play. And since research has shown that most cats prefer to play with their owners or alone rather than in groups, there should be enough space for them to romp without disturbing other cats.

The dining guide

Researchers have found that cats tend to prefer frequent small meals, although this approach can lead to overeating and may not always be possible in the home environment. Even the simple act of feeding, however, can be used to provide environmental enrichment; owners can try hiding the food or placing small amounts inside toys from which it must be extracted. Cats often prefer to drink away from feeding areas, so bowls of water should be placed in multiple locations.

The great indoors

In evaluating the relative merits of indoor and outdoor housing for cats, Rochlitz reviewed a comparison of conditions and diseases associated with indoor confinement (e.g. hyperthyroidism, obesity, inactivity) and outdoor access (e.g. infectious diseases, traffic accidents, attacks by other animals).

Indoor environments are relatively predictable and monotonous, writes the author, but she acknowledges that most cats seem capable of adapting well to living indoors if they begin doing so at a young age. Rochlitz posits that cats may require an increased level of social interaction with their owners when their physical environment is restricted, and she recommends that owners offer cats controlled outdoor exposure such as secure enclosures or leashed walks.

Although the literature review stops short of endorsing an indoor existence for all cats, data gleaned from previous studies points to the myriad ways that indoor and group housing can be modified to provide a comforting and stimulating environment for kitties at home, and by extension, at your shelter. —Hilary Twining



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