

Foster Focus - Safe Harbor

One woman's fostering, rescue and outreach efforts have helped make Oahu's freeroaming cats safer.

By Cimeron Morrissey

Some of Haleiwa's jetty cats, such as Morgan (pictured here), got a special safe harbor: a permanent home with Linny Morris. Photo courtesy Linny Morris

It was a postcard-perfect Hawaiian evening at Haleiwa Harbor in 1986. Linny Morris, a professional photographer who recently had moved to Oahu's north shore, was enjoying dinner at a harbor-side restaurant. As the fiery bloom of the tropical sunset faded and the stars began to sparkle, Linny spotted a captivating sight.

"Against the twilight sky were silhouettes of cats moving around out on the rocks on the breakwater," she says. "I was so intrigued that I went to explore what was going on out there."

What she found shocked her: dozens of skinny cats and kittens crawling around giant, trash-strewn boulders.

"I saw wads of fishing line with hooks and bits of bait left on them, and the cats were so starving that they'd eat the whole thing, including the hook," Morris says. "I just had to do something. That was the beginning for me." It was a moment that changed her life, as well as those of the harbor cats and many of Oahu's other abandoned, abused and neglected felines. At the time, she knew she needed to help the cats living on the jetty but wasn't exactly sure how.

She began by cleaning up the trash with the hope that it would make life safer for the cats and also provide a positive example for the locals.

"Being part Hawaiian, it saddened me that the people of our land would throw their trash on the ground and throw away their pets with no thought to the consequences," she says. Morris started feeding the cats and, using carriers, trapped them for spay/neuter surgery so they wouldn't produce future generations of harbor residents.

This work quickly led to fostering because she realized that some cats were adoptable or could be made so with some time, love and care. One by one, Linny saved more than 200 harbor cats over the course of several years, but her efforts didn't end there.

"When I moved up to the rainforest in one of the valleys in Honolulu, I picked up litters of kittens that had been dumped in the area — people would come at night and just throw them out of their cars," she says.

She fostered those abandoned cats as well, treating them for illnesses and parasites while socializing them. When they were ready for adoption, she'd either find a home for them on her own or take them to the Hawaiian Humane Society based in Honolulu to be displayed in the cat adoption area so they could find a loving new owner. But what amazed her was that no matter how many she saved and fostered, the cats just kept coming.

Oahu's cat overpopulation issue has been around for a long time — Mark Twain even wrote about it in the 1860s while he was there on assignment for The Sacramento Union (see sidebar). Despite this, almost none of the 4.5 million people who visit Oahu each year are aware of it. The cats are hidden behind swaying palm trees and in the shadows of the island's jagged, emerald-colored volcanic peaks.

To raise awareness of the feline overpopulation issue and inspire people to help them, Morris married her photographic skills with her compassion for homeless cats by creating an evocative art show that went on display at the Hawaiian Humane Society a few years ago. It featured formal black-and-white portraits of cats that Morris saved, which were printed in large format so that the cats in the photos were nearly life-size.

"I had this strong feeling to make their sadness and what they've gone through count for something," Morris says. "I had to show this because so many (homeless cats) just slip away and disappear. I decided to record them in a beautiful way to let people see into their souls. It was one more little brick in the wall of building peoples' consciousness about the problem and what they can do about it."

Today, Haleiwa Harbor looks much different thanks to Morris and the example of kindness that she set for others, who can now carry on her legacy. On a bright, sunny morning, a few healthy-looking cats emerge from the relatively debris-free breakwater and stretch in the warm morning sun. Most have notched ears, which indicates that they've been spayed or neutered. With their tails in the air, they run toward the park caretakers who bring them their breakfast.

This positive change also is reflected throughout the island. The number of surrendered cats at the shelter has decreased by 22 percent since 1995, and feline euthanasia has dropped by 31 percent.

"I think this has been accomplished by feral cat caregivers like Morris trapping and bringing in cats to be sterilized," says Pamela Burns, president and CEO of Hawaiian Humane Society. No doubt that Morris' fostering and adoption efforts have helped as well.

Morris smiles while watching a shiny black Haleiwa Harbor cat diligently groom himself after his meal.

"When a suffering animal or cat in need presents itself to you or crosses your path, just take the time to do something about it," she says. "It'll make you feel so much better. Every little thing the people can do, every act of kindness — even if you only rescue one animal in your life — is a huge step toward fixing the overall problem"

Cimeron Morrissey is a cat rescuer, award-winning writer and Animal Planet's 2007 Cat Hero of the Year. She is a member of the board of directors of Homeless Cat Network, a no-kill feline rescue organization in the San Francisco Bay Area.