

## Scratching the Surface

**Understanding this basic behavior can salvage your furniture and save your relationship with your cat.**

*Marty Becker, DVM, and Janice Willard, DVM*

Posted: Tue Aug 3 00:00:00 PDT 2004

Bugsy, a 4-year-old orange tabby, awoke from a nap, yawned, stretched, walked over to a palm tree in his backyard and started to rake his claws. "He looked just like a serval in the wild, raking its claws on a tree," said Bugsy's owner, Jill Mellen, Ph.D., education and science director at Disney's Animal Kingdom near Orlando, Fla., who has studied the behavior of 20 species of small, non-domestic cats for her doctoral research. "In fact, in my research slide collection there are pictures of a tiger, a serval, a caracal, an ocelot and a domestic cat all raking their claws. From feline species to species, this behavior is just remarkably similar."

"Providing scratching surfaces like a log are a basic provision for all cats kept in zoos," said David Shepherdson, Ph.D., conservation program scientist at the Oregon Zoo in Portland. "It has been known for a long time that this is a basic behavioral need for a cat species, as well as part of their natural environment. In fact, so important is this behavior for cats, that it would be considered a welfare concern if cats were not provided with a means to express this basic behavioral need."

Every cat owner, no matter what type of cat it is, needs to have something for it to sharpen its claws on, said Mellen. "When you furnish your living room, you start with a couch. Similarly, for cats, a log to scratch on is the basic piece of furniture you always include."

Be it a couch, the molding around doors or a pair of stereo speakers, a cat's basic need is to scratch, and if we don't provide them with what they need, they will manufacture it from the materials at their disposal. This feline expression costs many cats their homes or results in declawing surgery.

You don't have to declaw or get rid of the cat, or accept a cat ruining your home. Nor do you need to deny your cat the ability to scratch. By providing appropriate scratching surfaces in locations where your cat can enjoy them, training your cat to use acceptable objects and discouraging the scratching of unacceptable surfaces, you and your cat can find a pleasing compromise.

To provide your cats with scratching surfaces that meet their needs and are more attractive to them than household items, you must first understand why and what cats scratch.