

To claw or not to claw? NY cat proposal sparks frisky debate

May 22 2016, by David Klepper And Verena Dobnik



In this May 19, 2016 photo provided by Lisa Fernandez, school children interact with "Rubio," who is a poster cat for The Paw Project, an advocacy organization against feline declawing. Fernandez, a Brooklyn elementary school principal,

leads a program to teach the schoolchildren about declawing and help them stage action against it. At rear left is Jacques Cadeau, Suleila Clarke, is in the foreground and Brandon Blue is at right. (Lisa Fernandez via AP)

For many decades, declawing cats has been a routine veterinary procedure, but this is no simple pedicure. There's anesthesia, pain medication and the amputation of the cat's toes back to the first knuckle.

New York's first-in-the-nation legislative proposal to ban the declawing of [cats](#) has sparked a heated debate among veterinarians and cat lovers alike, with some insisting it's inhumane and others saying it should be allowed as a last resort for felines that won't stop scratching furniture, carpets and their owners.

"None of us love the procedure," said Richard Goldstein, a veterinarian at New York City's Animal Medical Center and a former faculty member at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine. "But when the alternative is condemning the cat to a shelter or to death? That's why we do it."

The state and national veterinary organizations that say they oppose a ban on declawing do so because it's often the only way for cats with behavioral problems to keep from being abandoned or euthanized, they say. Such medical decisions should be left to the professionals and [cat owners](#), not lawmakers, they add.

It's the reality of the procedure itself that has raised the backs of opponents. Unlike human nails, a cat's claws are attached to bone, so declawing a feline requires a veterinarian to slice through tendon and nerves to remove the last segment of bone in a cat's toes.



In this May 17, 2016, file photo, a cat named Rubio walks in front of the podium during a news conference in Albany, N.Y. Legislation in New York to ban declawing cats is singling out a once-common procedure that veterinarians say is now on the decline. (AP Photo/Mike Groll, File)

"It's amputation. It is the equivalent of taking a cigar cutter and cutting the end joint off," said Jenner Conrad, a California veterinarian who traveled to Albany this past week to lobby lawmakers for the proposed ban.

Brooklyn elementary school principal Lisa Fernandez said she declawed her own cat before she knew what it entailed. Students at her school are

now participating in a lobbying campaign to urge lawmakers to support the ban.

"When I found out what it was, I was horrified," said Fernandez.

The debate comes as Americans' feelings about their four-legged friends continue to evolve. Another bill in New York's Legislature would remove sales taxes on pet food, and lawmakers here voted last year to allow dogs to join their human companions on the patios of restaurants. Several states have now banned surgeries which remove a dog's vocal cords. And all 50 states now have statutes making severe animal cruelty a felony.

"There's a rising tide of social concern about animal welfare," said Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States. "We've proven that the American public is deeply concerned about the welfare of animals, the ones that live with them and the ones used for food production."



In this Friday, May 20, 2016, photo, Chief Medical Officer at the Animal Medical Center, Dr. Richard Goldstein speaks during an interview with The Associated Press in New York. Goldstein says that veterinarians don't like to declaw cats but it's better than the alternatives of housing the cat in a shelter or putting it to death. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

Australia, Britain and several European countries already ban cat declawing. It's also illegal in Los Angeles and some other California cities. Estimates are that about a quarter of all household cats will be declawed in their lifetimes—though vets that spoke to the AP say it's becoming less and less common.

At the Animal Haven shelter in lower Manhattan, associate director Kendra Mara said about 10 percent of the cats up for adoption are declawed. Some of the felines who have the procedure resort to biting instead, and some avoid using the litter box because the litter can aggravate their wounds.

"It's never an easy adoption," she said. "There's always the need to work on the behavior issue."

Manhattan resident Brian Gari, one of several cat owners interviewed by the AP, inherited his 10-year-old cat Kiki when his father passed away and declawed her because "he put his furniture in front of the welfare of the cat." Gari said Kiki has problems using the litterbox, forcing him to put her into a room lined with newspapers.

"It's a total nightmare. I have to work around the situation," he said. "She's very sweet though. But she's completely screwed up."



In this Friday, May 20, 2016, photo, Chief Medical Officer at the Animal Medical Center, Dr. Richard Goldstein checks on one of his patients at the hospital's clinic in New York. When asked his feeling about declawing cats, Goldstein said that veterinarians don't like the procedure but it's better than the alternatives of housing the cat in a shelter or putting it to death. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

Vets who spoke to the AP said cat owners increasingly turn to alternatives—scratching posts, regular clippings or small caps that go over a cat's nails.

The New York State Veterinary Medical Society, however, remains opposed to a full ban. President Susan Wylegala said the number of declawings at her Buffalo-area practice is less than 50 percent of what it was just three years ago.

"We're seeing it in significantly lower numbers because vets are educating clients on the alternatives that are available," she said. "It needs to remain that last option."

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Citation: To claw or not to claw? NY cat proposal sparks frisky debate (2016, May 22) retrieved 7 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-05-claw-ny-cat-frisky-debate.html>

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