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Further research into circumstances surrounding domestic cats getting lost and mitigating strategies

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Domestic cats are among the most popular companion animals. Due to their free-roaming nature, they can become lost and separated from their owners (Lord *et al.*, 2007). That this is a real problem is supported by the observation that around 15% of cat owners reported losing their pet in the last five years (Weiss *et al.*, 2012). Being separated from their pet can have a strong emotional impact on owners, but can also burden animal shelters where these animals can end up.

Apart from their free-roaming nature, several factors can contribute to cats becoming lost or not coming home. A common cause are traffic accidents (Wilson *et al.*, 2017). Other kinds of trauma can originate from falls and dog attacks (Hernon *et al.*, 2018). Profound changes in their living environment (such as introduction of a dog) are also sometimes mentioned as risk factors for cats not coming home.

To mitigate the risk of a cat becoming lost, several actions can be taken. Certain measures can help to identify cats that are found. The main examples of such measures are microchipping and identification tags (Lord *et al.*, 2010; Weiss *et al.*, 2016). Other methods are used to find a cat that went missing such as searching the neighbourhood where the animal was last seen (Weiss *et al.*, 2012). Social media are also used to reunite owners with their lost pets, both on a small scale (e.g. circulation a post among friends) and in dedicated communities (e.g. Facebook groups). A less commonly used, but possibly very effective, strategy is localization using trackers. These devices are usually attached to the animal's collar and provide the location of the animal through a range of possible means, including GPS signals. However, there are also certain disadvantages. The trackers can be quite large and often require a paid subscription. Moreover, cats can get stuck when wearing a collar or lose the collars the trackers are attached to if those collars have a safety release. Apart from these measures, starting to look early and looking after cats that are obviously lost or hurt should be a first reflex.

The success rate of reuniting cats with their owner is not fully clear. The percentage of cats that are eventually found ranges between 53 – 75% in the literature (Lord *et al.*, 2007; Weiss *et al.*, 2012; Huang *et al.*, 2018). It can be expected that this percentage is highly dependent on several factors, such as the search methods used and the area where the animal went missing. Having a better understanding about the success rate of the different strategies can be a start to reuniting more owners with their pets.

The amount of literature about factors surrounding cats getting lost or localization strategies is very limited. A systematic review could provide a structured overview of the current knowledge and provide a direction for further research. A subsequent cohort study could identify risk factors that are linked to a higher risk of cats getting lost and identify the most effective methods in locating lost cats. Due to the nature of the problem, prospective interventional studies are not feasible.

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