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Cute, Cuddly, Vicious Predators

The House in the state of Utah recently passed the HB210 bill, the so-called “feral cat” bill, which allows for any animal deemed a pest to be shot. No one can deny that feral cat overpopulation is a problem, but we can’t seem to agree on how best to deal with that problem. Cat lovers are outraged at the thought of feral cats being caught in claw traps or hunted, while bird lovers and those who are annoyed by feral cats in their neighborhood feel these are some of the most effective methods for dealing with overpopulation.

I realized that this is not just a Utah-centric debate, but a national one as well. I wanted to find out what others are saying, so I found two articles dealing with the matter online. My purpose in writing this paper is not to try and convince you who is right and who is wrong, but to analyze the rhetoric that is being used on both sides of the issue. After reading articles by Steve Dale and Leanna Teague and examining the methods of rhetoric each author uses to persuade their readers, I believe Dale ended up being more successful than Teague; he acknowledges the

feelings of those on both sides of the argument, does a better job of showing why his solution works, and ultimately I found him to be the more credible of the two.

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From his website, I was able to find out that Steve Dale is the author of the twice weekly syndicated newspaper column “My Pet Word.” He is also the host of

several nationally syndicated radio programs. He is certified as a Behavior Consultant by the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants and serves on several Boards of Directors, including the American Humane Association. On December 8, 2010, Dale posted a blog titled “Trap, Neuter, Return Or Trap and Shoot?” on ChicagoNow, an online blogging site for issues specific to Chicago. Dale seems to be writing not just to cat lovers, but all animal lovers, as well as people who are concerned with the best way to deal with feral cat populations. The purpose of his blog is to convince readers that rather than hunting and shooting feral cats, we should use a method known as trap, neuter, return (TNR).

Dale begins his article by informing the reader of the release of a recent report by the University of Nebraska Extension, called “Feral Cats and Their Management.” He says the report endorses catching feral cats in barbaric traps, and also whipping out a gun to shoot unwanted cats. He recognizes that feral cats and strays are a problem, but says that methods such as poisoning and shooting have been used in the past and were unsuccessful; if they had worked, we wouldn’t still have a problem today. Dale believes that the best solution to manage feral cat

colonies is a relatively recent idea called trap, neuter, return or TNR. The goal with TNR, he says, is that colony members, unable to reproduce, dwindle to zero and that

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if given half a chance it does work. He concludes by saying that blaming all the problems facing songbirds is plain wrong. Light and air pollution are also imminent

threats to birds. If we all want to see feral cats decline significantly, and we all want to protect birds, why can’t we find a solution by working together?

One of the author’s rhetorical choices that struck me as most interesting was his use of pictures throughout the article. There are pictures of a cat’s foot caught in a claw trap, a cat caught in a cat trap, a cat standing over a dead bird, a cute and cuddly looking cat lounging on carpet. For the most part, it seems the author uses this visual rhetoric with the intention of pulling at the reader’s heart-strings or conscience. It has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. By using photos instead of words, Dale is able to get his point across to his readers just as, if not more, effectively as a well said argument might.

The caption the author includes with each picture is another rhetorical device. The picture with the cat’s foot in the claw trap says, “Do you really want to see this in your community, moreover do you want your kids to see this? Besides is this really necessary? It’s not necessary, and it’s not humane.” There is a picture of a yellow bird with the caption, “Here’s a rare Prothornotary Warbler – I don’t want to see anything bad happen to this stunning species, or any other. This is why ‘bird people’ and ‘cat people’ need to work together. In the long-run cooperation is what we will need to help birds, but also political muscle and leverage to save the environment and lessen pollution which are truly more imminent threats.” Through these captions, Dale is using logical reasoning to try and convince his audience that

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hunting feral cats is not the solution to the problem. The author is hoping that by showing a cat caught in a trap and then asking readers if

they “really want” themselves or their children to see this, his readers will conclude that the traps used to hunt cats are inhumane, it would be bad for anyone to see cats caught in them, and therefore hunting feral cats is wrong.

Another technique used by Dale is citing credible sources, such as the American Veterinary Medical Association and The American Animal Hospital Association, to back up his position. Here is a specific example: “Robin Ganzert, president and CEO of the American Humane Association, chimes in: "It's absolutely unconscionable to advocate shooting cats as humane. How does the person pulling the trigger know if the cat is feral or not? And advocating shooting at cats is potentially very dangerous for the community. What if just one child is injured? We know there's a better way for the community and the cats, and it's called trap, neuter, return." Ganzert isn't alone. Many other organizations have issued statements in opposition to the University of Nebraska report.” I think Dale chose this technique to increase his believability and thereby build trust with his

audience.

The second article I found is “Hunting Feral Cats: Should It Be Legalized?” by Leanna Teague. It was posted on the Yahoo! Contributor Network on August 28, 2006. I wasn’t able to find out much about Teague, but her profile on the Yahoo! Contributor Network shows that, since becoming a contributor in 2006, she has written 918 blogs on many varied subjects. In this particular article, Teague’s likely

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purpose is to persuade readers that it will benefit both humans and other species of animals if hunting feral cats is legalized. Her intended readers are probably anyone

who is worried about a feral cat problem in their area, animal lovers, and bird lovers.In her article, Teague explains that a feral cat is a wild cat that will hunt any small prey to survive. She says that people tend to think a cat living outdoors is not a feral cat, but any cat outdoors, no matter how tame it seems to be, is still wild. Cats, she states, are vicious predators that are wiping out the songbird population. Teague claims that the solution of catching, spaying or neutering, and then releasing feral cats is a bad one. This is because one feral cat that escapes being spayed or neutered can produce thousands of feral cats with the help of its offspring. She

believes that, although hunting feral cats might seem cruel, it’s no different than hunting deer, who pose no threat to other species. The author says stray cats, on the other hand, are carriers of numerous diseases such as rabies, salmonella, Typhoid Fever, and Toxoplasmosis, which is now linked to Schizophrenia. Teague concludes that hunting feral cats should be legalized and that we need to do what’s right for all species to survive and not allow one species to eliminate another.

One of the first forms of rhetoric I notice the author using is her style of writing. The length of the sentences she writes throughout the article is short and to the point. “Cats in general are vicious predators. They have razor sharp claws and teeth. They are also becoming a huge problem few people want to acknowledge.” Teague most likely used this straightforward approach to make her audience feel comfortable reading her article and easily understand her position on the matter.

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Teague also uses word choice to evoke strong emotion in her readers. Here is an example of this: “If scratched by a stray you should immediately go to the doctor for

a series of painful shots in the stomach as a preventative measure for rabies.” Here, by advising her audience to “immediately” go to the doctor where they will receive “painful” shots, Teague is hoping that fear will help persuade her readers that hunting feral cats should be legalized.

Another rhetorical technique Teague uses is logic through facts and statistics. At one point she tells us that “Wisconsin has an estimated two million feral cats alone. Each year they kill an estimated forty seven million to one hundred thirty nine million birds.” Later she says that “Toxoplasmosis is caused by Toxoplasma Gondii parasites. Any animal could be infected, but the main carrier is the cat…Toxoplasmosis is now linked to Schizophrenia because the parasites have been found in the brain.” By using facts and statistics that show how harmful feral cats are to both health and the environment, Teague anticipates that her readers will be convinced of the necessity of hunting them.

While both authors use logical reasoning to persuade their readers, Dale winds up being more successful than Teague. Teague’s arguments against feral cats are very one-sided, whereas Dale takes into account the viewpoint of both cat lovers and bird lovers. He acknowledges that feral cats are a problem for people because they can “carry diseases we might potentially get, including toxoplasmosis and rabies” and that they pose a problem for wildlife “because the cats

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do kill songbirds (often endangered species) and other wildlife.” Then he points out that “many nations have been dealing with feral cats for centuries…when feral cats became too much of a problem they might have been poisoned, shot at, or animal

control officials would be asked to catch and kill them. If this approach worked, we wouldn’t still have a problem today.” He also tells us that “cat lovers don’t want to see birds further endangered, either,” but blaming cats for all the problems facing songbirds is wrong because “experts concur that habitat destruction, and both light and air pollution are also immediate threats to birds.” By attempting to avoid an overly biased argument, Dale ingratiates himself with his audience.

The biggest reason I find Dale’s rhetoric to be more effective than Teague’s is credibility. It was easy to find more information about Dale and his experience as an animal expert, but I was able to find out very little about Teague. More important, however, was the fact that Dale cited his sources while Teague simply made statements. For example, Teague says, “Wisconsin has an estimated two million feral cats alone. Each year they kill an estimated forty seven million to one hundred thirty nine million birds.” She does not say where she is getting these numbers from. Dale, on the other hand, says, “We don’t know how many feral cats are out there, but we do know cats are America’ No. 1 pet, with nearly 90 million pet cats (according to

American Pet Products Association).” Because Dale shows the reader where he is getting his information, the reader will feel they can trust what he has to say.

After reading these two articles and closely examining the kinds of rhetoric each author uses, I am able to see why it is so important to be able to recognize

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rhetorical devices. Not just pertaining to the issue of feral cats, but all issues. When you are able to recognize rhetoric, you are less easily persuaded or willing to accept opinion as truth. I am reminded of the sarcastic saying that TV (or books, or movies,

or the internet) never lies. The truth is that media is full of biases and hidden agendas. Being able to sift through rhetoric is an essential skill if you want to

be able to think for yourself.