

Trap, Neuter, Release: The Wrong Solution to a Tragic Problem

CATS INDOORS

The Homeless Cat Problem

Nobody knows how many homeless cats run loose in the United States, but estimates range from 60 to 100 million. Whether stray (abandoned or lost) or feral (descendants of strays living in the wild), these non-native predators often lead short, miserable lives, and wreak havoc on populations of birds and other wildlife already under siege from many other threats.

Unchecked, cat populations can skyrocket. In warmer climates, a female cat can have up to three litters per year, with four to six kittens per litter. Unaltered, roaming pet cats also contribute to the problem. Animal welfare groups work hard to encourage people to adopt pets from shelters, keep them indoors, spay or neuter their cats, and never abandon them. However, cat overpopulation remains a significant problem, with serious consequences for birds and for human health.

Groups of stray cats or “colonies” often form around an artificial food source, such as garbage dumps or places where people deliberately leave food out for cats. While artificial feeding may seem humane, it exacerbates the overpopulation problem because the cat colony will grow.



Greg Homel, Natural Elements Productions

Trap, Neuter, Release

While many humane groups, conservation organizations, and local authorities agree that homeless cats should be humanely and permanently removed from the wild, some people advocate managing colonies of stray cats through a practice called Trap, Neuter, Release or TNR. Volunteers trap the cats and take them to a veterinarian or clinic. The cats are spayed or neutered and sometimes vaccinated against rabies, and the tip of one ear may be clipped to identify the cats, which are then released, usually at the trap site.

TNR is being practiced, sometimes with explicit legal authorization, but sometimes in violation of local laws and ordinances, in cities, suburbs, college campuses, public parks and beaches, farms, areas adjacent to wildlife refuges, and on islands. Some volunteers use their own funds or secure donations or public funding from local governments. From 1999 to 2002, Madie's Fund gave \$9.5 million to the California Veterinary Medical Association to reimburse 1,116 veterinarians who spayed or neutered 170,334 un-owned cats for release. Only half of those cats were vaccinated against rabies, and far fewer received vaccines for other fatal feline diseases.

An Ineffective Way To End Cat Overpopulation

TNR is really the perpetual maintenance of cat colonies. Although proponents often claim that cat colonies die out in just a few years, it is now common to hear of colonies that have existed for ten or more years. Cat colonies perpetuate themselves because they often serve as dumping grounds for unwanted cats, and the food attracts more cats.

A prime example of TNR failing to eliminate feral cat colonies even at great expense is the Ocean Reef Club TNR program on North Key Largo, Florida. Starting in 1989, the volunteer group ORCAT trapped and spayed or neutered approximately 200 cats per year for five years. However, the cat population only grew larger. More intense efforts were needed, which led to the community association-sponsored “Feral Cat Center” in 1995 with an annual budget of \$100,000 and paid staff. By 1999, Ocean Reef’s cat population was considered “stabilized” at about 500, which is where it stands today.¹

In a study of managed cat colonies in two Florida parks, Crandon Marina and A.D. Barnes Park, feral cat colonies did not decrease in size, and the existing cats did not keep new cats from joining the colony, or away from food. The well-fed cats in both colonies were observed stalking and killing birds and other wildlife.²

The Suffering Does Not End

Managed cat colonies are not a humane solution for the cats themselves because they still face a multitude of hazards and diseases (see *The Great Outdoors Is No Place For Cats* at www.abcbirds.org/cats). Cats that have been captured once are also extremely hard to catch subsequently for re-vaccination or to treat for



Starving feral kitten: Alan Hopkins



Feral cat: Stavrolo, Wikimedia Commons

illness or injury. Not all volunteers have the money for testing and vaccination, and many debilitating and life-threatening illnesses cannot be treated on a one-time basis, such as roundworm, ringworm, fleas, ticks, ear mites, abscesses, respiratory infections, urinary tract infections, and eye infections.

Volunteers Often Can't Manage a Colony

Colony feeders must constantly trap new cats and kittens. Feeders are often overwhelmed by the cost and responsibility. According to the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare report, *The Fate of Controlled Feral Cat Colonies*, “The most common complaint from members of cat action groups was that they had too few people or too little money to adequately manage their population of cats.”

TNR clearly is not in the best interest of birds and other wildlife or of the cats, and it even overwhelms the ability of well-meaning people who genuinely want to alleviate animal suffering. It also undermines efforts to encourage responsible pet ownership.

Risks To Human Health

Cat colonies, even managed ones, pose a serious human health risk.³ Diseases that can be transmitted to humans, such as toxoplasmosis and rabies are very real threats. Rabies is 100% fatal if untreated; toxoplasmosis, which can be spread by contact with cat feces, causes birth defects, and is being studied for possible links to severe behavioral changes. Cats are the domestic animal most commonly reported rabid in the United States.⁴ Feeding stations artificially put these animals in close contact with raccoons and skunks, the most common carriers of rabies in wildlife. Cats are rarely caught for follow-up vaccination, de-worming, or other health concerns. The National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians passed a resolution opposing TNR because it poses a human health risk.⁵



Cat and raccoon at feeding station: Alan Hopkins

Deadly To Wildlife

There is extensive documentation that free-roaming cats are efficient predators of birds and other wildlife, even if well-fed, and that they can harm marine mammals, such as sea otters and Hawaiian monk seals through transmission of toxoplasmosis (see *Domestic Cat Predation on Birds and Other Wildlife* at www.abcbirds.org/cats).

In January 2011, the Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges issued a proposal to remove feral cats from the Florida Keys because of the harm they were causing endangered species and other wildlife. They pointed out that cat predation accounted for 50% and 77% of mortality of two endangered species, the Lower Keys marsh rabbit and the Key Largo woodrat.



Feral kitten eating rabbit: Jake Berzon, Wikimedia Commons

The refuges reviewed the available scientific literature and found that free-roaming cats reduce wildlife abundance and diversity, cause extinctions of native bird populations, and kill as many as one billion birds per year in the United States.⁶ The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also rejected a TNR management alternative after a review of available studies showed that TNR will not reduce cat predation of wildlife and it is an ineffective means of eliminating feral cat colonies.⁷ The Service stated that “TNR practices are prohibited on National Wildlife Refuges, and violate the Endangered Species Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act because they may result in the direct harm of protected species.”

TNR May Not Be Legal

A University of Florida law student conducted a thorough review of wildlife protection and animal cruelty laws, *Feral Cat Colonies in Florida: The Fur and Feathers Are Flying* (www.law.ufl.edu/conservation/projects/projects_u_feralcats.shtml) commissioned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The review concluded that TNR is likely a violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Endangered Species Act, and Florida state laws prohibiting abandonment and release of non-native animals.

Who Opposes TNR?

American Bird Conservancy, American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians, The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, The Wildlife Society, the Association of Avian Veterinarians, United Activists for Animal Rights, the New York Coalition for Animal Rights, and the Florida Animal Control Association all oppose TNR.

The Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) passed a resolution on May 30, 2003 opposing TNR on FWC lands and all lands managed for wildlife (See www.abcbirds.org/cats/florida_policy.htm).

In 2002, the U.S. Navy issued a policy letter that stated that TNR efforts would no longer be established on Navy land and that all TNR efforts would be terminated by January 1, 2003 (See www.abcbirds.org/cats/navypolicy.pdf).

ENDNOTES

- 1 Clarke, A.L. and T. Pacin. 2002. Domestic cat "colonies" in natural areas: a growing exotic species threat. *Natural Areas Journal* 22:154-159.
- 2 Castillo, D. and A.L. Clarke. 2003. Trap/neuter/release methods ineffective in controlling domestic cat "colonies" on public lands. *Natural Areas Journal* 23:247-253.
- 3 Gerhold, Rick, DVM, Ph.D., Cats as Carriers of Disease: the Potential to Spread a Host of Diseases to Humans and Wildlife. *Wildlife Professional*, Spring 2011, The Wildlife Society.
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- 4 Center for Disease Control and Prevention: Rabies <http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/exposure/animals/domestic.html>
- 5 National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, Compendium of Animal Rabies Prevention and Control, 2011, <http://www.nasphv.org/Documents/RabiesCompendium.pdf>
- 6 GILL, F. 1995. *Ornithology*, 2nd ed. W.H. Freeman. New York, NY.
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- 7 Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges issued a Draft Integrated Predator Management Plan Environmental Assessment, 2011.

BETTER SOLUTIONS

Local officials and park managers often have the difficult task of finding solutions to cat overpopulation problems that satisfy cat feeders, conservationists, and the community at large. The following are some recommendations:

- ✓ Humanely remove stray and feral cats from communities, parks, and other public areas that provide habitat for wildlife, and take them to a shelter. To locate a shelter near you, see the National Shelter Directory at www.asPCA.org/findashelter
- ✓ Educate cat owners to spay or neuter their cats at eight weeks to four month of age, and keep them indoors.
- ✓ Educate the public that feeding stray cats is not the best solution for cats, wildlife, or people.
- ✓ Enact and enforce legislation prohibiting abandonment of cats, and post warning signs in public wildlife areas.
- ✓ Prohibit the feeding of stray cats, including those in managed colonies, in public parks, and on beaches, wildlife refuges, or other public lands that serve as wildlife habitat; publicize this information.
- ✓ Involve wildlife experts from nearby colleges, parks, or state/federal agencies, community health officials, veterinarians, conservation groups, and animal shelter facilities to work together to solve cat overpopulation problems in your area.
- ✓ Support fully enclosed stray and feral cat sanctuaries on private property. Cats in sanctuaries, such as those at Best Friends, Utah; Rikki's Refuge, Virginia; and the Humane Society of Ocean City, New Jersey, are safe, sheltered, and well-fed. In addition, the cats do not harm wildlife or create health hazards for the general public.