

“MANAGED” CAT COLONIES: THE WRONG SOLUTION TO A TRAGIC PROBLEM

THE PROBLEM

Nobody knows how many homeless cats roam free in the U.S., 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 can 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, free-roaming pet cats also contribute to the problem. Animal welfare groups work hard to encourage people to adopt their pets from shelters, keep them indoors, spay or neuter their cats, and never abandon them. However, cat overpopulation remains a serious problem, and millions of homeless cats are euthanized each year.

Aggregations 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. Animal control officers are often called in to trap the cats and permanently remove them. Cats unsuitable for adoption are usually euthanized.

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**. TNR varies, but in general, volunteers live-trap the cats and take them to a veterinarian or clinic. If funds are available, the cats may be tested for fatal feline diseases such as feline leukemia virus (FeLV) or feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). Cats testing positive for these diseases or seriously ill cats may be euthanized. The cats are usually vaccinated against rabies and may be vaccinated for other diseases. The cats are spayed or neutered, and the tip of one ear is clipped to easily identify cats that have been de-sexed. The cats are then released, usually at the trap site, where they continue to be fed for as long as they remain in the colony. This could be a day, a month, or years. Kittens and recently abandoned or lost cats may be put up for adoption.

TNR is being practiced, sometimes with explicit legal authorization, in cities, suburbs, college campuses, public parks and beaches, farms, areas adjacent to wildlife refuges, and islands. Some TNR advocates oppose cat registration, spay/neuter requirements, or cat restraint laws unless they are exempted. Some volunteers use their own funds and/or secure donations or public funding from local governments.



Photo: Dan Castillo

AN INEFFECTIVE WAY TO END CAT OVERPOPULATION

TNR efforts in the U.S. began in the early 1990s, and some groups claim to have trapped, neutered, and released thousands of cats. Organizations promoting TNR occur in at least 40 states plus Washington, DC and Puerto Rico. TNR is especially popular in California, Florida, and Hawaii; states with highly endangered ecosystems and wildlife. (See state fact sheets at: www.abcbirds.org/cats). One of the largest TNR efforts was in California. From 1999 to 2002, Maddie’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.



Photo: Linda Winter

The founding theory behind TNR is based on 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 “managed” cat colonies that have existed for 10 or more years. For example, when the Stanford Cat Network

began TNR in 1989, they claimed there were approximately 500 cats on campus. Fifteen years later, they claim there were originally 1,500 cats on campus in 1989, and now there are approximately 200 cats on campus. Whichever number is believed, TNR has not eliminated the stray cat population on the Stanford University campus.

Cat colonies perpetuate themselves because they often serve as dumping grounds for unwanted cats and the food attracts more cats. Colonies often contain cats too wary to be caught. Cats that have been spayed or neutered, vaccinated, and regularly fed will also live longer. In a study of managed cat colonies in two Florida parks, Crandon Marina and A.D. Barnes Park, the cat colonies did not decrease in size, and the 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 wildlife, including a Common Yellowthroat (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).

RISKS TO HUMAN HEALTH

Cat colonies, even managed ones, pose a serious human health risk. Diseases that can be transmitted to humans, such as ringworm, cat scratch fever, and toxoplasmosis, cannot be controlled in managed cat colonies. Rabies is a very real threat. Raccoons and skunks are common visitors to feeding stations, as well as foxes, opossums, and rats. Raccoons and skunks are the most common carriers of rabies in wildlife, and cats are the domestic animal most commonly reported rabid in the U.S. Feeding stations artificially put these animals in close contact with each other. 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 health risk.

DEADLY TO WILDLIFE

There is extensive documentation that free-roaming cats are efficient predators of birds and other wildlife, even if well-fed (see **Domestic Cat Predation on Birds and Other Wildlife** at www.abcbirds.org/cats). The American Veterinary Medical Association’s position statement on managed cat colonies states, “The colony should be restricted to a well-defined relatively safe area, and not on lands managed for wildlife or other natural resources (e.g. state parks, wildlife refuges, etc.)” However, cat colonies are common in public parks and beaches, despite the presence of sensitive wildlife species.

For example, in 1994 Alley Cat Allies sought an injunction to stop the National Park Service (NPS) from removing a stray cat colony from park land. It is against NPS policy to allow

pets, including domestic cats, on park property without restraint. NPS removed 28 cats and three kittens (none were euthanized) from the park before the hearing, and the case was dismissed as moot. A legal decision in favor of the feeders could have set a precedent for all NPS lands. Since the food source was removed, a new cat



Photo: Alan Hopkins

colony has *not* formed there (Sealy, D. 1996. Removal of a colony of free-ranging domestic cats from an area administered by the National Park Service: A Case History. pp. 75-77 In *Uncommon Care for Common Animals. Proceedings of the 1995 International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council Conference, Virginia Beach, VA, 223 pp.*).

Another example is the Ocean Reef Club TNR program on North Key Largo, FL. Starting in 1989, the volunteer group ORCAT reportedly trapped and had 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. Adjacent to Ocean Reef Club is the Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park, and across the road is the Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge. These areas provide the last remaining habitat for the highly endangered Key Largo woodrat and Key Largo cotton mouse. A captive breeding program has been established in an attempt to save the woodrat from extinction (Clarke, A.L. and T. Pacin. 2002. Domestic cat “colonies” in natural areas: a growing exotic species threat. *Natural Areas Journal* 22:154-159).

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 extremely hard to catch subsequently for re-vaccination or to treat for 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



Photo: Alan Hopkins

infections. According to PETA, half of the 32 cats in one colony were shot by a man who claimed they were attacking his children. Cats in another colony were shot with darts. A loose dog killed several cats in another colony. A resident of Port St. Lucie, FL who tried TNR stated, "I was not helping these cats, I was only prolonging a terrible lonely and disease-filled life that I would not wish on anyone. The feral cat colony supporters need to realize that what they are doing is not humane or compassionate—it is a selfish act of the heart." (Letter to the Editor, Stuart News, 3/16/01).

VOLUNTEERS OFTEN CAN'T MANAGE

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 the cats, and even overwhelms the ability of well-meaning people who genuinely want to alleviate animal suffering. It also undermines efforts to encourage responsible pet ownership by keeping cats indoors.

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) which was commissioned by the U.S. Fish & 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 American Ornithologists' Union, The Cooper Ornithological Society, the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, The Wildlife Society and its Florida Chapter, the Association of Avian Veterinarians, United Activists for Animal Rights, the New York Coalition for Animal Rights, the Florida Animal Control Association, Madison Audubon Society, and the Wisconsin Society for Ornithologists 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).

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:



Educate cat owners to spay or neuter their cats from 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; and 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.



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/site/FrameSet?style=Shelter&url=../script_forms/shelter.html



Support fully enclosed stray and feral cat sanctuaries on private property. Cats in sanctuaries, such as those at Best Friends, UT; Rikki's Refuge, VA; and the Humane Society of Ocean City, NJ, are safe, sheltered, and well-fed. In addition, the cats do not harm wildlife or create health hazards for the general public.

For more information, contact:

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