

Grassroots Efforts

Voices chime in on
the managed
colony debate.

By Justin W. Sanders

You've probably seen one before. Maybe you glimpsed four little white legs slinking down a darkened alley or saw a flash of calico scuttling under a car. Maybe you noticed its scrawniness, or its weepy eyes or the grease in its fur. Maybe you even wondered where the feral cat was going and what was waiting for it once it arrived.

"There's no good number on how many feral cats there are," says Karen Kraus, director of the Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon. "But just because you don't see them, doesn't mean they're not suffering."

Kraus and the Feral Cat Coalition strive to improve the quality of life for feral cats by diminishing their numbers and helping prevent them from spreading diseases to other cats. Using a technique called trap-neuter-return (TNR), they lend traps to caregivers of feral cats (the people who are feeding them), who capture the animals and bring them to the organization for treatment. Kraus and her team then sterilize the cats; apply treatment for fleas, mites and other ailments; and vaccinate for rabies and distemper. Upon picking up the cat or cats, the caregiver must promise to continue to feed and care for them from that point forth. In this way, the Coalition helps cultivate the "management" of feral cat colonies.



SUPPORTERS AND CRITICS

The notion of the managed cat colony has gained momentum over the years. In 2006, for example, the Feral Cat Coalition sterilized and treated 3,039 cats, the most in its 13-year history. The program also has its detractors. Many believe no evidence exists that managing cat colonies reduces the feral cat population or helps prevent the spread of disease. Frequently, this counterargument comes from nature preservation groups, who fear that feral cat colonies pose a danger not only to local wildlife but also to other cats.

"Where feral or free roaming cats are encouraged, there's going to be an impact on wildlife," says Michael Parr, vice president of the American Bird Conservancy.

Parr believes outdoor cats, whether feral or domesticated, have directly contributed to the elimination — and even extinction — of naturally occurring wildlife, especially rare ground-nesting birds such as the piping plover, the California clapper rail and the Florida scrub-jay. Groups that support managed cat colonies, such as Alley Cat Allies in Maryland, deny this claim.

"Studies show overwhelmingly that the main cause of wildlife depletion is the destruction of habitat," says Jessica Frohman, program manager of Alley Cat Allies. "That's not a feral cat problem. That's a human problem."

Parr concedes that, "habitat destruction is a big problem, but if you add cat predation to the mix, it makes it worse."

Parr and the American Bird Conservancy point out that cats, whether feral or not, are an alien

species to North America, introduced hundreds of years ago by settlers. They say that, like humans, cats were not designed to mingle with the local wildlife that was here first.

"It's not the fault of the cats, and it's not the fault of the people who want to help them," Parr says. "It's just an example of a lack of education. Cats should be inside, and wildlife should be outside. ... Nobody wants to see [cats] in need that are not being fed or helped. But somehow we need to take a bigger picture vision of this and see that there are consequences for all animals."

COEXISTENCE

For Frohman and other advocates of managed cat colonies, the TNR program is a way for cats and wildlife to coexist. The education comes with teaching people how to do it right.

"Feral cats and wildlife of any variety can live peacefully together," says Frohman, "but we need to take it on a case-by-case basis. [TNR] is a very grassroots-oriented program. It is a community solution to a community problem. [Those interested in managing colonies] really need to beat the bushes and go out and do some leg-work. If you come across a colony, you need to do some reconnaissance. You want to find out who already is feeding these cats. You want to get them on a feeding schedule so you can trap the whole colony at once. You want to make a plan, so you don't just go out and put trapped cats in your house and hope a vet sterilizes them. You need to make an appointment with a vet and find a place for them to recover once they're sterilized."

The managed cat colony debate divides people into many camps, but all can agree on one thing. As Frohman puts it, "feral cats and outdoor cats, in general, are out there because of humans, and somebody needs to take responsibility here."

In the end, feral cat colonies are not fierce jungle creatures but stray housecats that simply got used to being homeless and bored and raised their offspring in the streets or fields.

Whether we choose to help them by carefully managing feral colonies, building sanctuaries or simply doing our part to contain our pet cats, we are the ones who ultimately have the power to help them.

"Thousands of years ago, we took on the responsibility to care for these animals, but feeding is not enough," Kraus says. "You have to spay or neuter. Call your local vet, or go to the web. Find a resource; do whatever you can." ○

It is our responsibility to humanely manage feral cat colony overpopulation and its effects on natural wildlife.

Justin W. Sanders is a writer in Portland, Ore. He lives with two cats and one human.

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