

## **Feral Cats and Public Safety**

Do feral cats live short, miserable lives? Are outdoor cats a public health and safety risk? Do feral cats threaten birds? The answer to all these questions is a resounding *no*.

### **Trap, Neuter, Return Programs Enhance Public Safety**

Feral cats are naturally inclined to keep away from humans. In addition, when cats are fed away from populated areas, contact is further minimized. However, when caregivers are prevented from feeding, the cats are forced to forage populated areas in search of food. Soon compassionate individuals begin feeding the cats close to work or home, thus increasing the cats' proximity to people. Trap, Neuter, Return (TNR) programs, accompanied by ongoing colony management, instead reduce the chance of contact by keeping cats away from human population areas.

### **TNR Humanely Controls Feral Cat Populations**

TNR and colony management are also effective in reducing the number of cats, and therefore, the number of chance encounters with humans. Prevention of TNR or the use of lethal methods, on the other hand, actually allows the population to continue multiplying. A survey of feral cat caregivers conducted by The SF/SPCA found that *every* caregiver who implemented a TNR program saw their colony stabilize or decrease in number. In San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, one feral cat colony has been reduced from 85 cats to two through TNR. And after caregivers at Stanford University started a successful TNR program, the campus cat population reached zero population growth almost immediately. Today, through natural attrition and the adoption of tame cats, the colony has decreased by over 50%.

In contrast, Sonoma State University administrators implemented a trap and kill program over the objections of campus cat caregivers. Less than one year after the cats were removed, more cats were again living on campus. At Georgetown University, school officials trapped feral cats and took them to the local animal control agency where the cats were killed. Less than six months later, 10 new unaltered cats and 20 kittens appeared on the campus.

### **Are Feral Cats a Risk to Public Health?**

A study conducted by Stanford University's Department of Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) found virtually no risk to humans from feral cats and diseases associated with cats. EHS also concluded, after consultation with the Santa Clara County Health Department and Stanford's Department of Comparative Medicine, that there was a general consensus that feral cats pose virtually no health and safety risk to individuals.

### **Rabies**

As they are not a natural vector for rabies, cats pose a very low risk for contracting and spreading this disease. In 1998, only three cats tested positive for rabies in all of California. There are no known cases of a human ever contracting rabies from a cat in the state of California. Rabies is more prevalent in some species of wildlife, and in Europe, a very successful oral rabies vaccine has proven an effective, economical, and humane form of rabies control.

## **Toxoplasmosis**

A study in the July 15, 2000 issue of the British Medical Journal confirms that "contact with cats, kittens, cats' feces, or cats who hunt for food was not a risk factor for infection." The author continues, " No significant associations were detected between infection and presence of cats (whether adult or kittens), the diet and hunting habits of the cats, or cleaning a cat's litter tray." The study concludes that eating undercooked meat is the primary risk factor in contracting the organism.

## **TNR Reduces Costs to Taxpayers**

In addition to being the most humane, effective, and healthy option for controlling feral cat populations, TNR is also the most cost-effective. TNR and colony management by compassionate individuals is accomplished wholly at private expense while trapping the cats and taking them to animal control agencies requires taxpayer dollars for intake, housing, handling, feeding, killing and "disposal."

## **Do Feral Cats Lead "Short, Miserable Lives?"**

Feral cats do not experience significantly more or worse medical issues than do housecats. In fact, feral cats may actually be healthier as a population than domestic pet cats. This is because feral kittens develop natural immunity to a variety of illnesses. Spay/neuter further improves cat health by reducing wandering, mating, and fighting.

It is also not uncommon for feral cats to live ten or more years—a lifespan comparable to many domestic cats. And while feral and abandoned cats may face hardships, we don't think death is better than a less-than-perfect life. Many animals, such as raccoons, foxes, and field mice face similar hazards and do not live extraordinarily long lives, yet we would never consider euthanizing them "for their own good."

Opponents of TNR have also argued that potential cruelty by malicious humans is another reason why homeless cats should be rounded up and euthanized. In order to ward off the potential painful death of *some* animals, they argue *all* homeless cats should be killed as a preventive measure. This argument is as preposterous as it sounds.

## **Predation**

Every reputable study to date has shown that claims of cat predation affecting bird and wildlife populations are wholly overstated, and that the true causes of population declines are factors such as habitat loss, pollution, pesticides, and drought. Cats are also widely recognized to have low success at bird predation. Studies have shown that the bulk of a feral cat's diet consists of garbage, insects, plants, and other scavenger material. Unless we are going to conclude that studies on four continents are all wrong, feral cats should not be unfairly implicated in any perceived decimation of wildlife populations.

## **San Francisco SPCA Resources**

- Fact sheets: "The Care and Feeding of Feral Cats," "Cat Advocacy," and more.
- Lifeline for Feral Cats (415) 554-3071. We can provide advice specific to your situation.
- Position papers on pet limit laws, mandatory cat licensing, cat predation, and more.
- Feral Cat Video Series.
- The SF/SPCA Feral Fix Program provides free spay/neuter for San Francisco feral cats, no appointment necessary.