

POSITION STATEMENT
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF WILDLIFE VETERINARIANS
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AAWV POSITION ON FERAL CATS

Background: Domestic cats encompass a variety of categories including feral (existing without human assistance, untamed and unsocialized), stray (existing with or without human assistance but generally unfriendly, often untamed and unsocialized) or free-roaming/outdoor (existing with human assistance but somewhat to very tame). The AAWV acknowledges that the use of the term “feral cats” is controversial; however, for clarity, in this resolution, feral cats (*Felis domesticus*) are defined as free-roaming, stray or domestic cats without owners.

The absolute number of feral domestic cats in the USA is unknown but is thought to be in the tens of millions (Levy et al 2003, Jessup 2004). There is broad interest from a variety of wildlife management, public health and animal welfare organizations to reduce the number of feral cats for the benefit of all wildlife, cats and humans. Yet, biologically effective and socially acceptable means are a major point of contention in the USA. Methods for management of feral cats range from socialization and adoption, to humane euthanasia.

A major point of debate is the impact of feral cats on wildlife. Feral cats are non-native, detrimental predators of native wildlife including birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. There is no debate about a cat’s intuitive behavior to stalk, chase, harass and hunt; however, there is much debate among animal rights activists and wildlife managers about the impact that cats have on wildlife populations. Domestic cats are thought to pose a significant threat to birds, herpetofauna, and small mammals that they prey upon (Schmidt et al 2009, Lepczyk 2004, Nogales 2004). Cats have been implicated in 63 species extinctions on islands (Doherty 2016), but also have negative impacts on songbirds in non-insular environments (Crooks et al 1999, Baker et al 2008). A recent estimation of the broad impact of free-roaming cats on wildlife of the United States suggests that up to 3.7 billion birds and 20.7 billion mammals fall prey to cats each year (Loss, 2013).

Animal welfare, animal rights, and humane groups have become active proponents of managed cat colonies which are groups of feral cats that are trapped, tested for selected pathogens, vaccinated, neutered, and released (TTVNR; thereafter shortened to TNR here) back to their original capture site or a safe site for long-term management. The feral cat colony is then maintained by routine provision of food and health care, including re-vaccination, when and if possible. Managed cat colonies can vary from licensed, well-regulated efforts with regular assessment and specific goals, to “neighborhood feeding stations” managed by untrained individuals with no oversight or measurable endpoints. Theoretically, TNR colonies should decline to zero over time. However, for these programs to result in stabilization or decline, several quantitative

assumptions must be met. For example, at least 75% of the population must be sterilized and the immigration rate should be zero (Andersen et al 2004, Schmidt et al 2009). Both of these premises are dependent on social and political *human* factors that are difficult to control. Even when TNR is applied to small, highly managed colonies where complete success is highly likely, members of the colony remain in the environment for several years during which time they exert negative impacts on wildlife.

The management of outdoor cat colonies subject a cat to environmental extremes, pathogen infection, and various sources of trauma and predation, all of which contribute to high mortality rates (Nassar and Mosier 1982, Warner 1985, Andersen et al 2004, Nutter et al 2004) and relatively short life spans (Warner 1985). None of these are consistent with animal welfare. Animal welfare should also be expanded to wildlife victims of feral cats, which are a major source of patient admissions in wildlife rehabilitation hospitals/centers in the USA.

Cats can be reservoirs for significant zoonotic pathogens including *Bartonella henselae*, *Salmonella spp.*, *Toxocara cati*, tapeworms, hookworms, and *Sarcoptes scabiei* (Dabritz and Conrad 2010, McElroy et al 2010) but by far, rabies is most concerning. Outside of cases due to bats, human exposure to rabies is primarily associated with feral cats (Childs 1990, Cole and Atkins 2007). In addition, cats harbor several pathogens that have been transmitted to wildlife, at times with disastrous consequences (e.g. FeLV transmission to the Florida Panther) (Cunningham et al 2008).

The expansion of populations of unowned cats, the unregulated roaming of owned cats, and the development of cat colonies are of concern to wildlife management and public health agencies. This resolution states the position of the AAWV on feral cats and their management

WHEREAS: Feral cats are present worldwide and are considered an exotic or non-native species in all habitats in which they occur;

WHEREAS: Governmental wildlife agencies are charged with the management, conservation and preservation of native flora and fauna and the habitats in which they exist;

WHEREAS: Feral cats can exert significant detrimental predatory effects on native birds and small mammals in local ecosystems and the maintenance of feral cat colonies does not eliminate predation on native birds and small mammals by feral cats;

WHEREAS: Bites, scratches and feces from feral cats can be a significant risk for exposure to several zoonotic diseases to the people that care for feral cats as well as the general public and their pets;

WHEREAS: There are recommendations but no standard, enforceable guidelines for the quality of care or maintenance provided to feral cat colonies, and the effectiveness

of TTVNR programs or management, control or elimination of feral cat colonies is highly-dependent on the type of management applied;

WHEREAS: The management of outdoor, free-roaming cat colonies is not consistent with animal welfare;

BE IT RESOLVED: That the American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians supports actions by governmental agencies, public health agencies, and public and private organizations to manage and eliminate feral cats in a humane manner on public lands to protect the wildlife species on those lands.

BE IT RESOLVED: That the American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians supports actions by governmental agencies, public health agencies, and public and private organizations to ban or eliminate feral cat colonies in a humane manner on public lands managed for natural resources and discourages feral cat colony establishment and management on private lands.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: That the American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians recognizes the need for further scientific study on feral cat management and supports public education efforts to explain the complexities of the ecological and social factors involved in this issue; and encourages cooperation and positive discussion between groups involved in the feral cat issue. Ultimately the AAWV recognizes that a single solution to feral cat management is unlikely and supports the use of various strategies including adoption, humane euthanasia, and the management of cat colonies in enclosures.

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