**Trap-Neuter-Return**

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is a method for managing the population of “homeless” (e.g., stray, abandoned, or feral) cats through sterilization. Because many of these cats lack the social skills that would make them suitable adoption candidates, they are routinely killed if brought to a shelter. As Nathan Winograd, Director of the No Kill Advocacy Center, argues, “there is no other animal entering a shelter whose prospects are so grim and outcome so certain.”

TNR involves the humane trapping (often by volunteers) and sterilization (by veterinary professionals) of these cats, which are subsequently returned to the trapping site. Rabies vaccines are often administered, and some TNR programs include basic health checks as well.

TNR was first introduced during the 1950s in Britain, and then in Denmark during the 1970s. The practice was introduced in the U.S. around the same time, but remained largely “underground” until the formation of Alley Cat Allies in 1991.

Although the merits of TNR have been demonstrated both anecdotally and in published research studies, critics often overlook, ignore, or simply dismiss such evidence. As the following examples illustrate, however, the arguments against TNR rarely stand up to careful scrutiny.

**Claim:** TNR doesn’t work.

The science: In fact, several credible studies have documented TNR’s potential for decreasing the number of cats in a particular location. In Randolph County, NC, for example, researchers observed a 36 percent average decrease among six sterilized colonies in the first two years; over that same period, three colonies of unsterilized cats experienced an average 47 percent increase.

In Rome, Italy, a survey of caretakers (overseeing 103 cat colonies) revealed a 22 percent decrease overall in the number of cats—despite a 21 percent rate of “cat immigration” (as a result of abandoned and stray cats moving into colonies). Although some colonies experienced initial increases, significant reductions were observed over time, from 16 percent on average after three years to 32 percent after six years. And these figures don’t account for an additional observed benefit, one common to managed colonies: “kittens are almost invariably taken and homed by the cat care-takers.”

A TNR program on the campus of the University of Central Florida begun in 1991 led to the adoption of nearly half (47 percent) of the 155 cats living on campus over an 11-year observation period. In 2002, upon completion of a related six-year study, just 23 cats remained on campus. Some additional context: TNR may not be an ideal solution, but in most instances it’s the best option available. Even setting aside question about whether they are humane or not, lethal control methods have, for generations now, proven largely ineffective and very costly. “There’s no department that I’m aware of that has enough money in their budget to simply practice the old capture-and-euthanize policy,” observes Mark Kumpf, former president of the National Animal Control Association. “Nature just keeps having more kittens.”

Indeed, “successful” eradication programs on small oceanic islands demonstrate the enormous challenges involved. On Marion Island, for example, it took 19 years to exterminate approximately 2,200 cats—using feline distemper, poisoning, hunting and trapping, and dogs. Just 115 square miles in total area, this barren, uninhabited South Indian Ocean island is the largest from which cats have been eradicated. On Ascension Island, roughly one-third the size of Marion Island, it cost approximately $1,732 per cat to eradicate an estimated 635 cats over 27 months. (Nearly 40 percent of the island’s pet cats were accidentally killed in the process, which, as one report noted, “caused public consternation.”)

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—Mark Kumpf, former president, National Animal Control Association

**Claim:** The population of feral cats in the U.S. may be as high as 120 million and growing.

The science: It’s extraordinarily difficult to estimate the number of free-roaming cats in part because of the difficulties involved in determining whether a particular cat is a pet, a stray, or feral. Researchers have suggested that the number of unowned free-roaming cats may approach the number of pet cats in the U.S. (86.4 million in 2012). It’s important to note, however, that this estimate is based on small-scale surveys conducted 10 or more years ago. In addition to the questionable methods involved, there’s no reason to think that this “snapshot” reflects current populations in any particular community. Furthermore, Animal People editor Merritt Clifton argues that the population “probably peaked in 1993 or 1994 before beginning a downward trend,” and, as of 2003, varied seasonally from a low of 13 million to a summertime high of 24 million. In 2012, Clifton suggested that...
TNR is holding the “feral cat population at the present level” of six million in the winter “with a summer high of about 12 million.”

Some additional context: Even if TNR only stabilizes population levels, that’s a significant benefit. As has been demonstrated on oceanic islands, feral cat populations can rise dramatically in the absence of such interventions. "Certain jurisdictions and communities," observes Kumpf, reflecting on the ineffectiveness of, and growing distaste for, the traditional trap-and-kill method, "are more interested in maintaining a stable cat population than they are in simply bailing the ocean with a thimble." 6

Claim: Outdoor cats live short, brutal lives. 

The science: It’s generally acknowledged that more than half of kittens born “in the wild” don’t survive to adulthood. As, was pointed out previously, however, kittens born into managed colonies (a fairly common occurrence early on) are often adopted by caretakers or homes found through local rescue organizations. And caretakers often report of cats living long, healthy lives in managed colonies. More than half of the 23 cats living continuously on the University of Central Florida campus during an 11-year observation period were estimated to be 6.8 years old or older. A 2012 nationwide survey conducted by Alley Cat Rescue revealed similar longevity: one quarter of TNR organizations responding to the survey have colony cats in the 6–8 year range; 35 percent in the 9–12 year range, and 14 percent reported caring for cats 13 years of age or older. 5

Some additional context: Restricting or prohibiting TNR would only worsen the odds for kittens born to stray, abandoned, and feral cats. Indeed, because these cats would likely be unsterilized, there would be more of them. And, in the absence of TNR, it’s unlikely that these kittens would find their way into adoption programs (which typically offer medical care). And the numbers of such cases are significant—it’s been suggested that perhaps one-third of pet cats are “recruited from the feral population.”  10

TNR opponents often suggest that, because of the risks faced outdoors, unowned cats are better off “euthanized.” As indicated above, lethal control methods are rarely effective or inexpensive. And, as a 2007 Harris Interactive survey commissioned by Alley Cat Allies revealed, such methods are out of step with public opinion. Indeed, 81 percent of the “nationally representative sample of 1,205 adults” agreed that “leaving a stray cat outside to live out his life is more humane than having the cat caught and killed.” 13

Claim: TNR encourages the dumping of cats and kittens.

The science: It’s true that TNR programs are sometimes faced with the unfortunate—and illegal—dumping of cats and kittens at colony feeding sites. (This is one reason caregivers are reluctant to disclose the locations of their colonies.) However, there’s no evidence to suggest that these cats and kittens would not have been dumped anyhow, regardless of whether or not TNR was being conducted in the area.

Some additional context: Cats abandoned near a managed colony are far more likely to be adopted and/or sterilized and vaccinated—thereby mitigating their potential impact on the overall population of unowned cats (as well any potential impacts to wildlife and the environment).

Literature Cited


Vox Felina
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