

Literature Review: Effective Solutions for Feral Cats

October 7, 2017

John B. Davis, Ph.D.

Visiting Research Scientist
Department of Biological Sciences
University at Albany, State University of New York

This work was supported by a research grant from the American Wildlife Conservation Foundation. Any opinions, findings, conclusion, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of AWCF.

Synopsis

Feral and free-roaming domestic cats have been accused of destroying wildlife, causing property damage and disturbance, endangering other domestic pets, and posing health risks for humans. These issues are a growing problem across New York State, where the burden of these impacts is most felt at the local government level. In response to this problem, the American Wildlife Conservation Foundation has commissioned a literature review of the impacts of free-roaming cats, the effectiveness of management and control techniques that are currently being employed, and the control measures that have been enacted at the local level in New York State

There is little question that free-roaming cats are causing unsustainable impacts on wildlife. This is true anywhere that there are large, established populations of feral cats, or where household pets are allowed to wander outside of the home. In the United States alone, it is estimated that free-roaming domestic cats annually kill more than 1 billion wild birds and 7 billion small mammals. The loss to bird life from predation by domestic cats is greater than the number of deaths from collisions with automobiles, buildings, power lines, towers, or wind turbines. Reported losses in Canada, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and other countries are of similar magnitude.

The damage caused by feral and free-roaming cats is a direct consequence of their enormous numbers. There are at least 100 million free-roaming cats in the United States, or about one for every three human beings, with perhaps 6 million or more in New York State. "Free-roaming" includes household pets that are allowed regular outdoor access, abandoned and stray former pets, and truly feral, unapproachable cats. However, the

numbers are just part of the story; it is just as important to understand the role of human behavior in the creation and perpetuation of the problem. Free-roaming cats are often described as “subsidized predators”, because they are fed and sheltered by people, and are maintained at densities which may be hundreds of times greater than any native predator in the wild. Surveys have revealed that more than half of cat owners allow their pets outside without monitoring or control, and in some places as many as one quarter of all households regularly feed stray cats. Therefore, any government body attempting to control feral cats must recognize that an effective solution will require widespread community participation.

Although individual studies vary in their conclusions, when taken together, the body of evidence is more than sufficient to satisfy the precautionary principle. Therefore it is reasonable and justifiable for municipal governments to take deliberate actions to restrict free-roaming cats, but so far, the legislative response at the local level continues to be isolated and sporadic. In New York State, just 61 local governments (1 county, 8 cities, 17 towns, and 35 villages) have laws that are specifically directed at the management of feral or stray cats. An additional 91 include cats in their general animal control ordinances. Only 5% of the 932 towns have any form of cat control law, compared to an estimated 86% that have control or management laws for dogs.

Analysis of legislative control measures reveals a variety of approaches to cat control, which can be roughly grouped into five stages:

- 1) Common-law responsibility. In this stage, the municipality defines an owner as anyone who “feeds, keeps, or harbors” a cat, and requires that the owner be responsible for any “nuisance” committed by the animal. Nuisance is a common-law term, but here it means such things as loud noise, digging, damaging property, or leaving excrement.
- 2) Control of Movement. Some municipalities extend the responsibility of the owner to controlling the cat’s movements, *i.e.*, preventing the cat from “running at large”. Others limit the number of cats that can be “harbored” by one individual. For both the first and second stages, the onus is largely on the complainant. That is, if a property owner finds a cat committing a nuisance or running at large on her/his property, s/he must file a complaint and seek redress.
- 3) Voluntary Spay/Neuter. Some municipalities offer an incentive for individuals to have their cats spayed or neutered, including low-cost and no-cost alternatives
- 4) Licensing. A few municipalities require cats to be licensed and to bear an identification, whether a tag or a microchip. Cats without identification are subject to seizure by the Animal Control officer as an abandoned animal. With licensing, but sometimes without, owner responsibility is sometimes extended to requiring a rabies vaccination. Cats that are unlicensed and at large are subject to seizure by the animal control officer, and may eventually be euthanized if not claimed or adopted.

5) Trap-Neuter-Release. A handful of municipalities (e.g. City of Buffalo, City of Hornell, Town of Fallsburg, City of North Tonawanda, Village of Williamsville, and NYC) have adopted some version of trap-neuter-release, usually in connection with an animal care organization. The most important aspects of this type of legislation are:

- a) Feral cats are recognized as inherently different from domesticated cats
- b) Managed cat colonies are allowed, but only by permit. Thus, an individual may not simply choose to feed cats in their back yard.
- c) Requirements for managed cat colonies include controlled feeding, vaccination, and sterilization. Sometimes, identification of the cats is required.

In some instances, the TNR program is not mandatory, or is not actually written into legislation, but is partially funded by or otherwise supported by the municipality.

Cat control legislation until now has been largely reactive, representing a response to complaints brought by citizens who are either concerned about the plight of homeless cats, or irritated with the noise and property damage the animals cause. The form and severity of the cat control legislation that is finally adopted depends on how bad the problem has already become, and how loudly citizens argue for or against particular measures. However, cat welfare advocates are taking a more organized and increasingly militant approach, presenting Trap-Neuter-Release as the preferred method for cat control and pushing local legislators to enact TNR programs.

Considering all the information available at this time, Trap-Neuter-Release may be an effective management strategy for local populations of less than fifty cats, but for larger populations, immediate, permanent removal of at least 25% of the colony is necessary to bring about population reductions in a reasonable time. Whether the removal is accomplished by adoption of kittens, relocation of adults to shelters or care-for-life sanctuaries, or through euthanasia, will depend on the local resources and socio-political dynamics of the community.

Recognizing that local conditions and policy preferences vary from municipality to municipality, we hope that a thorough exploration of the available management solutions and their success or failure will assist local government leaders in making informed decisions. To that end, the information being gathered in this literature review will be made available to local governments in New York State at the conclusion of the project.