

Trap-Neuter-Return: Working with Feral Cats

**Prepared for the 2003 Asia for Animals Conference
by Neighborhood Cats of New York City**

What is Trap-Neuter-Return?

Trap-neuter-return, commonly known as TNR, is the only method proven to be effective at controlling feral cat population growth. TNR involves trapping all or most of the cats in a colony, getting them neutered, and then returning them to their territory. The returned cats, who are eartipped to identify them as neutered, are provided regular food and shelter and are monitored by their caretaker for newcomers. Whenever possible, kittens young enough to be readily socialized and friendly adults are removed and placed for adoption.

TNR immediately stabilizes the size of the colony if at least 70 percent of the fertile adults are neutered. Neutering closer to 100 percent will result in a gradual decline of the population over time. In addition, the nuisance behavior often associated with feral cats is dramatically reduced. This includes the yowling and noise that comes with fighting and mating activity and the odor of unneutered males spraying to mark their territory. The cats tend to roam less and so become less of a visible presence. They continue to provide natural rodent control, a particularly valuable benefit in urban areas.

On a community-wide scale, TNR also has several advantages. Foremost, the neutering of ferals lowers the number of cats and kittens flowing off the streets into local shelters. This can have a substantial positive impact on euthanasia rates. For example, in San Diego, after only two years of county-wide TNR, euthanasia of cats dropped by over 40 percent. In San Francisco, after six years of a citywide TNR program, the euthanasia rate for all cats, domestic and feral, dropped by over 70 percent. The rate for domestic cats drops when there are fewer ferals because the lack of street kittens means less competition for spots in adoptive homes.

Another potential advantage on a large scale is cost savings to animal control agencies. Traditionally, the cost involved with feral cats includes the time it takes for an officer to trap the cat, the expense of feeding and sheltering during the usual mandatory waiting period before the animal can be euthanized, and the cost of the euthanasia procedure. In contrast, the only cost involved with TNR is the neutering and vaccination of each cat. The rest of the work – trapping, feeding, and so on – is done by volunteers. In a study in Orange County, Florida, over the course of two and a half years of a new TNR program, cost savings were found to be 47 percent (which came to over \$109,000 in this particular case).

TNR has the ability to mobilize large numbers of volunteers because it is life-affirming, which is in itself an advantage. Catching the vast number of feral cats now at large in many communities requires an army of volunteers, as animal control alone can rarely make even the slightest dent in the problem. That army is not going to step forward if the ultimate fate of the felines is to be killed. But if people know the cats will be released and then cared for, experience repeatedly demonstrates they will offer their time and effort.

Failed Alternatives

Perhaps the most significant argument in favor of trap-neuter-return is that not only does it succeed in controlling feral populations when properly implemented – it's the only known method that ever has! The traditional approach has been "trap-and-kill," whereby feral cats are trapped, usually by animal control, and then invariably euthanized. The typically out-of-control feral cat numbers in most regions should be testimony enough to the failure of this method. The reasons why it almost always fails in the long term are clear.

First, as you'll discover if you become active in TNR, it's not easy to catch all the cats in a feral colony. If there are a large number of cats, it can take several days and a lot of persistence. Animal control agencies rarely have the resources to make this kind of sustained effort. Instead, what normally happens is that animal control officers set some traps, catch some of the cats, and make a temporary reduction in the colony's numbers. At this point though, nature kicks in. Feral colonies grow in size up to the number of cats their food source can support. Once the colony is reduced, the remaining cats overbreed until the ceiling imposed by the food source is reached again, and the temporary drop in population is quickly erased.

Even assuming all the cats in a colony are caught and removed, that still won't lower the population in the long run. This is due to the "vacuum effect," first observed by Roger Tabor in his studies of London street cats (*The Wild Life of the Domestic Cat*). No feral colony is an island; it is surrounded by other feral cat groups in adjoining territories. If a colony is removed but its food source remains, cats in neighboring territories will move in and start the cycle of reproduction again. Normally, most of these cats stay out of the territory if it is occupied by a colony of sufficient size.

You might ask, Why not remove the food source along with the cats and avoid the patterns just described? That's much easier said than done. The food source might be the daily waste from a restaurant or mess hall, or garbage left out for collection, or cans of food that continue to be left by the cats' caretaker. Trying to control all this and stop food from being available is rarely a practical alternative.

This last point also indicates another reason why it is almost impossible to eradicate feral cats from an area: their caretakers. Feral cat caretakers are a devoted breed who will often do whatever is in their power to feed and protect their feline wards, including violating feeding bans, trespassing on private property, and interfering with the trapping efforts of animal control agencies. The trap-and-kill approach turns these caretakers into enemies. TNR, on the other hand, mobilizes them into an enormous force for population control.

At the other end of the spectrum of failed alternatives to TNR is the rescue model, which views the cats as essentially domestic animals who belong in human homes and should be placed in them. This vision may have been plausible at one time, in areas where there were only a few stray cats, most of them recently abandoned. It doesn't make sense now, when the number of feral cats is in the millions in many countries. Once past kittenhood, ferals can be very difficult to socialize, and there are not nearly enough homes available for them anyway. Plenty of domestic cats are now dying in shelters for lack of space. Why bring in ferals off the streets when they can be maintained where they are, in a manner more befitting their unique natures?

Another method often adopted in individual situations is to try to make the cats go away by depriving them of food. The belief is that the cats will look for another food source. In fact, depriving the cats of food often has the opposite effect – they just come closer. Ferals are extremely territorial, and their nature keeps them from wandering off. Rather than leaving to find food elsewhere, they'll encroach further into human habitations within their territory in search of sustenance. Depriving the cats of food is also obviously rather cruel, as it can result in their starvation.

TNR has the advantage of being humane because it respects the cats' right to live and provides them with as high a quality of life as possible under the circumstances. It is also effective at lowering population levels, both within individual colonies and across entire communities. Other methods not only cost more; they don't work. TNR is clearly the future when it comes to enlightened care of feral cats.

What is a “Feral” Cat?

A feral cat is a cat who has reverted in some degree to a wild state. Such cats originate from domestic cats who have been lost or abandoned and have learned to live outdoors or in structures such as warehouses, factories, abandoned buildings, or barns. They adapt to urban areas as well as rural, establishing themselves in back alleys, parking lots, and piers, to name a few. In most cases, feral cats are not completely wild because they still depend on people for food, whether the source is a caretaker who comes by once or twice a day, a dumpster outside a restaurant, garbage cans, or the like. Relatively few feral cats subsist by hunting alone.

Just how feral a cat is depends on several factors. First is the age of the cat. After six or seven weeks, a kitten’s ability to socialize starts to diminish. How many generations the particular line of cats has been living outside a human home is another important factor. A cat born to a mother who was herself a domestic will tend to be less feral than a cat who is tenth-generation living outdoors. The amount of human contact is a third factor. If the cats have regular interaction with people, they’ll be less wild than if they live in a spot where there is little or no contact. Finally, the individual cat’s personality must be considered. Every once in a while, you’ll come upon an adult cat who is many generations feral and rarely has contact with people yet is quite friendly. This, however, is very much the exception.

It’s important to recognize that if a cat is truly feral, then the most compassionate choice may be to allow him to live outdoors. Trying to domesticate such a cat is little different from trying to make a squirrel or a raccoon a household companion – you might succeed somewhat, but never fully and only with a great deal of time and patience. Moreover, you would not be permitting the animal to live in the manner that suits him best. Many well-meaning people, convinced they are “saving” a feral cat by bringing him indoors, end up condemning the poor creature to a life of hiding under the bed and being in constant fear. Better a fuller, even if riskier, life in freedom.

Implementing TNR: The Managed Colony Approach

The following is an overview of the steps involved in performing TNR on a single colony. Much more can be learned about each step by consulting the educational resources described in Step 1.

Step 1: Educate Yourself

Before trying to set up a managed feral colony, you should learn as much as possible about trap-neuter-return. The work of TNR is not just caring for the cats; it is also acting as their advocate. To do this effectively, you need to know your subject well. Fortunately, there are resources available which allow you to learn quickly.

1. Neighborhood Cats’ online course, entitled “Trap-Neuter-Return: Managing Feral Cat Colonies” (for a complete overview, go to www.suite101.com, click on the “Pets & Animals” department, then on the TNR course. Immediate access to all written materials costs \$14.95 (US); the interactive discussion-board version costs \$19.95 (US)). This course is a comprehensive presentation of all you’ll need to know to begin working with TNR. Scholarships for students in developing countries are available through a joint program with ANIMAL PEOPLE (write to ANPEOPLE@whidbey.org).
2. The Alley Cat Allies website (www.alleycat.org). Alley Cat Allies, the largest feral cat organization in the United States, maintains a website that contains fact sheets and articles on almost every aspect of TNR.

3. The Neighborhood Cats website Info page (www.neighborhoodcats.org/info). Our website presents the basic steps of managing a feral colony in an easy-to-follow format and is full of tips and information useful to colony caretakers.

Step 2: Develop Good Community Relations

Feral cats' territories usually overlap with locations where people reside or work, and people in the community often have their own relationships with the cats. Many might enjoy the cats and help feed and care for them. Others might see the cats as a nuisance and want them to go away. Whatever the prevailing attitudes are, they must be taken into account and worked with to ensure the success of a TNR project. For example, neutering and returning feral cats to an area without having informed or asked the property owner for permission is inviting eviction and disaster later on. By contrast, educating the property owner on the advantages of TNR ("no kittens, no noise, no odor") and gaining his support before the trapping begins will help provide long-term security for the colony.

One way to gauge the mood of a neighborhood towards the cats is to simply walk around and talk to residents, especially anyone who seems to spend a lot of time outdoors. Be professional in your approach and appearance and have some literature on hand. Try to find out how many cats there are, who feeds them, where they stay, how long they have been there, whether anyone has tried to do anything about them before, and so on. Write down names and numbers – they may come in handy later. Speak to superintendents and make appointments if necessary to meet with landlords or property owners. The people who work in buildings can be the friendliest towards the cats because they know the cats' value as a means of rodent control.

Often a feral cat situation will first come to your attention because the population level has reached a crisis point. Naturally, because most people are ignorant of how the problems can be resolved, hostility develops towards both the cats and their caretakers. It's important to expect a certain amount of hostility and not be drawn into a confrontation or argument. Instead, be understanding – if you were being woken up every night at 2 a.m. by yowling cats, or if you couldn't use your garden because of the smell, you would probably be resentful, too. Calmly but persistently explain how TNR will solve these problems, whereas trying to remove all the cats won't and will only keep the cycle going. People are generally receptive to a method which is humane and allows the cats to remain while eliminating the problem behavior.

If someone just won't agree to TNR, you have to keep trying to convince them. Given the number of feral cats at large and their unadoptability, relocation or rescue is rarely a practical option; you have to make TNR work in the territory they occupy. Gaining the support of animal control and local animal welfare organizations will help. Unfortunately, though, sometimes people have to learn the hard way that trapping and removing doesn't work. After spending time and money on such a usually futile attempt, they may become more receptive to TNR.

Step 3: Set Up Feeding Stations and Shelter

Begin managing the colony well before trapping and neutering. By setting up a feeding station and establishing a regular feeding schedule, you are training the cats, who are very habitual creatures, to show up at a certain time and place. This will be invaluable when the time comes to trap. You'll be able to effectively withhold food and make the cats hungry enough to enter the traps; plus, the cats will come to you instead of your having to go after them. You will also be able to count the number of cats in the colony, which is important when arranging for spay/neuter and having the right amount of equipment for the trapping. Inaccurate estimations of a colony's size are very common – you can't take anyone's word for it.

The regular feeding will also allow you to determine if there are any young kittens, friendly adults, or sick cats. If so, arrangements for foster or veterinary care should be made ahead of time, before the cats are in your custody. During this pre-trapping phase, feed the cats as

high-quality and nutritious a food as possible in order to strengthen their immune systems to withstand the stress of surgery and captivity. A couple of weeks of excellent nutrition will often also go a long way towards curing many common feline ailments, such as upper respiratory infections or ringworm. This is particularly true when the cats' normal diet is of poor quality.

Shelter is important for health as well. During the winter, the cats need a warm, dry place to sleep. The Neighborhood Cats website (see the Info page) contains simple instructions on how to build winter shelters easily and inexpensively. More ideas can be found on the Alley Cat Allies site.

The type of feeding station you use will depend on the kind of access you have to the territory. If possible, set plates and an automatic water dispenser inside a covered wooden box that is completely open on one side so one cat can't keep others out. If you can't feed every day, you might try an automatic dry food dispenser. If a boxlike setup isn't possible, then putting plates and a water dish as far from where people can get at them might be the best you can do. With both the feeding station and shelters, try to place them in a spot that is the least visible to passersby but where caretakers have easy access. Wherever the feeding station is located, keep it clean! People understandably don't like seeing a mess, and local health departments really don't like it. So be considerate, and for the cats' sake, clean up the feeding station on a daily basis and don't leave empty plates and cans lying around.

Step 4: Secure a Holding Space

Trapping a colony takes two days or more, if the colony is large. During the trapping period and for 48 hours after surgery, you'll need a holding space for the trapped cats. The traps double as cages, and the cats don't leave them – except during surgery – until they are released (see Step 7: Caring for Cats in Traps, *infra*). The holding space needs to be large enough to comfortably hold as many traps as there are cats, with room for the caretakers to move around to feed and clean. The space also must be secure from strangers, protected from the elements, and heated in the wintertime. Spaces that might work include a garage, a basement, a warehouse, an extra room, and even a backyard in warm weather, if a tent or tarp can be set up to provide shelter from rain.

Putting the traps on tables makes feeding and cleaning easier, though placing them on the ground will do. Plastic drop cloths should be spread out over the floor or tables and the traps placed on top. The holding space inevitably ends up smelling a bit, but the plastic will catch any waste which gets out of the traps and will make clean-up easy. It's a good idea, when the cats are in surgery, to roll up the plastic and throw it away, replacing it with fresh plastic. Do this again when the project is done and the cats have been released. In warm weather, to minimize the risk of a flea infestation, keep the traps covered with light cloths and vacuum thoroughly or flea-bomb afterwards.

Step 5: Arrange for Spay/Neuter

At this stage, you've educated yourself and the community on how TNR works and what its advantages are. A feeding station and shelter have been set up for the colony and a regular feeding pattern established. You know how many cats there are and whether any kittens or sick cats will need special attention, and you've also secured a holding space for the project. Now you can arrange a specific date for the cats to be neutered. Ideally, use a veterinarian or clinic that is experienced with feral cats and works quickly.

In New York City, the veterinary protocol for feral cats is to neuter, eartip, and provide a rabies vaccination; one clinic also administers flea and ear mite medication. Eartipping, which involves taking a quarter-inch off the tip of the left ear in a straight-line cut, allows for the rapid identification of a neutered feral after the cats are released. Other methods, such as photos, eartagging or tattoos, have proven unreliable. Testing for FIV/FeLV infection is not standard procedure. The tests greatly increase the cost per cat of services, and studies have shown that the

incidence of these diseases in the feral population is no higher than in the domestic population (1 to 2 percent for FIV; 2 to 4 percent for FeLV). If preventing the spread of disease is the goal, the money is better spent on neutering than testing. Of course, if a particular cat is being considered for adoption, testing is mandatory.

Step 6: Trapping

Alley Cat Allies has an excellent fact sheet entitled “Humane Trapping Instructions for Feral Cats.” It’s highly recommended for learning about the materials you’ll need and how to use them to actually get a cat into a trap. The fact sheet can be found on their website or on the Info page of the Neighborhood Cats site (see “Trapping – the Basics”).

The traps normally used are box traps, which should be 36 inches long and have rear doors so they can double as cages. These traps require the cat to enter the trap in order to reach the bait. When the cat steps on a trip plate, the trap door shuts behind him. (Certain traps have very small trip plates which cats often step over. If that’s the case, extend the plate by laying on top of it a piece of cardboard about six inches long.) If the cat becomes frantic after the door shuts behind him, covering the trap with a sheet will calm him down. It’s a good idea anyway, to always cover a cat in a trap with a sheet.

The most important factor for a successful trapping is that the cats are hungry, so withhold food for at least 24 hours beforehand. Whenever possible, it’s best to try to trap an entire colony at once. There’s always a cat or two who is shy of entering a trap, and it may take a few days of withholding food to get her to go in. This is much more easily done if all the other cats are already trapped and you’re not trying to pick out one from the rest of the colony. Mass trapping is more intensive in the short term but less work in the long run. Perhaps the greatest advantage to this approach is instant satisfaction: by neutering all or almost all of the colony, population growth and nuisance behavior are immediately brought under control and the situation improves right away.

Have more traps than cats on hand. That way, when you get down to the last cat or two, you’ll have a number of traps set, and catching them will be easier. When you first start trapping, don’t rush in to collect a trapped cat unless the cat appears frantic and might hurt himself. Every time you enter the territory, you run the risk of scaring a cat away for the night. If you do remove a trap, place another one in the same spot. Often, for whatever reasons, there are certain “hot spots” where cats keep going in.

Note that trapping, contrary to many people’s natural inclination, comes towards the end of the TNR process, not the beginning. “Trap first, think later,” is a recipe for getting yourself into a lot of trouble.

Step 7: Caring for Cats in Traps

This process is described in detail (with a photo) on the Info page of the Neighborhood Cats website. The traps become the cats’ cages. Feeding and cleaning is safely accomplished through the use of a simple tool known as a trap divider or trap isolator. It looks like a small pitchfork and fits through the bars of the trap, sectioning off one part from the other. Especially after the cat is first trapped and most eager to get out, two dividers should be used back to back.

At all times, the traps should be covered with light cotton sheets to keep the cats calm, although the ends may be exposed for ventilation. Feral cats tend to move from light to dark, so to get the cat to go to one end of the trap, pull the sheet back towards that end, making it dark where you want the cat to go and exposed where you want him to move from. If that doesn’t work, a little nudge with the trap divider slipped through the bars usually will. Once the cat has moved to one end of the trap, section him off with the trap dividers. Now you can open the door at the opposite end and line the bottom of that side of the trap with newspaper. Then go to the other end of the trap and repeat the process: get the cat to move to the opposite end, section him off with the dividers, and line the empty side with newspaper. At this point, you can add food and water as

well. Water dishes should be flat and not easy to tip over. Feed the cat and replace the newspaper (which will collect the cat's waste) twice a day.

Sometimes people think it's cruel to keep a cat in a trap for several days like this. In fact, feral cats in captivity prefer tight, dark spaces to large, open ones, as this makes them feel more secure. If you place a feral cat in a large cage, he'll tend to just hunker down in a corner. Inside the traps, the ferals often get quite comfortable. As long as you regularly clean, they're perfectly fine for as long as they need to be held.

Food and water must be removed from the traps the night before surgery so the cat has an empty stomach. Otherwise, the cat might vomit during the procedure and choke.

Step 8: Monitoring After the Release

If there are no complications following surgery, the cats should be released after 48 hours at the place where you trapped them. Ferals are very territorial, and relocating them is a difficult process that requires three weeks of confinement in the new territory. If they're not returned to where you found them, the cats will quickly get lost.

Once the cats are neutered and returned, the TNR process is not over. Much of the hard work is done, but long-term monitoring of the colony is vital. The greatest threat to TNR's effectiveness in gradually lowering feral populations is the continued abandonment of domestic felines who find their way into colonies. If the colony is not monitored for newcomers, then sooner or later a pair of abandoned cats will begin the reproductive cycle anew. To prevent this, newcomers should be quickly trapped and neutered, then placed for adoption if feasible or returned if not. If any of the cats have eluded being trapped and do end up having a litter, the kittens should be removed ideally at six to seven weeks of age so they can be easily socialized.

Ongoing monitoring of the colony is also important because conditions change over time. By continuing to be present, the caretaker gives the community someone to whom problems can be addressed. New neighbors may need to be educated or have a complaint with something the previous tenant or owner didn't care about. Sometimes after neutering, a cat will become very friendly – too friendly to leave outside safely. So while trapping and neutering is the most intensive part of the TNR process, it is only the beginning, not the end. Caretaking is an ongoing responsibility and the key to the long-term success and health of the colony.

Community-Wide TNR Programs

Every community will have its own resources and unique circumstances that will need to be taken into account in shaping a TNR program. TNR is more effective when implemented on a community-wide scale because the crossover of unneutered cats into managed colonies is reduced and the overall impact and cost savings for local shelters and animal control agencies are greater. Listed here are some of the basic elements which need to be addressed, although by different means in different places, and which will help establish a successful effort.

1. **Coordinating agency.** This agency can be private or governmental, but it should be approved by municipal authorities for legitimacy purposes. Its function will be to supervise the TNR program, mediate between caretakers and other authorities, and identify feral cat colonies in the area. Sometimes the best approach is to create an organization from a coalition of already existing animal welfare groups, or as an offshoot of an existing shelter or group.

2. **Free spay/neuter.** The closer you can get to offering no-cost spay/neuter as well as eartipping and rabies vaccinations, the more effective the program will be. Even small fees are a burden on a caretaker when large numbers of cats are involved. Remember that people are giving a great deal of their time and effort to do what is essentially community work by bringing the street cat population under control. They shouldn't also have to pay out of their own pockets.

3. **Trap bank.** This is particularly important for encouraging mass trapping. Only an agency can usually afford to stock and coordinate loans of a large number of traps. Refundable deposits, but not fees, should be required for borrowing traps. Use 36-inch long traps with rear doors which can double as cages. Provide trap dividers too, for safe cleaning and feeding of the cats while they're confined in the traps.

4. **Holding space.** Depending on the nature of the community, holding space will be either simple or difficult to arrange. In dense urban areas where people live mostly in apartments, a space for keeping 15 cats for five days might be hard to find, whereas in the suburbs, people have garages and basements. Ideally, holding space would be provided at the same facility where the neutering is done, with volunteers doing the feeding and cleaning. If that's not an option, it's best to make the arranging and maintaining of the holding space the responsibility of the caretaker. This is best for purposes of liability as well, if the local municipality does not want to assume the risk of injury that might come from caring for the cats.

5. **Adoption and socialization network.** Caretakers and feral cat activists are much freer to do their work if they have the support of a network for placing kittens and abandoned domestics. This frees their time for trapping and neutering and keeps cats from piling up in their homes while they look for adoptive placement.

6. **Colony registration system.** Neutered, vaccinated colonies should be recorded for statistical purposes, to track population growth or decline, and as a way of locating caretakers if a feline member of their colony is turned into a local shelter. Information collected should include caretaker contact information, colony location, and a description and history of each cat (color, age, when and where neutered and vaccinated, whether eartipped, and microchip number, if applicable). Procedures should be in place for when an eartipped or otherwise identified feral is turned into the shelter, including a waiting period during which the caretaker can be notified and mediation services with property owners if necessary.

7. **Ordinance or caretaker contract.** A legal basis should be established whereby funds, veterinary services, and sanctioning of a TNR colony are provided in exchange for the caretaker's meeting certain requirements, such as getting the cats neutered and rabies vaccinated, providing regular food and shelter, keeping the site clean, updating registration information, removing kittens, and so on.

8. **Educational programs.** Regularly scheduled workshops for training caretakers in the basics of TNR and caring for ferals will make for a smoother and more widespread program.

9. **Food drives.** There's nothing like providing free food to motivate caretaker cooperation. Plus, it can be a financial burden to feed a large number of cats, especially on a fixed income.

10. **Public announcement of municipal support.** This is important for gaining trust and cooperation, especially if there is any history of trap-and-kill, which is usually the case.

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Additional resources for information on feral cats:

The HSUS handbook *Community Approaches to Feral Cats: Problems, Alternatives & Recommendations* by Margaret R. Slater is downloadable at no charge at this website: <http://www.hsus.org/ace/14631>

ANIMAL PEOPLE Newspaper Online: www.ANIMALPEOPLENEWS.org