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Talking the Talk

Essential Feral Cat Advocacy Terms

Alley Cat Allies (ACA) – National information clearinghouse and advocacy organization working to establish effective nonlethal programs, including Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR), as the standard method of reducing feral cat populations. ACA functions through print, video, and web-based information; workshops and conferences; and by consulting with individuals, groups, agencies, and institutions that work directly with feral cats. ACA is a 501(c)3 nonprofit association based in Bethesda, MD, and is supported by 95,000 donors and activists. For more information, go to www.alleycat.org.

Feral Cat – Literally “gone wild,” a domestic cat that was lost or abandoned and has reverted to a wild state, or a cat that was born to a stray or feral mother and had little or no human contact. Adult feral cats are usually impossible to tame and are not suited to cohabiting with people. They live in family groups called colonies that form near a source of food and shelter. Feral cats can survive almost anywhere and are found worldwide.

Stray Cat – A domestic cat that strayed from home and became lost or was abandoned. Because a stray cat was once a companion animal, he or she can usually be resocialized and placed in an adoptive home.

Feral Cat Colony – A group of free-roaming cats living in a specific geographic area. Prior to the implementation of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR), feral cat colonies consist of both stray (tame) and feral (wild) cats of all ages, from kittens through adults. After TNR is completed, a feral cat colony consists exclusively of adult feral cats.

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) – A nonlethal sterilization method to reduce the number of feral cats in the environment both immediately and for the long term. A comprehensive, ongoing program in which stray and feral cats already living outdoors in cities, towns, and rural areas are humanely trapped, then evaluated, vaccinated, and sterilized by veterinarians. Kittens and tame (stray) cats are adopted into good homes. Healthy adult cats too wild (feral) to be adopted are returned to their familiar habitat under the lifelong care of volunteers. Cats that are ill or injured beyond recovery are not returned to the environment.

TNR was brought to the United States from Europe and the United Kingdom in the late '80s. The practice of TNR grew rapidly in the '90s when Alley Cat Allies began providing information and assistance to people caring for feral cats who recognized that their numbers must be controlled and reduced through sterilization. In communities where TNR is widely embraced, feral cat numbers have dropped.

TNR programs operate largely or entirely through the dedicated efforts of committed volunteers. TNR works because it breaks the cycle of reproduction. In general, the cost of sterilizing and returning a feral cat is less than half the cost of trapping, holding, killing, and disposing of a feral cat. TNR protects public health and advances the goal of reducing the numbers of feral cats in the environment. The public supports humane, nonlethal TNR as the long-term solution to feral cat overpopulation. ■

Adoption – Feral kittens up to eight to ten weeks of age can usually be socialized and adopted into homes. Adult feral cats, on the other hand, are wild animals unsuited to cohabiting with humans. There are tens of millions of feral cats in the United States, and although individual adult feral cats can sometimes be tamed, the time (usually many months) and resources required are exorbitant which means that, many more feral cats may go without basic necessities—sterilization, vaccination, food, and shelter.

Advocacy – “The act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, idea, or policy; active support” (American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition). Feral cat caregivers, both individuals and groups, are advocating for nonlethal feral cat reduction in communities throughout the nation.

Eartipping – A technique of painlessly removing a quarter inch off the top of a feral cat’s left ear while the cat is anesthetized for spaying/neutering. Eartipping is the universal symbol of and only proven way to permanently identify (both close up and from a distance) a feral cat that has been evaluated, vaccinated, and sterilized. Eartipping ensures that a sterile cat will not undergo unnecessary repeat trapping and surgery.

Establishing Colonies – This refers to the *myth* that feral cat caregivers establish new cat colonies, often by rescuing cats scheduled to be killed in shelters and putting them outside. The *truth* is that feral cat colonies already exist in abundance in the United States (see **Feral Cat Colony**). Feral cat advocates and caregivers who practice TNR as recommended by Alley Cat Allies humanely trap, sterilize, and vaccinate stray and feral cats already living in colonies, find homes for the kittens and stray cats, and return healthy adult feral cats to their outdoor homes, thereby reducing the population both immediately and in the long term (see **Trap-Neuter-Return**). Feral cat caregivers do not establish new colonies.

Euthanasia – “The act or practice of ending the life of an individual suffering from a terminal illness or an incurable condition, as by lethal injection or the suspension of extraordinary medical treatment” (American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition). The term “euthanasia” does not apply to killing healthy companion animals and/or feral cats because there are too many of them.

FeLV, Feline Leukemia Virus – A retrovirus specific to cats, FeLV causes an immune system breakdown, making the cat susceptible to diseases it might otherwise be able to fight off. FeLV cannot be transmitted to humans nor can it be transmitted to other species. FeLV positive cats may remain asymptomatic (although contagious, they are shedding the virus, primarily in saliva) for many years. With supportive care and symptomatic treatments, many FeLV positive cats live a high-quality life for months to years, while others may succumb quickly. FeLV is spread primarily from mother to kitten.

Feral Cat Caregiver – A compassionate human who feeds feral cats, performs Trap-Neuter-Return, and provides long-term care and monitoring for adult feral cats that are returned. Caregivers are men and women of all ages from all walks of life. Most of the leading feral cat organizations were founded by caregivers whose commitment to feral cats grew to encompass entire communities.

Feral Kitten – Any kitten born outdoors to a stray or feral mother. Most feral kittens can be socialized if the process is begun when they are only a few weeks old. Socialization requires that the kittens be confined for a short period of time during which they are talked to and gently held and petted for increasing periods until they come to form a human-animal bond. Usually, the younger the kitten, the easier socialization will be.

FIV, Feline Immunodeficiency Virus – Also a retrovirus specific to cats, FIV is transmitted from cat to cat primarily by deep bites, as the virus is shed in the saliva. Perhaps the most prevalent method of transmission is bite wounds in fighting cats, especially roaming males. Intimate contact through grooming, sharing food, etc., does not spread the virus. Overall, FIV is less common than FeLV. FIV-positive cats often live long, symptom-free lives.

Goal – Responsible feral cat advocates and practitioners of TNR share one goal with wildlife and environmental groups, animal control agencies, and public health officials: to reduce the number of feral cats in the environment in the long term. We strive to demonstrate to these groups that TNR coupled with other non-lethal practices is showing results and should become the standard method of feral cat control everywhere.

Groups that advocate adoption for feral cats are ignoring the documented wild nature of feral cats and their fate when

adoption proves impossible—death in a shelter or animal control facility.

Humane Box Trap – A metal wire box rigged so that when an animal steps into it, the door closes, preventing the animal from leaving. These traps do not cause the animal any pain and are the only type of trap to be used for Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR).

Managed Feral Cat Colony – A group of feral cats living together and having strong blood ties in which all cats have been sterilized and vaccinated and are provided daily food and shelter by a volunteer caregiver. The caregiver regularly monitors cats and captures any who need veterinary care, in addition to trapping any newcomers to be sterilized and vaccinated. A properly managed colony is a healthy, stable colony in which no kittens are born.

No-Kill – A belief that healthy animals should not be killed simply because there are too many of them. No-Kill advocates that animals sick or injured beyond treatment should be euthanized (see **Euthanasia**), but that healthy or treatable animals should be given the opportunity and resources to live.

Orange “Feral Cat Awareness” Ribbon – Adopted by activists during the 2003 campaign to fight Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission policy, the orange ribbon loop symbolizes the need to enact ethical, nonlethal, and effective policies to reduce feral cat populations.

Predation – “The capturing of prey as a means of maintaining life” (American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition). The question of what, if any, role feral cats play in the decline of wildlife is controversial. Some environmental and wildlife groups maintain that cats, both feral and owned, are decimating wildlife and that all cats must be removed from the outdoors. This position is flawed on two counts.

First, by far the primary issue in wildlife decline is ongoing habitat destruction, disruption, and fragmentation caused by development and other activities associated with human population growth. The major reputable studies on avian and wildlife population declines all point to habitat loss, drought, and pesticides produced by human activities that must be curtailed or corrected if wildlife is to prosper once again.

Second, removing cats from the outdoors sounds like a simple, straightforward operation, except that, as a nation, we have been trapping and removing (killing) feral cats for decades with no effect whatsoever on reducing their numbers (see **Trap-and-Remove**). Communities that practice this outdated approach have as many or more feral cats as ever.

The critical point about predation is that, no matter what role cats may play in any predatory situation, the solution is to have fewer feral cats in the environment (see **Goal**). Trap-and-remove schemes have failed for decades to achieve this goal. TNR, on the other hand, has been succeeding since it began in the United States over a decade ago (see **Trap-Neuter-Return**). The answer to predation concerns is for feral cat advocates and environmental and wildlife groups to endorse TNR as the standard method of feral cat control everywhere and continue to reduce feral cat numbers.

Rabies – A virus that affects the central nervous system of mammals, causing first encephalopathy and ultimately death. In the United States, rabies is overwhelmingly a disease of wildlife; the vector species are raccoons, bats, skunks, and foxes. Cats routinely account for about 3 percent of rabies cases and are not a primary vector. Pre-exposure rabies vaccine is available for both animals and humans. Treatment for humans exposed to rabies is completely effective if it is administered before the onset of symptoms. After symptoms occur, there is no cure. While rabies is a lethal disease to be treated with utmost caution, rabies control is a major public health victory in the United States. Human deaths from rabies average 2 to 3 per year. In at least 13 years, none of those rabies cases were acquired from cats.

Relocation – In almost all cases, feral cats are better off being returned to their established outside homes after sterilization, to be watched over by caregivers. Cats bond with their territories and with other cats in their colony. Relocation is difficult, time-consuming, and often costly, and comes with no guarantee that the cats will stay in their new location. Alley Cat Allies strongly recommends that all measures be taken to correct problems connected with keeping cats in their territories. If, however, compelling difficulties force the relocation of a feral cat colony, ACA provides relocation guidelines that, when followed carefully and completely, offer the greatest chance of relocation success.

Three Options (for Feral Cat Control) – The only options available to communities dealing with feral cats are:

(1) Attempt to remove all feral cats from the environment by trapping and removing feral cats so thoroughly that none are left behind, because any cats surviving this effort will breed prolifically. Eradication has been attempted throughout the United States for many decades. The result? Communities that deal with feral cats by trapping and removing (either killing or relocating) them have now as many, if not more, feral cats than ever because full-scale trap-and-remove schemes require a much larger allocation of resources (both funds and staff) on an ongoing basis than communities can afford to dedicate to them. Also, public resistance to the killing of healthy animals is growing ever stronger and goes beyond a simple refusal to cooperate to active sabotage of municipal efforts to harm cats. Without community support, a thorough trap-and-kill campaign cannot be executed.

But even if a jurisdiction could dedicate the substantial budget funds and staff hours to successfully trap and remove all feral cats in a territory, the vacuum effect would ensure that the campaign must continue indefinitely (see **Vacuum Effect**).

(2) Do nothing. Although doing nothing is obviously not the answer, it is often the only answer available to communities that do not have TNR programs in place or the resources and/or public mandate for option 1.

From a public health standpoint, doing nothing is the least responsible stance. Feral cat populations grow unchecked. Sexually intact, unvaccinated, and uncared for feral cats scavenge sustenance while reproducing prolifically. Common sense dictates that whatever the actual level of risk is, a vaccinated, sterilized, fed, and monitored feral cat will always present less threat to another animal or to a human than an unvaccinated cat roaming for mates and scavenging food.

(3) Implement Trap-Neuter-Return programs (see **Trap-Neuter-Return**).

Sanctuaries – Proposals to confine feral cats in sanctuaries are not plausible. Establishing an animal sanctuary requires land; building(s); hiring/training staff and/or recruiting, training, and maintaining volunteers; ongoing food and veterinary care; insurance; licensing; and ongoing funding. Few cat sanctuaries can house even 100 cats, due to the cost of the elements listed above. The most conservative estimate of feral cat numbers in the United States is 20 million. It would require some 200,000 sanctuaries to house them.

Trap-and-Remove – The traditional approach to reducing feral cat numbers, trap-and-remove schemes may achieve a temporary lowering of feral cat numbers, but survivors of the campaign breed prolifically and outside cats can move in to take advantage of the now available sources of food and shelter and form a new colony (see **Vacuum Effect**). “Trap-and-remove” is usually a euphemism for killing feral cats.

Vacuum Effect – Feral cats establish territories based on availability of food sources and shelter. When the cats are removed from this environment, more cats quickly move in to take advantage of those resources. These new unsterilized cats will breed to the capacity of the site. The vacuum effect has been documented around the world.

Zoonotic Diseases – Diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans. Rabies is the most well-known of the zoonotic diseases (see **Rabies**), although there are numerous others, many not involving cats. Opponents of TNR sometimes cite zoonotic diseases as threats to public health and reasons to eliminate feral cat colonies, but it has been demonstrated that feral cats are rarely the primary or even a significant source of disease, that the diseases connected with cats are extremely rare, and that feral cats enjoy the same level of health as owned cats in the United States. ■