

## 2. What is Trap-Neuter-Return?

Trap-Neuter-Return, commonly known as TNR, is a method for humanely and effectively managing cat colonies and reducing free-roaming cat populations. The process involves trapping the cats in a colony, having them spayed and neutered, eartipped for identification and, where appropriate, vaccinated for rabies, then releasing them back into their territory. Whenever possible, friendly adults and kittens young enough to be easily socialized are removed and placed for adoption. A designated caretaker provides regular food and shelter to the returned cats, monitors the colony for newcomers, and mediates any conflicts between the cats and the surrounding community.



photo: Meredith Weiss

TNR offers a number of benefits on both the colony and community levels. As a TNR activist, it's wise to become knowledgeable about these advantages and be able to articulate them whenever necessary. TNR is still a relatively new concept and many people don't understand why it's a good idea to put the cats back where you found them. So let them know!

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### • The advantages of TNR – colony level

For a particular colony, getting the cats spayed and neutered has the following advantages for their neighborhood:

- 1. No more kittens and a gradually falling population.** If all the cats are fixed, or at least all the females, no more litters will be born. If newcomers to the colony are quickly trapped and altered or adopted out, the size of the colony should decline over time.
- 2. Noise is dramatically reduced.** Most of the noise from an unmanaged colony comes from activity related to mating, such as yowling and fighting – behaviors which are greatly reduced by spay/neuter.
- 3. Noxious odors are eliminated.** Unaltered males mark their territory by spraying urine tinged with testosterone, causing an especially foul odor. Neutering eliminates the testosterone and the pungent smell associated with it. In addition, most altered male cats will stop spraying or do so less frequently.

4. **Rodent control is maintained.** Cats provide a natural form of rodent control, primarily by their scent deterring possible prey. Returning the cats allows this to continue.
5. **A healthier and less visible colony.** Neutering, regular food and adequate shelter greatly improve the cats' health. As a result, they will be much less prone to infestation by parasites like fleas, a benefit to their human neighbors as well. In addition, neutered cats tend to roam much less and so become less visible.
6. **Removal of the pity/sadness factor.** Concerned neighborhood residents no longer have to observe hungry cats or dying kittens, sights commonly associated with an out-of-control free-roaming cat population.
7. **The presence of a caretaker.** With TNR, someone is there to take responsibility for the colony, watch over them and work out any problems with neighbors.
8. **Prevents a new, unaltered colony from forming.** Removing most or all of a colony leaves the territory vulnerable to re-colonization by new, unaltered cats and resumption of the same problems as before. This is commonly referred to as the "vacuum effect," a phenomenon discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Fixing the colony and leaving them in place breaks this cycle. The colony will usually guard its territory from newcomers if its food source is limited to an amount which can only support its members.

## ● **The advantages of TNR - community level**

The advantages of TNR when the method is practiced on a community-wide scale extend well beyond each individual colony:

- a) **Reduction of the community's free-roaming cat population.** If a substantial percentage of the colonies in a community are spay/neutered and managed properly, then the overall number of feral and stray cats in that community will decline over time. The rate of decline will increase as more and more colonies are TNR'ed.
- b) **Lower intake and euthanasia rates.** Feral cats and especially their offspring are flooding shelters throughout the United States, thereby raising cat intake rates, creating overcrowded conditions and draining limited shelter resources. Because adult ferals are unadoptable and the sheer quantity of kittens can be overwhelming, euthanasia is often the outcome for these cats. By reducing the number of feral cats in a community, TNR can lower intake rates and lessen the need for euthanasia. Funds saved can be used to further TNR efforts in the community.

- c) **Fewer nuisance complaints.** As mentioned, spay/neuter alone eliminates much of the nuisance behavior associated with unaltered feral cats, such as noise and noxious odors. This in turn reduces the burden on local animal control or public health authorities of investigating and acting upon complaint calls. An overall reduction of the number of feral cats in a community, achieved through TNR, will also lead to fewer complaint calls.
- d) **Rabies control.** In regions where rabies is present in the environment, rabies vaccinations are a part of the standard veterinary protocol for TNR. This reduces the number of unprotected cats and reduces the threat of people being exposed to the disease. While cases of rabid cats attacking a person are extremely rare, it is possible for young kittens carrying rabies to be unknowingly handled by people. When it is later learned these people were exposed, the required treatments are expensive and can strain the budgets of local health departments. By both vaccinating cats and reducing litters of kittens, TNR lowers the incidence of potential rabies exposures.
- e) **Ability to mobilize volunteers.** Because TNR is life affirming, it attracts large numbers of people who care about the cats and their well-being. Volunteers will contribute their time, labor and funds to trap the cats and get them fixed, knowing the cats will live. In contrast, efforts to trap and remove the cats usually result in their deaths and are not something many people will volunteer to do. With estimates on the number of free-roaming cats in the U.S. in the tens of millions, the ability to mobilize an army of volunteers is essential to put an end to their overpopulation.
- f) **Cost savings for shelters.** Every time a cat is impounded and euthanized, there are costs involved. There may have been the cost of sending an animal control officer out to capture the cat. There is staff time spent processing the intake and providing care during whatever mandatory holding period may be required. There is food and litter. The euthanasia procedure is a cost as is the disposal of the body. As a result, for every feral cat that is TNR'ed instead of being brought to a shelter, the shelter saves funds, especially if a private individual or another animal welfare group conducts the trapping and pays for the surgery.
- g) **Gaining caretaker cooperation.** Caretakers of colonies typically know their cats' numbers, whereabouts and habits. They can help trappings go well by sharing information and withholding food at the appropriate time, or they can thwart trappings by doing the opposite. Caretakers' cooperation is crucial for any successful attempt at feral cat population control and TNR gains this by ensuring the cats will not be harmed.
- h) **Improved public relations for animal control.** When animal control supports TNR instead of trapping and removing cats, their public image gets a major boost in a positive direction. This can lead to more volunteers, more people coming to municipal shelters to adopt cats and improved fundraising.

## • Failed alternatives to TNR

One of the most persuasive reasons for doing Trap-Neuter-Return is that nothing else works! To achieve the goals of population reduction and lowered nuisance behavior, no other technique has a realistic chance of long-term success. An examination of the available alternatives to TNR makes this clear.

### 1. Trap and remove

“Trap and remove” is often referred to as “trap and euthanize” because euthanasia is the common outcome for the cats. We prefer the term “trap and remove” because it focuses on the attempt to eradicate the cats from the environment. It has been the predominant approach by animal control agencies in the U.S. towards feral cats for decades. The current proliferation of the cats in every nook and cranny of the country speaks eloquently to the utter failure of this method to achieve long-term reduction of their populations. There are several reasons why it doesn’t work:

#### ▪ *The vacuum effect*

Cat colonies spring up and subsist in certain locations because the habitat provides adequate food and shelter. When a colony is removed from a site, but the habitat is left unchanged, cats who were recently abandoned or belong to neighboring colonies will move into the vacant territory to take advantage of the remaining food and shelter. The cycle of reproduction begins anew and the colony quickly returns to the size which available resources can support. This phenomenon, known as the “vacuum effect,” was first documented by wildlife biologist Roger Tabor in his studies of London street cats (Tabor, R., *The Wild Life of the Domestic Cat* (1983) Arrow Books.)

Altering the habitat to discourage immigration of new cats is difficult. All it takes to create an adequate food source is an unsealed dumpster, open garbage cans or one compassionate person leaving out cans of food when they spot a cat. One study found a quarter of the respondents in a random survey of adults in Ohio had recently fed a feral or stray cat. (Lord, L., *Attitudes toward and perceptions of free-roaming cats among individuals living in Ohio* (1983) Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association Vol. 232: 1159-1167.)

#### ▪ *Higher survival rates*

Trapping all the members of a colony can be done, and one of the purposes of this handbook is to explain how, but it requires close knowledge of the colony, training, patience and dedication. When local authorities attempt to trap and remove feral cats, they rarely have the information or time needed to do a thorough job and, inevitably, some cats are left behind. These cats and their offspring now have less competition for the food and shelter remaining at the site, resulting in a higher percentage of kittens surviving until the colony’s natural ceiling – the number of cats which the available food and shelter can support – is again reached.

- ***Lack of animal control resources***

At this point in time, there are so many feral cats in the environment that it is the rare animal control agency which has the manpower to try to trap and remove a significant number from its community. More urgent matters, such as dangerous dogs, take priority. Cat trapping usually occurs in response to complaints. An officer will go out to a location, put out a few traps for an unknown (to him) number of cats, take away whoever he happens to have caught when he comes back in a few hours, then move on to the next problem. Many communities, like New York City, have recognized the futility of this approach and the wastefulness and no longer send officers out to trap cats unless there is a significant public health issue involved.

- ***Caretaker resistance***

As discussed earlier, one of the advantages of TNR to the community is that caretakers of colonies will cooperate. On the flip side, if the approach instead is to trap and euthanize the cats, caretakers will resist, either actively or passively. Passive resistance may include withholding important information, such as the number of cats, and where and when they eat. Active resistance may include feeding the cats before trapping attempts to discourage them from entering baited traps, or setting off or damaging traps when they're left unguarded.

- ***Synergy***

Most situations involving trap and remove attempts have more than one and often all the relevant factors present at the same time – the vacuum effect, higher survival rates for untrapped cats, lack of animal control resources and caretaker resistance. They combine to render trap and euthanize completely ineffectual for long-term, community-wide population control. Municipalities that continue to utilize this method typically experience constant levels from year to year of seized cats, complaint calls and euthanasia rates. These unchanging numbers indicate all that is being accomplished is population turnover rather than reduction – new feline faces, but not fewer. The problem is not being solved.

## **2. Feeding bans**

Feeding bans, at first glance, may have a simplistic appeal to authorities trying to reduce their community's free-roaming cat population – “stop feeding cats and there won't be any,” is basically the thinking. The first fault with this approach is it is inherently cruel and irresponsible. If a feeding ban was going to work, it would be because the cats would either starve to death or go somewhere else and become someone else's problem.

In reality, assuming a feeding ban can be enforced, the cats won't all die nor will they pack their kitty bags and board a bus to the next town over. Ferals are extremely territorial and will not wander far in search of food. However, they are quite resourceful

and as their hunger grows, they will encroach farther into inhabited spaces, including homes and workplaces, locate previously untapped food sources within their territory and raise their level of predation. Though it may well damage their health, cats can survive for weeks without food and continue to reproduce. If they become malnourished, their vulnerability to parasites like fleas increases. A common tale is a workplace where first feeding cats is prohibited, then hungry cats enter the factories or trailers looking for food, then flea infestations break out in these areas. What might have seemed like a simple solution ends up making the situation much worse.

The second reason feeding bans invariably fail is because they are almost impossible to enforce. Caretakers of colonies feel as much of a bond towards the cats as owners feel towards their pets and most will not just walk away when they know the cats are depending upon them. Caring people have repeatedly demonstrated they will risk their jobs, their homes, jail, fines and even bodily harm to prevent the animals from starving. Given the level and intensity of resistance that typically arises when a feeding ban is imposed, enforcement becomes impractical in areas of any significant size. People will simply put out food when no one is watching. Attempts to make free-roaming cats disappear by banning feeding usually result in suffering for the cats and increased conflict among local residents, pitting those who care for the cats against those who don't, but little else.

### **3. Rescue or relocation**

Neighborhood Cats encourages the placement of adoptable cats and kittens into responsible homes whenever possible. This is both humane and one way in which TNR activists can help reduce the street cat population. However, the goal that all ferals should be rescued and placed in homes is not realistic. There are far too many cats and too few foster or permanent homes with the willingness and patience to socialize a feral. Perhaps one day this will change, but we are a long way from that time. Resources now are better spent neutering the feral population rather than going through the long and uncertain process of socializing and placing feral cats, especially when there are plenty of already tame cats dying in our shelters for lack of homes. For the cat's sake, too, allowing a feral to live out his life in his territory may be a more compassionate choice than having him spend fearful years in a cage or hiding under a bed.

In addition to rescue, bringing the cats to a sanctuary or relocating them to a safer site are other possible solutions people often jump to when they first come upon an unmanaged colony in distress. This is understandable – the cats appear to be in danger due to anger and hostility towards them from the community and the immediate urge is to remove them from these risks. But there are few reputable sanctuaries and little room in them, and relocation to a new site is a difficult and uncertain process. See Chapter 16 for an extended discussion of both sanctuaries and relocation projects

There is also the question of what happens at the old site when the cats are removed, whether to be adopted out, sent to a sanctuary or relocated elsewhere. Unless the food source is also removed, the vacuum effect may come into play and new cats may appear. In addition, survival rates may increase among any cats left behind, including their offspring. In the end, despite the rescue or relocation of some cats, the end result may be just as many cats living in the same area.

## 4. Do nothing

If nothing is done, then the number of cats in a colony or in the community at large will grow to the carrying capacity of the environment. In other words, however many cats the available food and shelter can support, that's how many cats there will be. At the point where capacity is exceeded, population control takes the form of disease, starvation or other natural means. Impacts on shelters, including higher intake, euthanasia and costs, are not reduced. Public health concerns such as rabies and noise, odor and other quality of life complaints are left unaddressed. If the human population in the area grows, so will the carrying capacity and the number of cats. Doing nothing may be an option, but it's hardly a solution.

In sum, trying to solve free-roaming cat overpopulation by removing feral cats – whether to euthanize, rescue or relocate – does not work. In nature's ongoing cycle, new cats replace the old ones and nothing much changes in terms of the numbers or nuisance behavior. Feeding bans, besides being cruel in concept, are ineffective in practice. Doing nothing means accepting the status quo and all the problems that come with it. Ultimately, targeting the cats' reproductive capacity through spay/neuter and returning them back to their territory is the best approach available for lowering their numbers, reducing their impact on the environment and improving their lives.



photo: Heather Letzkus