



Research



FERAL CAT HEALTH ANALYSIS: LIVING HEALTHY LIVES OUTDOORS

Feral cats are cats who are not socialized to humans. Instead, they live contented lives with their feline families (often called colonies) outdoors. Cats, like squirrels, chipmunks, and birds, are capable of living healthy, fulfilling lives in the outdoors.

For thousands of years, cats have lived outdoors alongside humans. Just because they don't live in our homes doesn't mean they are 'homeless.' Yet the current animal control system and even misguided animal welfare organizations believe that taking feral cats to shelters, where nearly 100 percent of them will be killed, is more humane than leaving cats to live outdoors. The science—and the opinion of most Americans—tells a different story.



Feral cats don't suffer outdoors.

One prominent animal rights organization falsely states that “horrific fates” await feral cats, like diseases, injuries, or human cruelty.¹ But these claims are based on isolated incidents and not supported by scientific evidence.

In fact, the research points the other way—a 2006 study found that of 103,643 stray and feral cats examined in spay/neuter clinics in six states from 1993 to 2004, less than 1 percent of those cats needed to be euthanized due to debilitating conditions, trauma, or infectious diseases.²

Feral cats live full, healthy lives outdoors—there is no reason for them to be killed in shelters.

Feral cats are just as healthy as pet cats.

Feral cats have equally low rates of disease as the cats who share your home.

In 2008, only 294 cases of rabies were reported in cats, both pet and feral.³ That's just 4.3 percent of all the rabies cases reported in animals that year. Feral cats do not pose a rabies risk to humans: there hasn't been a confirmed cat-to-human rabies transmission in more than 30 years. The number one source of rabies in

the United States is wildlife—accounting for more than 90 percent of rabies cases in animals. Since feral cats involved in Trap-Neuter-Return programs are vaccinated and therefore cannot acquire or transmit the virus, they pose no threats to humans or other animals.

Most importantly, research confirms that feral cats are neither breeding grounds for disease nor a health threat to communities in which they live. After testing feral cats in Northern Florida for FIV, FeLV, and nine other infectious organisms, a 2002 study concluded that “feral cats assessed in this study posed no greater risk to human beings or other cats than pet cats.”^{4, 5}

Feral cats are not a significant health threat to humans or other animals. They deserve to live out their lives just like other outdoor creatures do.

Feral cats live healthy lives outdoors. Trap-Neuter-Return helps.

Cats cared for through Trap-Neuter-Return have healthy life spans. In 2003, a long-term study of a Trap-Neuter-Return program noted that 83 percent of the cats present at the end of the observation period had been there for more than six years.⁶

The lean physique of some feral cats sometimes leads animal control and other groups to claim that the cats are starving or ill, but a 2002 study found that feral cats have healthy body weights and fat distribution.⁷ If they may be a little leaner than the cat on your couch, it is the result of a different lifestyle, not because they're suffering or sick. Neutering feral cats is an act of compassion and helps improve their wellbeing.

It's time to stop the killing.

Current animal control and shelter policies result in millions of healthy cats being killed each year, year after year. Not surprisingly, this endless cycle of killing violates the humane ethic of most Americans. A 2007 study by Alley Cat Allies⁸ found that 81 percent of people polled consider it more humane to leave a cat outside where it is than to have the cat caught and then killed. Unfortunately, that is exactly what happens to more than 70 percent of all cats brought to shelters and nearly 100 percent of feral cats.

The pounds and shelters say these animals are “euthanized.” But an animal is only euthanized when she is terminally ill or untreatably injured. Using the word “euthanasia” masks what really happens to healthy cats in pounds and shelters—they are killed. Amidst all the false claims, the sad truth is this: the number one documented cause of death for cats in the U.S. is being killed in a shelter.

Feral cats live healthy, natural lives outdoors, just as cats have done for thousands of years. Removing them from their outdoor home and into shelters is a death sentence— and there is nothing humane about it.

¹ People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, “Animal Rights Uncompromised: Feral Cats,” <http://www.peta.org/campaigns/ar-feralcats.asp> (accessed April 26, 2010).

² Wallace, Jennifer L, and Julie K Levy, “Population Characteristics of Feral Cats Admitted to Seven Trap-Neuter-Return Programs in the United States,” *Journal of Feline Medicine And Surgery* 8 (2006): 279-284.

³ Blanton, Jesse D, et al., “Rabies Surveillance in the United States During 2008,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 235, no. 6 (2009): 676-689.

⁴ Luria, Brian J, et al., “Prevalence of Infectious Diseases in Feral Cats in Northern Florida,” *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* 6 (2004): 287-296.

⁵ Lee, Irene T, et al., “Prevalence of Feline Leukemia Virus Infection and Serum Antibodies Against Feline Immunodeficiency Virus in Unowned Free-Roaming Cats,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 220, no. 5 (2002): 620-622.

⁶ Levy, Julie K, et al., “Evaluation of the Effect of a Long-Term Trap-Neuter-Return and Adoption Program on a Free-Roaming Cat Population,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 222, no. 1 (2003): 42-46.

⁷ Scott, Karen C, et al., “Body Condition of Feral Cats and the Effect of Neutering,” *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 5, no. 3 (2002): 203-213.

⁸ Chu, Karyen, et al., “Population Characteristics and Neuter Status of Cats Living in Households in the United States,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 234, no. 8 (2009): 1023-1030.

ABOUT ALLEY CAT ALLIES

Alley Cat Allies is the only national nonprofit dedicated exclusively to the protection and humane treatment of all cats.

For over 25 years, Alley Cat Allies has led the movement to save cats’ lives. With advocacy, education, and grassroots organizing, we champion innovative programs and policies that serve communities and save cats. Since our founding in 1990, we have popularized Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) as the only humane and effective approach to community cats. Before Alley Cat Allies, TNR was virtually unknown in America, and no local governments supported it. Today, more than 600 municipalities have officially embraced TNR.

Alley Cat Allies has changed how all cats are treated—pet, stray, feral, and each cat in between. We advocate for a variety of progressive policies to protect cats, including the transformation of the American animal shelter system, which still routinely kills 70 percent of all cats who enter.

Thanks to our more than half a million supporters and countless advocates, Alley Cat Allies works in hundreds of communities each year. To learn more about how we save cats’ lives, visit www.alleycat.org.