

Position Statement on Feral and Unattended Domestic Cats Outdoors

POSITION: Chicago Wilderness is a regional alliance of organizations working together to restore local nature and improve the quality of life for all who live here, by protecting the lands and waters on which we all depend. Chicago Wilderness members believe that people need to actively manage and conserve our region's natural communities based on scientific principles and best management practices.

Alliance members recognize that pets provide many benefits to people, including companionship and comfort. However, we also recognize that feral cats, and domestic cats that are let outside unattended, kill hundreds of millions of birds and more than a billion small mammals in the United States each year. Therefore, Chicago Wilderness supports efforts to encourage responsible pet ownership, to keep domestic cats indoors or controlled on a leash, and to manage feral cat overpopulation by establishing alternatives to feral cat colonies.

BACKGROUND: The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) originated from the European and African wild cat (*Felis silvestris*) but is now considered a separate species. Domestic cats are not native to North America, yet their numbers have increased to the point where they may be more abundant than any native carnivore. Of the more than 140 million domestic cats estimated to be in the United States, 50 to 70 percent are feral or abandoned.

There is a strong consensus among wildlife professionals that feral and unattended outdoor domestic cats negatively impact wildlife. A cat's instinctive behavior to hunt, rather than its need for food, drives it to take prey, and feral and unattended domestic cats routinely prey upon native birds, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians. In addition to the negative impacts that these cats have on wildlife populations, they serve as potential vectors of diseases to humans, pets, and wildlife and are themselves exposed to many other health risks, such as collisions with vehicles, larger predators (e.g., coyotes), disease, and adverse weather conditions.

Feral cats are a growing concern for communities and land managers nationwide, and advocates for feral cats often favor trap-neuter-return (TNR) programs to address issues regarding overpopulation and disease exposure of feral or abandoned cats. These programs usually involve capturing animals in "feral cat colonies," where people are providing feeding stations and shelter. The cats are neutered, sometimes vaccinated against certain diseases, and then released at the capture site. TNR programs are popular with domestic cat advocates because neutering prevents individual cats from directly contributing to overpopulation, and vaccinations presumably reduce the prevalence of certain diseases in these populations. However, despite their popularity with some people, these programs remain controversial, especially with wildlife advocates and managers, because they are not effective in reducing feral cat numbers.

A growing body of literature has documented the negative impacts associated with feral and unattended domestic cats that are let outdoors:

- Most cats that are allowed to roam outdoors live only 2 to 5 years, while cats that are cared for and kept exclusively indoors live up to 15 years.

- Feral and unattended cats that roam outdoors kill hundreds of millions of birds and more than a billion small mammals each year in the United States. Feral cat colonies support high densities of cats which, in turn, may have even greater negative effects on local wildlife populations.
- Even though members of feral cat colonies benefit when people feed them, they still routinely prey on wildlife. Even a well-fed cat is genetically programmed to hunt.
- Although the goal of managed feral cat colonies is to reduce the population through adoption (when possible) or natural attrition, any reductions are offset by the illegal dumping of additional unwanted cats and the attraction of other feral cats to a provided food source.
- Research has shown that 70 to 90 percent of the cats in feral cat colonies must be sterilized, and no new cats must join the colony, in order for the colony cat population to begin to decline – a result that is impractical to achieve.
- Native wildlife such as raccoons, skunks and coyotes are attracted to cat colony feeding stations, which increases interaction with feral cats and promotes the transmission of disease.
- A number of diseases and parasites are associated with feral and unattended domestic cats that roam outdoors, such as ringworm, hookworm, cat scratch fever, toxoplasmosis, feline distemper, feline leukemia, and rabies. In fact, cats represent the majority of reported rabid domestic animals in the United States annually. Unvaccinated cats may also become reservoirs for diseases and transmit them to wildlife, pets, and people. Many TNR programs do not vaccinate cats against any diseases, and the TNR programs that do usually only vaccinate against rabies and distemper.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Chicago Wilderness alliance supports the following actions related to feral and unattended outdoor domestic cats.

- We support efforts to educate and encourage cat owners to keep cats indoors or controlled on leashes when outdoors, and to have their pets spayed or neutered.
- We support and encourage the humane reduction of feral cat colonies.
- We support the development and implementation of education efforts that foster an understanding of the biological and social impacts of allowing cats to roam outdoors.
- We support the development and dissemination of educational information to municipalities, residents, veterinarians, and other stakeholders on the negative impacts of feral cat colonies, including information on the effects on wildlife, disease transmission, and the health risks to cats.
- We support the passage and enforcement of state legislation and local ordinances prohibiting the establishment of feral cat colonies and the release of feral or unwanted cats outdoors.
- We oppose the passage of state legislation and local ordinances that condone or legalize the deliberate establishment of feral cat colonies.
- We recommend that if a community feels it must allow the establishment of feral cat colonies, that the colonies be considered only an interim solution, and should not be placed on public lands or in areas that could threaten at-risk wildlife or pose public health threats.
- We encourage research to provide additional insight into the effects that feral and outdoor, unattended domestic cats have on native wildlife populations.

SUMMARY: The Chicago Wilderness region is critical for wildlife survival. More than 300 species of birds alone—many threatened, endangered, or seriously declining due to threats such as habitat loss and fragmentation—use the protected areas in our region, as well as parks and backyards, for migration or year-round homes. Significant resources are invested each year to protect areas that can support these species and their tens of millions of members, and feral and unattended domestic cats only detract from these efforts, while also posing a threat to native ecosystems and overall biodiversity. People are responsible for introducing domestic cats to North America, and it is our responsibility to manage cats that prey on native wildlife.

Resources:

American Bird Conservancy – Cats Indoors! <http://www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/index.html>

American Veterinary Medical Association Policy on Free-roaming Abandoned Feral Cats
http://www.avma.org/issues/policy/animal_welfare/feral_cats.asp

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Impact Assessment – Impacts of Feral and Free-ranging Domestic Cats on Wildlife in Florida http://www.icwdm.org/Publications/pdf/House_Cats/FLFW_feralcats.pdf

Longcore, T., C. Rich, and L. M. Sullivan. 2009. Critical assessment of claims regarding management of feral cats by trap-neuter-return. Conservation Biology 23:887-894.
http://www.ca.audubon.org/chapter_assets/Longcoreetal2009ConBio.pdf

National Audubon Society <http://audubonmagazine.org/incite/incite0909.html>

The Wildlife Society – Facts about Feral Cats
http://joomla.wildlife.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=845&Itemid=183

The Wildlife Society Position Statement on Feral and Free-Ranging Domestic Cats
<http://joomla.wildlife.org/documents/positionstatements/28-Feral%20&%20Free%20Ranging%20Cats.pdf>

Chicago Wilderness Wildlife Task Force Cats and Wildlife Working Group - Cats and Wildlife Bibliography
www.chicagowilderness.org/members