Reducing numbers of free-roaming cats

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Reducing numbers of free-roaming cats

We appreciate the recent Viewpoint article from Phillips et al[1] on the role private practitioners can play in reducing numbers of homeless dogs and cats and shelter euthanasia rates. This is an issue of great importance to the veterinary profession and to many veterinarians as individuals, and we applaud the emphasis on methods for increasing feral cat adoption.

That said, we disagree with the statement that "[n]umerous studies have demonstrated that the most efficient approach to decreasing the number of feral cats is through mass sterilization of owned and feral cats combined with colony management." The authors cited 3 references to support this statement. However, Nutter[a] evaluated the effects of a trap-neuter-release (TNR) program on 9 small feral cat colonies and found that it was effective in reducing the size of only the 3 smallest colonies; Mendes-de-Almeida et al[2] reported that a single colony of feral cats in a Brazilian zoo was reduced from 40 to 17, but this required 8 years and methods different from those commonly used in TNR programs; and Centonze and Levy[3] reported information provided by feral cat caretakers but did not include verifiable data on colony numbers.

Although TNR programs are often claimed to "work," there is a solid body of peer-reviewed literature showing that under a variety of circumstances neither a TNR program alone nor its community cats iteration is effective at reducing colony size or eliminating feral cat colonies by attrition.[4-7] In addition, other published evidence has suggested that TNR programs are ineffective over broader areas and longer time scales. For example, Foley et al[5] in a study of TNR programs in San Diego County, California, and Alachua County, Florida, did not find reductions in free-roaming cat populations.

Phillips et al[1] also suggested that "Because fewer feral cats also means less wildlife predation, TNR programs of appropriate scale are good for wildlife populations also." In contrast, the devastating effects of feral and free-roaming cat predation on wildlife are well documented.[8] In addition, cats are the only known definitive host of *Toxoplasma gondii,* which has rendered the Hawaiian crow[9] extinct in the wild and threatens recovery of monk seals.[10] And, other diseases and parasites of feral cats are known to have negative consequences for the health of humans and other animal species.[11]

Use of the term *community cats* implies that feral cats are there by consent of local landowners. However, this is often not the case, and establishment of TNR programs by local officials often makes it difficult or impossible to remove feral cats, even from adjacent private property.

In our view, TNR programs, as currently practiced, do not optimize the health of wildlife, human beings, or the environment and do not protect feral cats from the suffering and death that life on the streets brings.

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