Best Friends Animal Society

SAVE THEM ALL®

Fact vs. fiction: What shelter and field services staff should know about free-roaming cats

Trap-neuter-return (TNR) is a common-sense, cost-effective solution for managing populations of unowned, free-roaming cats (sometimes called stray, feral or "community cats") by preventing additional births — rather than trying to round up, house, feed and kill more cats. Despite TNR becoming increasingly popular over the past 25 years, a great deal of misinformation exists regarding TNR, and outdoor cats in general.[a]

To protect community cats, yourself and the community you serve, you need to know the facts.

Fiction: TNR leads to nuisance complaints from residents.

Facts: A well-run TNR program generally reduces nuisance complaints — sometimes dramatically.[b] Summarizing their review of the relevant research, the authors of a 2013 report from the Alliance for Contraception in Cats & Dogs write: "Credible studies indicate that neutering reduces urine spraying and roaming in search of mates by male cats, and spaying eliminates estrous-associated behaviors in female cats, including aggression, vocalization and perhaps efforts to escape outdoors in order to mate."[1]

Fiction: Most residents are opposed to TNR for managing the unowned, free-roaming cats in their neighborhood.

Facts: Results of a 2014 national survey commissioned by Best Friends revealed a 68 percent preference for TNR over impoundment followed by lethal injection of unadoptable cats (24 percent).[2] That's nearly three-to-one in favor of TNR. More recently, a 2017 survey (also commissioned by Best Friends) found nearly identical results: 72 percent of respondents supported TNR, compared to just 18 percent favoring impoundment and lethal injection. At a time when Americans are divided about so many policy issues, roughly seven in 10 agree that TNR is the best way to manage community cats.

Results of a 2006 survey commissioned by Alley Cat Allies found that 81 percent of respondents thought "leaving [a] cat where it is outside" was more humane for the cat, compared to the alternative of "having the cat caught and then put down" (14 percent).[3] When respondents were asked the same question — but were told to assume the cat would die two years later after being hit by a car — the support for "leaving the cat" remained strong, at 72 percent (with 21 percent preferring to have the cat caught and

[a] For additional information, visit bestfriends.org/resources/feral-cats-and-tnr.

[b] For additional information, visit bestfriends.org/resources/feral-cats-and-tnr for resources such as "How TNR Reduces Nuisance Complaints: What the Research Tells Us."

euthanized). The same questions were asked in two subsequent surveys, and the results again indicated a strong preference (e.g., 73–86 percent of respondents for the first question) for "leaving the cat where it is outside."[4,5] Such attitudes are in line with the results of a 2011 national survey in which just 25 percent of respondents agreed that animal shelters "should be allowed to euthanize animals as a necessary way of controlling the population of animals."[6]

Fiction: TNR doesn't work.

Facts: The science is quite clear: There are only two ways proven to reduce, and eventually eliminate, a population of free-roaming cats: (1) intensive TNR efforts or (2) intensive eradication efforts, such as those done using poison, disease, lethal trapping, and hunting on small oceanic islands.[7,8] Given the horrendous methods employed — and costs that can exceed $100,000 per square mile[9] — eradication is a non-starter in the U.S. The only fiscally sound option, then, is TNR. Arguments about the limitations of its effectiveness, the alleged impact of outdoor cats on the environment and so forth largely miss the point. In the vast majority of instances, TNR is simply the best option available to humanely reduce the outdoor cat population and any related nuisance complaints.

A number of TNR programs have demonstrated dramatic population reductions, and in some cases, completely eliminated colonies of free-roaming cats. For details, please visit bestfriends.org/resources/feral-cats-and-tnr for resources such as "Trap-Neuter-Return Success Stories: What the Research Tells Us."

Fiction: TNR increases the risk of rabies transmission to humans, domestic animals, and wildlife.

Facts: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports: "Over the last 100 years, rabies in the United States has changed dramatically. More than 90 percent of all animal cases reported annually … now occur in wildlife."[10] Vaccination against rabies is common practice for TNR programs in the U.S., especially in parts of the country where rabies in cats occurs most frequently.[c] In fact, a 2012 nationwide survey of feral cat groups conducted by Alley Cat Rescue revealed that 96 percent of the groups provide rabies vaccinations as part of their TNR programs.[11] TNR therefore protects public health by creating a powerful barrier between wildlife and humans. And not every cat needs to be vaccinated to achieve "herd immunity"[12] (Figure 1). The public health benefit of TNR is therefore two-fold: The cats are vaccinated, and their numbers are reduced over time.

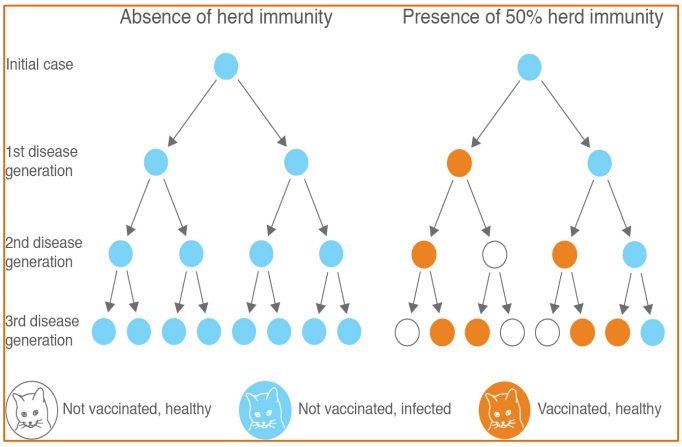

Figure 1. Achieving herd immunity. Adapted from Jekel, J. F. *Epidemiology, Biostatistics, and Preventive Medicine*. 3rd ed., 2007.

Since 1975, the CDC has documented 109 cases of human rabies in the U.S., most of which were attributed to contact with wildlife. Of the 26 cases attributed to domestic

[c] Best Friends recommends that vaccination against rabies be included in all TNR programs, and that reasonable attempts are made to assure boosters are also administered.

animals, 25 were attributed to dogs (nearly all exposures were outside the U.S.). Just one case was attributed to contact with a cat.[13] (Seven cases were the result of organ and arterial transplants.)

Fiction: TNR compromises the welfare of community cats.

Facts: Best Friends operates more large-scale TNR programs than any other organization in the country; as such, we are in a unique position to comment on the positive impact of these programs. Our firsthand experience, and evidence from a number of studies, shows that the vast majority of unowned, free-roaming cats are healthy — even thriving. During an 11-year observation period, more than half of the 23 cats living continuously on the University of Central Florida campus were estimated to be 6.8 years old or older, for example.[14] A 2012 nationwide survey conducted by Alley Cat Rescue revealed similar longevity: One quarter of TNR organizations responding to the survey had colony cats in the 6–8 year range and 35 percent had cats in the 9–12 year range, while 14 percent reported caring for cats 13 years of age or older.[11] And a number of studies have found that cats involved with TNR programs are "surprisingly healthy and have good body weight."[15–17]

The research shows that well-managed TNR colony cats are, generally speaking, just as healthy as indoor-outdoor pet cats,[18] with rates of feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) infection "similar to infection rates reported for owned cats."[19] Comparable findings have been reported in Ottawa, Ontario.[20] By contrast, significantly higher rates of both FeLV and FIV have been observed where no active TNR program had been implemented.[16]

Fiction: TNR encourages the abandonment of cats and kittens, and might actually be considered abandonment.

Facts: TNR is not abandonment; healthy cats are merely being returned to their neighborhoods. Existing anti-cruelty statutes that address the act of abandonment are contingent upon the critical elements of intent and the foreseeable harm that may result from a person's deliberate decision to withdraw necessary care. Returning healthy cats to their original location after sterilization and vaccination obviously does not meet the legal requirements for abandonment since their healthy condition suggests that these cats have ample access to resources — and therefore the intention underlying the return of these cats is noble and the foreseeable harm minimal.

Although it's true that TNR programs are sometimes faced with the unfortunate (and illegal) dumping of cats and kittens at colony feeding sites, there's simply no evidence to suggest that these cats and kittens would not have been dumped anyway. Moreover, cats abandoned near a managed colony are far more likely to be adopted (multiple studies have found that approximately 30–50 percent or more of TNR cats are adopted into homes[14,15,21,22]) and/or sterilized and vaccinated, thereby mitigating their potential impact on the overall population of unowned cats (as well as any potential impacts on wildlife and the environment).

Fiction: TNR is too costly to be feasible.

Facts: Studies show that TNR can actually save taxpayers money. A review of data from Hillsborough County Animal Services (HCAS) in Tampa, Florida, for example, found the

cost to sterilize and vaccinate colony cats to be $65 per cat "as opposed to $168 for [HCAS] picking up, handling, and disposing of an animal."[23] This is similar to cost estimates from San José Animal Care and Services, in California, which reports a cost of approximately $72 per cat for "vaccinations against rabies and other common cat disease, flea treatment, ear treatment, microchip, and ear-tipping."[17] Estimates (unpublished) compiled from across the U.S. by researchers with the Alliance for Contraception in Cats & Dogs indicate less of a cost difference, but with TNR still more economical (about $20 to $97 per cat) than the traditional impoundment and lethal injection (about $52 to $123 per cat).

Dr. Donna M. Alexander, administrator for Cook County (Illinois) Animal and Rabies Control, has testified in court that "prior to adoption of the TNR programs, local municipalities were trapping and euthanizing approximately 500 to 600 feral cats per year, at a cost to taxpayers of about $135 per cat." Implementation of the county's TNR program, then about five or six years old, "had saved the county over $1.5 million, primarily resulting from having fewer feral cats to euthanize."[24]

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