
Do Feral Cats Have a Right to Live?

A National No Kill Standard for Feral Cats

The humane movement makes many assumptions about feral cats, the quality of their lives, and how they should be treated. These assumptions, however, do not hold up under scrutiny and result in treating feral cats in ways that are in direct conflict with principles that should guide policies of shelters and animal welfare groups—principles which we advocate on behalf of other animals.

This article analyzes those assumptions in order to distill what those fundamental principles should be as it relates to the “cousin” of the most popular pet in America—the feral cat.

They were revered as gods by the ancient Egyptians, persecuted as demons in the Europe of the Middle Ages, and have been watched over by dedicated caretakers for as long as written text prevails. No one knows how many there are, or even exactly how to define them. They live in our barns, behind restaurants, in old warehouses, wherever they can find a modicum of shelter, some scraps of food, and a place to bear their young. They are especially common wherever there are transient populations of people: on college campuses, military bases, apartment complexes, and tourist destinations.

In the lexicon of animal sheltering, they are called “feral cats.” Popularly, they are known as “barn cats,” “alley cats” or “wild cats.” Webster's dictionary defines feral as “having escaped from domestication and become wild,” but this definition does not cover all the cats we know as feral.

Cats in our society occupy a spectrum that runs from the cherished pet to ferals who may have had little or no human contact or support. Some of these elusive felines were born in parks and alleyways and will never become accustomed to people. Others may be marginally “owned” living in someone's backyard, garage, or barn, or traveling from doorstep to doorstep in search of food and occasional shelter.

Whatever one calls them, they have a rich and noble history. The oldest known feral cat colony, dating back several hundred years, sits in London's Fitzroy Square, and inspired T.S. Elliott's famous poems that in turn inspired Andrew Lloyd Webber's “Cats,” the longest running musical in Broadway history. A visit to the Coliseum in Rome may be inspired by a love of history, but the visit will teach you more about feral cats and the

people who feed and care for them—who outnumber the tourists there—than about the great emperors of yore. Some feral cats even come with an Ivy League-caliber pedigree. Hundreds of feral cats living on the campus of Stanford University are cared for and fed daily by the University's prestigious faculty.

In some parts of Italy, feral cats have a right to live where they are born, regardless of human property rights. In other parts of the world, these cats are part of a “live and let live” culture, sharing the urban landscape with all kinds of creatures, from pigeons to people—and assuming the inevitable risks and benefits, joys and hardships that come with living on earth.

In the U.S., however, feral cats have historically been seen as a “nuisance” and were trapped en masse and taken to local shelters where they were routinely killed. This point of view was unleashed with such vehemence by traditional shelters, that the largest humane organization in the country at one time even advocated the arrest and prosecution of those who believed—and practiced—otherwise.

Why the hard-line response? Are feral cats not worthy of our compassion and protection? And should we accept their mass slaughter in U.S. animal shelters?

Should Feral Cats Be Killed?

The answer historically has been “yes.” For much of our movement's history, feral cats were referred to as “filthy,” “vicious,” and “fractionous,” spared no quarter, even by those claiming to be their “advocates.” As one proponent once said, “Ownerless animals must be destroyed. It is as simple as that.” And unfortunately for the cats, it was as simple as that. But not anymore.

The last three decades have seen the meteoric rise of one of the most innovative and ethical programs to end the mass killing of cats in animal shelters. Indeed, in terms of effectiveness in reducing impounds, deaths and unnecessary suffering, a feral cat assistance program based on the principles of trap, neuter, return (“TNR”) is moving beyond controversy or comment. The acceptance of TNR is increasing across all sectors in animal welfare, animal rights, No Kill and animal control circles. TNR proclamations are being endorsed by agencies, health departments, local governments, and by entire communities.

There are those who belong to groups mired in the animal sheltering methods—and failures—of the past; who continue to unfairly blame the cats for perceived decimation of birds and wildlife based on shoddy science and the misleading pronouncements of nativist organizations; who claim that TNR perpetuates suffering based on mistruths; and, who continue to regurgitate clichés about all cats belonging in homes. But their view, and their tenure, is disappearing.

In the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, staff at one of the largest humane organizations in the country coined the phrase “subsidized abandonment” to describe feral cat programs. One of their regional directors called TNR an “inhumane act”. When a local

rescue group turned to them for help in saving their feral colonies, not only did they refuse, but their attorney encouraged the local prosecutor to file criminal charges against the caretakers arguing that TNR was a violation of animal cruelty laws covering abandonment—a crime which carried a jail sentence. They are not publicly making those claims anymore. In terms of acceptance of TNR, we have, indeed, come a long way. That does not mean we can sit back and declare victory. *Only that victory is inevitable.*

But what does that victory look like? In other words, are we doing all we should for feral cats? Are we adequately expressing their most basic rights? And have we set down a standard by which to measure No Kill success when it comes to feral cats? In order to do that, we have to understand why shelters say they are killing them in the first place and in the process, we have to challenge some of the erroneous beliefs about feral cats held by even TNR advocates.

Shelters which advocate the killing of feral cats generally fall into one of two camps:

- For those who support TNR, they believe that a feral cat is a domestic animal who cannot survive in the wild without human intervention. In their view, unless there is a caretaker, the cat should be killed.
- For those who oppose TNR, they believe that even with human care, feral cats still live a life of misery and suffering and should therefore be killed with or without a caretaker.

But is either of these beliefs accurate? To find out, to get a clear and honest portrayal of the life of feral cats, we must first answer the basic question of what exactly a feral cat is.

What is a feral cat?

If the question seems obvious, it is only because we have become so conditioned to the notion that it appears to be beyond controversy. Webster's dictionary defines "feral" as "having escaped domestication and become wild," but this definition does not cover all the cats we come to know as feral. Nor does it get us closer to devising a humane strategy—if necessary—to address their population. To do that, we need to know what kind of question we are asking.

Is it a biological question? In other words, we know that all cats—feral or pet—are genetically identical to the African wildcat, a wild animal by everyone's definition. So if the feral cat is biologically the same as a wild animal, isn't the unsocialized feral cat born on a remote corner of a farm and never becomes accustomed to people a wild animal? Biologically the answer is yes.

Or perhaps the question is one of socio-behavior. If we determine that feral cats are capable of surviving and thriving in the wild by exhibiting behavior we attribute to wild animals like raccoons do we conclude that they are wild animals? By the same token, if we determine that cats in the wild are disproportionately suffering more than animals we all agree are wild animals, can we conclude that cats should no longer be considered wild

animals? Does a caretaker change the calculus? Whether these are the right questions might be less important than their answers. The studies of feral cat colonies by British naturalist Roger Tabor prove that feral cats are truly hardy survivors. And the arguments by U.S. shelters reaffirm this.

Traditional shelters are fond of telling us that feral cats are the offspring of domestic cats who have run away and become lost or have been abandoned by people. If this is true, then the abandoned pets are thriving, to the tune of 100 million feral cats estimated by some. In other words, feral cats are doing all right out there. All right to the point that if you believe traditional shelters, they are multiplying at the rate of 420,000 every seven years for every two unaltered pairs (a ridiculous exaggeration whose sole purpose is to underscore the point here). That is a lot of cats, proving that when it comes to food and sex, the great outdoors is, well, great.

Take the wildest cat and he can learn to live around humans and may even exhibit pet-like behavior to the person who feeds him. (This is a familiar site at cat colonies with feral cats who rub up against the legs of their feeders, and even perhaps purr, just like pet cats.)

Take the most pampered house pet and let her loose in the wild (something No Kill Solutions would never advocate), and she can survive with the deftness of the most voracious raccoon, as Henry David Thoreau noted, writing in *Walden*:

Once I was surprised to see a cat walking along the stony shore of the pond, for they rarely wonder so far from home. The surprise was mutual. Nevertheless the most domestic cat, which has lain on a rug all her days, appears quite at home in the woods, and, by her sly and stealthy behavior, proves herself more native there than the regular inhabitants.

If that is the case, behaviorally speaking the answer again appears to be that feral cats are wild animals.

If the question is one of genealogy, then the answer must be linked to parentage. So, if a pet cat is abandoned or runs off and gets lost in the woods, has kittens and the kittens grow up wild because they have no contact with people, are they wild or domestic?

If the answer is domestic because of domesticated parents, then let's take the logic to its conclusion. Let's go further back because to stop at initial parentage is arbitrary. Let's look at grandparents and great-grandparents and ultimately all the way back to their wild ancestors.

So if the basis for the claim is genealogy, the answer again seems to be a wild animal. But since this can be said of most, if not all, animals, perhaps the real issue is not one of domestication, but rather adaptability.

But are we even asking the right questions? In other words, when it comes to the cat, does the distinction of wild vs. domestic matter? Or, more importantly, even make sense? Every American student goes through the litany in high school biology. We are taught that all living things on this planet are categorized as follows: Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, and Species. For Kingdom, we know the world is broken down further, the two main groups of which we are familiar are plants and animals.

And we also know that the primary difference between the two is that plants can photosynthesize, and animals are terrestrial, in other words, can move from one location to another on their own volition (as opposed to a plant or seed which relies on birds or the wind for movement). That is how the world is broken down. Or is it?

In fact it is not. The biological categorization is a map humans have developed to make sense of the world. We run into problems when we confuse the map of reality with reality itself. What happens for example, if a creature can both photosynthesize and move from one place to another? Is it a plant? Or is it an animal? It may be neither, or it may be both.

In fact, creatures in this category occupy a gray zone (now its own kingdom Protocista which is neither plant, animal, fungus or bacteria), a glorious example of the complexity of the world or, poetically, the world trying to tell us that she is infinitely more complex than our zest for neat little categorizations can always comprehend.

“Science is a process, not an end,” wrote the columnist Jeff Elliott. “We get into trouble when we think that it can provide us with simple, conclusive explanations to describe a complex world.” Add the cat to that mix. It too is neither a wild animal nor a domestic one.

Desmond Morris, a curator for mammals at the London Zoo, who spent much of his youth watching cats on the farm where he grew up, describes it best:

The cat leads a double life. This switch from tame pet to wild animal and then back again is fascinating to watch. Any cat owner who has accidentally come across the pet cat when it is deeply involved in some feline soap opera of sex and violence will know what I mean. One instant the animal is totally wrapped up in an intense drama of courtship or status. Then out of the corner of its eye, it spots its human owner watching the proceedings. There is a schizoid moment of double involvement, a hesitation, and the animal runs across, rubs against its owner's leg, and becomes the house kitten once more... It is like a child that grows up in a foreign country and as a consequence becomes bilingual. The cat becomes bi-mental.

If the answer to what exactly is a feral cat eludes simple definition, their hardiness as survivors does not. And therefore, neither does the question of how a shelter should respond to them.

How Should the Humane Community Treat Feral Cats?

Ignoring biology, sociology, genealogy, common experience and good sense, to shelters mired in traditional philosophies, a cat is a cat is a cat. Regardless of whether the cat is the most beloved and pampered pet or the wildest outcast, to these groups cats are domestic animals who belong in a home. And in their view, the feral cat without a human home is better off taken to a shelter and killed. For these groups, an unowned cat's life is a series of brutal experiences and shelters need to protect the cat from continued and future suffering.

The reality is that all animals living in the wild face hardship—and feral cats are no exception. Since no animal groups support the trapping and killing of other wild animals—raccoons, mice, fox—why do we reserve this fate for feral cats? If feral cats are genetically identical to wild animals, and they survive in the wild like wild animals, and they are unsocial to humans like wild animals, and they share the same hardships as wild animals, and if they can and do live in the wild like wild animals, shouldn't we treat them as we do wild animals—by advocating on their behalf, pushing for their right to life, and respecting and protecting their habitats? And, more importantly, why should we condemn all of them because of the sloppy logic that some may face hardship?

That the answer by opponents of TNR to how we stop the cat from being killed is to kill the cat ourselves is a contradiction that simply cannot be reconciled. But the contradiction goes deeper. Because while traditional shelters argue that all cats are the same, they themselves treat them very differently.

In the shelter, the feral cat meets a deadly double-standard. Once there, a friendly cat is capable of adoption. An “unfriendly” cat, by contrast, is killed outright. The distinction between the two is real and obvious, and is made daily by the very shelter professionals who make the claim that all cats are the same and require the same things in order to lead happy, healthy lives. That is why the traditional alternative to TNR, what they call “Trap-Remove-Evaluate” is nothing more than a deceptive euphemism for “Trap & Kill” when it comes to feral cats.

A National No Kill Standard

The No Kill movement's break with traditional sheltering is less about saving “pet dogs and cats” and more about focusing on the individual animal. Regardless of whether a shelter takes in 30, 300, 3,000 or 30,000 dogs and cats each year, No Kill is premised on—in fact demands—fundamental fairness to individual animals. This commitment is echoed in the mission statement of virtually every humane society and SPCA in the country which claims to cherish animals, enforce their rights, and teach compassion. Yet, these lofty goals can only be achieved if we judge, treat, and devise a plan for shelter animals individually with all the resources we can muster.

Implicit within the No-Kill philosophy is the understanding that some animals, such as those who are irremediably suffering or hopelessly ill, will be killed for reasons of mercy. That much we can all accept. But feral cats do not fit into this category. In its purest

form, the No Kill gold standard is that we would never end life when that life is not suffering. And feral cats, as a general rule, are not suffering.

We have surely come a long way in the world of TNR from the point of view that “ownerless animals must be destroyed. It is as simple as that.” If anything should be simple, it is this: Unless they are sick or injured, with a poor prognosis for recovery, feral cats should *never* be executed. Caveats about location, proximity to wildlife, landowner opinions, and local ordinances are not relevant to the life and death calculus. They may play a part in where the cat is released, but not whether he or she should die. A No Kill plan which does not thoroughly address the unique nature and needs of feral cats and preserve their lives cannot, by definition, be No Kill.

A No Kill community must include a commitment to TNR. But that is only the first step. Since feral cats are the offspring of abandoned pets and are thriving, and since—as a general rule—feral cats are entering shelters relatively healthy and robust, then it is clear that they are doing well, *with or without a caretaker*. And while there are counter-examples, as there are with all animals, this is no reason to enact an unreasonable double standard for feral cats since we do not advocate death for all friendly stray cats.

Therefore, if TNR in a managed colony is not an option, the compassionate alternative is to spay/neuter and release even when there is no established feeder. If the feral cat is out there and appears healthy, we may intervene to spay/neuter to allow feral cats to be better able to thrive without the biological demands of mating or raising litters. If that too is not an option, they should be released in another safe place, first with a caretaker *but without one if need be* the way we would if a raccoon or other wild animal could no longer safely remain in a particular location. Finally, if TNR is not an option in any form, the shelter should not accept feral cats, a course of action no different than a shelter’s refusal to accept and kill a raccoon or other wild animal because the relinquisher does not want the animal crossing his yard. It is not ethical to kill healthy feral cats under any circumstances any more so than we would kill healthy raccoons, foxes, deer, horses, pigeons or cows.

In the end, a community’s definition of No Kill has to be one where no healthy dog or cat, no sick or injured but treatable dog or cat, and—without question or compromise—where no healthy or treatable feral cat is killed. Anything short of that, and the No Kill movement would be sweeping feral cats under the rug—and would, in fact, not be No Kill.

Feral Cat Rights

Some groups have cautiously supported TNR in some circumstances and so long as certain conditions have been met—if the landowner agrees, if there is shelter, if there is no wildlife predation, if the climate is temperate, if there is a feeder 365 days a year, if there is licensing, if all the cats are vaccinated regularly. Even some No Kill shelters have adopted some of these preconditions to the support of TNR. But the true No Kill position is that while some of these factors may or may not be important for other reasons, they are utterly irrelevant for purposes of supporting TNR.

From the No Kill position, the rights of feral cats are self-evident. These may not be legal rights, but they are fundamental to the No Kill position. And they include the right to life and the right to live in their habitats. And the right to have the animal welfare community fight to protect both. This position is no different than our views about habitat protection for raccoons and other animals.

And that is why our approach to TNR must include a platform which promotes the right of feral cats to their habitat, wherever that may be, and a right to their very existence, independent of their relationship to humans. They are animals who share our communities and whose needs must be accommodated.

After all, it's their world too.

Caught Between Two Worlds. Just like feral cats occupy a unique niche between wild and domestic, they also occupy a gray zone in the law. For many cats, their status as “domestic” animals means certain death in shelters. But wild animals tend to fare little better.

In those states where it is allowed, wildlife is subjected to trapping, poisoning and hunting, particularly if they are an unprotected species. Feral cats, in essence, are caught between two anachronistic world views. If they are legally domestic, they are subject to mass slaughter in shelters by the humane movement. If they are legally wild, they are subject to killing by hunting, trapping, and poisoning.

The feral cat, in this case, is a grim reminder of how far we have yet to go—as a humane movement and as a society.

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