



The Needs of Feral or Free Roaming Cats

Open Dialog
Food & Water
Spay/Neuter
Shelter

Open Dialog

Feral cats are in almost every neighborhood and community across New Jersey and the country. Always keep a friendly and professional attitude when talking with people about feral cats. You are the voice of the cats. Whether or not you can convince them to go along with your plan to TNR, always be sympathetic to their concerns and try to work with them to solve their complaints, giving them options that will help them. Be sure that they know you are listening and care about their concerns. Let them know that the ultimate goal is to reduce the number of cats in the area.

Remain professional and know your facts. Use these points to help your neighbors understand what you are doing and why.

- **What is a feral cat?**

Cats that have spent most of their lives outside and have had little human contact are referred to as “feral.” This means they have reverted to a wild state and cannot safely be handled by people. A feral cat is unsocialized to humans and living in homes therefore in most cases cannot be placed in a home.

- **Where did they come from?**

The populations of cats living solely outdoors have come from unaltered lost or abandoned cats or intact owned cats allowed to roam unsupervised. Cats are domesticated creatures that need to be near humans to survive. They are also territorial in nature. They will remain in their territory, will defend it and will try to return to it if they are removed.

- **If no one feeds them, won't they just move on? Why can't they just be removed?**

For decades traditional methods of controlling feral cat populations have failed.

- Doing nothing – If left alone, populations will continue to grow, resulting in increasing nuisance complaints, destruction of property, and spread of disease in the population. As populations increase, so will the upsetting sights of cats suffering, being injured and dying. Kittens especially have a high mortality rate when born outside. Cats are prolific reproducers with the ability to produce

numerous litters throughout the year so populations can grow rapidly. Doing nothing will only lead to a worsening of the problem.

- Trap and Remove - Efforts to trap and remove the cats most often results in euthanasia for the cats. There is simply no place for the cats to go. They cannot be adopted into a home, and moving them to another location, if one can even be found, involves a difficult and lengthy process which is frequently unsuccessful. Cats will often try to return to their original territory.

In addition, removing the cats from the area allows other cats to expand into that area; a phenomenon known as the "Vacuum Effect." Leaving the original colony in place prevents such invasion as the original cats will defend their territory from intruders.

- Feeding bans – Feeding bans are simply ineffective. Cats will not just move on if they are not fed. The resources they need already exist in the territory. They will also continue to reproduce whether or not someone is feeding them. Providing cats with nutritious food will keep them healthy and reduce nuisance behaviors as they try to find other sources, like trash containers.

Feeding bans are also difficult to enforce since there will always be people who will go to any length to feed the cats, regardless of the law. They will feed at night or in secret.

- **So what can we do?**

Why TNR Works - Trap-Neuter-Return consists of having the cats altered, vaccinated and ear tipped. TNR is essential to reducing the population of feral cats and kittens ending up in shelters, subsequently being euthanized or competing for homes. Altering cats makes them better neighbors and easier to live with. The most annoying behaviors are related to reproductive activity so getting the cats fixed will reduce nuisances like spraying, yowling, fighting, and roaming. Colonies will stop growing in size and the number of cats reduces over time as they die off. The colony will defend its territory, keeping more cats from moving in.

- **OK but, how do I keep them out of my yard?**

Steps can be taken to resolve issues with the cats. Deterrents can be used to keep cats out of yards and gardens, a litter box can be provided for the cats in an appropriate area.

Food

Take care to avoid feeding wildlife. Keep your feeding station clean and never leave food out unattended. Sharing of food bowls between cats and wildlife can spread disease. In addition, attracting wildlife closer to humans can lead to nuisance complaints and may result in the

nuisance animal being relocated or euthanized. Keep feeding stations clean to avoid attracting rodents that can lead to public health concerns.

Follow proper feeding methods:

- Feed only as much as cats can consume within 20 minutes
- Do not leave food behind, remove what is not consumed
- Have a regular feeding schedule
- Avoid feeding after dusk
- Keep feeding areas clean of debris and food scraps
- A 10 pound cat should consume about ½ cup of dry food per day
- Dry food does fulfill dietary needs for cats
- When wet food is given, reduce the amount of dry food
- Increase food for pregnant, nursing, underweight or large cats
- Cats may have an increase of appetite in the winter months

Water

Always provide fresh water daily in a clean bowl. In cold climates it may be necessary to winterize your water set up. If electric is available, heated water bowls can be used.

Other winterizing methods include:

- A larger, deeper bowl will take longer freeze
- Insulate a bowl by cutting a Styrofoam cooler and place the water bowl inside of it
- Use warm or hot water in the bowl

Spay/Neuter

Spaying or neutering cats will improve their health and well being, and make them easier to live with. An unaltered feral cat will be more of a nuisance to neighbors. When feral cats are altered, reproductive nuisance behaviors are reduced, making them better neighbors.

Spay/neuter also reduces the spread of diseases like Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (Feline AIDS) and Feline Leukemia by reducing the behaviors that spread these illnesses.

An unaltered female can have multiple litters per year. Kitten mortality is quite high with only about one in three kittens surviving. Breeding will continue however and it is not uncommon for a female feral cat to be nursing one litter while she is pregnant with the next.

An ear tip is the universal sign that a feral cat has been altered and vaccinated. When the cat is altered, the veterinarian removes ¼ inch from the cat's left ear while it is under anesthesia. Ear tip provides an easy way to see that a cat is altered, essential not only for monitoring the colony but also a sign to Animal Control that the cat is part of a managed colony.

Shelter

If you are a caretaker of feral cats it is important to provide shelter for feral cats especially in colder climates. Feral cats will be less likely to disturb neighbors by digging under sheds or porches if appropriate shelter is provided. Cat shelters can be purchased or made inexpensively using a large Rubbermaid container lined with straw (not hay) with a small doorway cut into one end. For very cold weather extra insulation will be needed. There are many websites with instructions to build shelters. A female cat that is spayed in the winter will have a shaved abdomen so it is especially important she have a warm place to retreat to until the hair grows back.

Useful resources

Neighborhood Cats NYC

Neighborhoodcats.org

Alley Cat Allies

Alleycat.org

The Animal Protection League of NJ

APLNJ.org

Best Friend Animal Society- Kanab Utah

Bestfriends.org

The Humane Society of the United States

Humanesociety.org

People for Animals

Pfaonline.org

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